UNRULY WOMEN

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Statement of Originality

The thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. After an embargo of twelve months from the date the thesis has been marked and any revisions made, I give consent to the final version of my thesis being made available worldwide when deposited in the University’s Digital Repository, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968.

Signed: Jill Gibbons
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Abstract

My memoir of the friendship between a young social worker and an elderly prostitute spans the period from 1920 to 2000 telling the stories of two women from very different backgrounds who attempted to elude their conditioning to be perfect wives and mothers. Both social work and prostitution are women’s professions, subject to many stereotypes, and found on the margins of society. As a social worker, my relationship with Pat demanded that I let go of judgements and conventional morality, my need to fix. In telling Pat’s story, I could have followed a problem trajectory—how she suffered physical and sexual abuse and neglect as a child which led to a lifetime of prostitution and alcoholism, inability to parent her own children, and a propensity to being in relationships with violent men. However, in the face of social disapprobation Pat was a woman who refused to be shamed or silenced—she was proud of her life. My story sets out to create a voice for both of us, unruly women in our own ways, in defiance of being cast as nobodies.

The exegesis examines the genre of women’s life writing through the critical dimensions of voice, agency, identity, and relationality. The historical context of my story is explored through fiction and non-fiction set in Sydney during the years leading up to and during WW2; and literature on social policy and attitudes regarding children in care, prostitution and alcoholism over the last 80 years. Finally, literary representations of prostitutes in fiction, memoirs and autobiographies are reviewed with reference to feminist analyses and debates about prostitution.

Critical analysis of the concept of the angel in the house, the Victorian ideal of womanhood, has drawn attention to the stereotyping of women into Madonnas or whores. As early as 1975, Anne Summers posited that Australian women have been colonised through our history to be damned whores or God’s police. This duality of thinking that classifies women as good or bad must be laid to rest. Yet feminists continue to debate whether there are circumstances in which women can freely choose to work as prostitutes, and conferences on prostitution continue to be picketed by sex workers’ collectives arguing that their choices should be respected. In 1931 Virginia Woolf famously said that the angel must be killed if women are to achieve their creative and social potentials, if they are to be accepted as individual and unique with all their light and shade.

‘Unruly Women’ sets out to tell the story of two individual women, and both informed and was informed by my examination of women’s memoir, the historical context of the story, and the critical review of literary representations and feminist debates about prostitution.

Key words: women’s memoir, social work, prostitution, feminist sex wars, institutional care
Unruly Women
Chapter One
The cattle-dogs hurl themselves at the rickety gate, barking and baring their teeth. My heart’s thudding. It’s 10am and already stinking hot. I’m standing in front of a run-down gun-barrel cottage in Stockton, breathing the stench from the fertilizer factories on the Westerly breeze. The old houses are on big blocks, squeezed onto the narrow peninsula, battered by the salt winds from the sea to the east and toxic fumes from Kooragang Island to the west. A shadow appears behind the sagging screen and I bawl across the barking.

“I’m Jill Gibbons from the Health Department. I’ve come to see about your eyes.” The curtain at the house next door twitches back into place. “Can you do something about the dogs? I can’t come in till you’ve called them off!”

I sigh and set about waiting. Dogs are the worst part of home visiting. My mother was terrified of dogs and it’s passed on to me. I’ve been six years with this aged care team, the only social worker among doctors and nurses a generation older than me. I like the work but right now I’d really like to get back into my government issue Ford Escort and take off.

“I’m from the Health Department,” I shout again. “I’ve come about your eyes!”

It’s January 1983 and most of the staff are still on holidays, so I was the only one around to respond to the anonymous phone-call about a blind woman wandering around Stockton saying her husband was keeping her prisoner and wouldn’t let her go to hospital to have her eyes fixed.

The door scrapes open and a stocky woman with badly-dyed red hair feels her way across the verandah, shouting at the dogs to be quiet. She’s in blue floral nylon, a missing button at the top of her dress revealing grey bra straps and an impressive cleavage. She shuffles forward, calling the dogs to her, grabbing and fumbling at their collars, dragging them back through the door and disappearing with them. When I hear the bang of what sounds like the back door I open the gate and pick my way across broken concrete up to the verandah, ready to run if needed. The paint is peeling from the walls and through the gaping flyscreen I can see a long narrow hall. I smell the mustiness of old clothes and furnishings.

The old woman is making her way tentatively back along the hall towards me. The dogs are still barking non-stop.

“Come in luv,” she says, pushing open the screen door. “Sorry about the dogs. They wouldn’t bite, you know.” She is a head shorter than me, with a pinched, wizened face. I catch a whiff of beer, cigarettes, peppermint and cheap perfume. She reaches out to feel where I am and I try not to recoil. Her black eyebrows and squinting give her a fierce look but I see that her eyes are milky with cataracts.
We make slow progress as she leads me down the hall. There’s plenty of time to glance into the front rooms crammed with ornately carved old furniture, cascading with piles of clothes, sheets, blankets—cluttering and composting. My social work jobs have taken me into quite a few houses like this. I’ve warned my partner Guy about it when he won’t help with the housework—what happens when you don’t clean for twenty years: the dust builds up into a thick black sticky layer, a domestic sedimentation happening before your very eyes.

“Have a seat luv,” she says when we finally reach the kitchen. “What did y’say ya name was? Where ya from?”

She wipes the formica table, careful not to knock over the Vegemite glass of beer. Her dishcloth rearranges the patterns in the black grease. I perch on a wobbly chrome and vinyl chair—some of its foam stuffing oozing from the side. The dogs throw themselves against the back door, still in a frenzy. I can’t hear myself think.

“Just a minute!” She lets herself out the back door and the dogs, excited and leaping and barking, follow her down the yard, where she chains them to a post near the shed. I watch her as she puts out each foot to test the ground before she takes a step, her arms flailing around as she reaches for familiar markers—walls, doors, railings. Her red and swollen feet are squeezed into black patent high heels, no stockings. The shoes don’t make her progress any easier. I let my breath out with relief when she makes it back to the kitchen.

“I’ll make yer a cup o’ tea luv,” she says as she puts her finger in the kettle to test the water level, then feels for the controls on the electric stove. I can see that she manages after a fashion in her own place. She can’t see the dirt.

“Can you tell me your name?” I ask.

“What’s that love?” Oh no, she’s deaf as well.

“Can you tell me your name?” I bellow this time, leaning forward to her ear.

“Patricia Grainger,” she hollers. “Call me Pat.”

“I hear you’ve been upset about your eyes Pat. People are concerned about you. They’ve asked us to come and see what can be done.” She looks as proud as Punch, a little smile on her lips. The irises of her eyes are a glassy white—I’ve never seen cataracts this bad, only in pictures.

“D’ya mind if I have one of these?” She reaches for the crumpled cigarette packet on the bench and the lighter. “D’ya want one?”

I shake my head—but of course she can’t see. “Nah. I don’t smoke.”

It makes me anxious, watching her try to find the end of the cigarette with the lighter. Thinking she’s going to set fire to her hair, I reach over to light it for her. I’m an anti-smoking fanatic, but social work school taught us we have to be ‘non-judgmental’. I won’t worry about the glass of beer either.
“It’s me eyes,” she says after a few drags. “I’ve gorn blind. Bill won’t let me go to the hospital to have them fixed.”

“Is Bill your husband?”

“Naah,” she chuckles. “I never married ‘im. E’s not all there, you see,” she taps her head, “But we been together a long time.”

“So why won’t he let you have them done?”

She gets a shifty look on her face and takes a sip of the beer—she seems to know exactly where the glass is.

“I dunno. He’s just like that see. Doesn’t want me to do anything. Wouldn’t have anyone to do his tucker if I was in the hospital, would he?”

“But surely he realises that things would be a lot better for both of you if you could see!”

“He don’t like hospitals, Bill. He thinks I might go in and not come out.”

“Who’s your doctor Pat? Do you see a doctor here?”

“Bill don’t like me goin’ to the doctor down here. He’s a dark man—the doctor now. The other one—oh I don’t know what happened to him. But this one, he wants to feel me up all over,” she demonstrates by starting to knead her breasts, snickering. “It’s not nice. What did you say your name was? Not nice at all!”

“My name’s Jill. Aren’t there any other doctors over here? You’ll have to get a referral if you want your eyes done. That’ll be the first step.”

I hear the bang of the front screen door.

“Gawd, it’s Bill,” she says in a frightened voice, like she’s caught out. I wonder if I’m safe here.

A small wiry man with a big head limps into the room—agitated, nervy, eyes darting about suspiciously. He’s old but there’s something boyish about him. He’s wearing a perky checked deerstalker hat, yellow nylon shirt, very short shorts and thongs. He clearly spends a lot of time outdoors—his skin is dark and wrinkled from too much sun, and his nose has the red open-pored look of a serious drinker. A roll-your-own hangs from the corner of his mouth—he smells of cigarette smoke mixed with sweat.

“What’s all this then?”

“I’m Jill Gibbons from the Health Department. I’ve come to see about Mrs Grainger’s eyes.”

“Bill Grainger,” he holds out his hand for me to shake—dry skin, coarse and broken nails, a band-aid on his thumb, old scabs on his knuckles. His handshake is firm. He pulls another chair over to the table and stubs his cigarette in the ashtray.

“What ya been telling the lady?” he bawls at Pat.
She throws him a cunning look, careful, “Nothin’. Just about me eyes.”

“Ya stupid old cow!” He shouts, turning to me. “She won’t go and have ‘em fixed. She’s frightened of the hospital. I want her to go but she won’t.”

“What are ya saying?” Pat shrieks.

The offer of a cup of tea is forgotten. I can only sit there as they hurl accusations at each other—both of them and neither of them have been avoiding Pat going to hospital. When they finally run out of steam they turn their attention to me, their faces full of expectation—an authority to make the decision for them.

“It’s not so bad,” I tell them. “They only keep you in hospital a few days. You can’t go on like this, Pat. It could be a six months wait for pensioners, so there’s no time to waste to get you on the list. I can ring the doctor and get him to refer you. I’d better put you on the list for hearing aids too—it’ll take a year for you to get an appointment for that. You won’t know yourself when you can see and hear. Will you both agree to that?”

They nod, suddenly as meek as mice and I get up to go. On the verandah I pass Bill’s BMX bike, a child’s bike with high handlebars. I put the rickety gate back into place, get into the car and turn the air-conditioner up high. I’m stirred up from all the shouting and find myself driving a bit too fast to get out of Stockton. I’ve missed the eleven o’clock news but I turn on the radio anyway. There’s lots of excitement, breaking news—Bill Hayden has resigned as Labor leader and Malcolm Fraser has called a double dissolution election for 5 March. I suppose this is the chance for Bob Hawke, the Silver Bodgie, to barge his way in as Opposition leader though he’s been in parliament less than three years.

Back at the office I ring the GP. It turns out he hasn’t seen Pat for a good while, but knows her well enough. It would seem that Bill and Pat are local identities. He agrees to make a house call and send a referral to the eye specialist. I write up the report. Case closed.

A week later Bob Hawke is leader of the Opposition and I’m accosted by the office receptionist as I arrive at work. She’s full of her own importance.

“There’s been someone trying to get in touch with you about a Pat Grainger from Stockton. Apparently she’s in a terrible state. You’re going to have to look into it right away—here’s the number.” She hands me a scrap of paper. I go to the tearoom and make myself a mug of coffee. I chat to a few of the other workers in there. I don’t want to make this phone call—I know it’s going to be trouble.

The woman who answers the phone says she is a neighbour.

“They found old Bill dead in the laneway down the side of here last night. The police have been, the ambulance, everyone. They took him away to the morgue. The old lady’s hysterical.”
“Oh dear, that’s terrible! Poor Bill, poor Pat!”

“Poor Bill!” The woman shrieks so loudly down the phone I hold it away from my ear.

“At least we might be able to live in Stockton now without our stuff being pinched all the time. You couldn’t leave anything lying around for a second with that klepto about. Poor Bill! Christmas he pinched the sausages from the Prawners’ Club barbecue. They caught him whizzing off on his bike with two kg’s of them stuffed up his shirt. That BMX was pinched too. Nothing’s safe. He’s taken things from all our yards. If anything was missing we’d go round to his place to find it—then we couldn’t get in because of those dogs. He had a plate in his head you know—he wasn’t the full tin of biscuits. That’s what they think he died of—a brain haemorrhage.”

“Oh!” is all I can manage. But she’s not finished with me yet.

“Poor Pat!!” she hollers. “That drunk! She’s in the street all the time cadging money for booze or fags. Those dogs are going to kill someone. She’s not going to be able to manage without him—not with being blind and all. You’re going to have to do something about her. We’re all fed up to the back teeth with it. We can’t be responsible.”

“Do you know if there’s any family?”

“Never seen anyone go in there. Family’s disowned them if they had one. You’ll have to take charge of it. It’s a job for the Welfare if ever I saw one.”

I hope my sigh doesn’t come across the line. Then she hangs up on me.

There’s no getting out of it. I take the lift down to the car park, get in the Escort and head back to Stockton. When I was a kid in the 1950s we used to go in the car ferry across the harbour to Stockton and then drive up to Port Stephens. Long queues of cars would form on either side and people would get out of their cars and stand around chatting. Dad bought a block of land at Port Stephens after he got back from the war: the house in Georgetown, a piano for Mum, and a block of land in Shoal Bay. He saved the money by selling his cigarette and beer rations to the Yanks up in the islands. He didn’t smoke and wouldn’t drink warm beer. We used to have a swim at Nelsons Bay, drive around to look at the block of land, and then have fish and chips from the shop on the corner. Dad sold the land in the 1960s to put a new roof on the house in Georgetown. He said he didn’t like the thought of going to the same place every year for holidays.

In 1971 the big arching bridge from Kooragang Island across the channel to Stockton was opened. Now you have to drive all the way around from the city—along Industrial Drive, over the Tourle Street Bridge at Mayfield, past the reclaimed swamp that is Kooragang and then up and over the bridge to Stockton. I know a man who’s afraid of heights—he won’t drive across that bridge. It takes about half an hour from the city to Stockton, longer if there’s heavy traffic. Only a passenger ferry still makes the five-minute trip across the harbour.
When I arrive, the dogs race at the gate. The shadowy figure of Pat appears at the door. I shout out who I am and she takes the dogs and chains them down the yard like before, shuffling back to let me in. I am shocked by the change in her—she looks twenty years older, like an old crone. She scrabbles around on the kitchen bench and finds a glass with her false teeth in. She slips them in with an embarrassed glance towards me, and then she looks normal again. We sit at the same dirty table with a half-glass of beer. Pat begins to sob as she tells me the story of Bill being found dead in the laneway.

“He usually gets home from the Boatrowers just after closing time. He rides his bike, always comes the same way. He didn’t come and didn’t come and I was kinda worried. The dogs were barking. Then in the morning there was a constable at the door and they told me they’d found him down the lane. Stone dead. Do ya think someone had done it Jill?”

“I don’t know. What did the police say?”

“They said natural causes Jill. Natural causes. But they would. Still he had that plate in his head and they always said he could go at any time.”

I reach out and squeeze her hand.

“What am I going to do?” she wails.

She tells me his family cut him off years ago because he’d had a bash in the head and was never quite right afterwards. She met him on the street in Sydney back in the 1950s and he invited her to come with him on the train to Newcastle to be his housekeeper. She was not long out of the Kenmore Hospital at Goulburn and facing another sentence if she didn’t stop drinking. The cops in Sydney knew her too well so Newcastle seemed like a good option.

“I took the name Grainger,” she says. “Wouldn’t you? They were a good Singleton family, the Graingers. Had a big shop in the main street. I’ve been Grainger now for thirty years. But I never married him, Jill. Nah, I never married.” Pat twists the ring on her wedding finger. “I got this at St Vincent de Paul.” She chuckles through her tears. “Are you married Jill?”

“No, I never married either. I’ve lived with my bloke, Guy, for seven years. I wouldn’t want to give him any opportunity to boss me around.” Pat laughs through her tears and takes a long sip of beer.

“There was none of that with Bill,” she tells me, “You know what I mean? He wasn’t interested Jill. Maybe it was because of the plate in his head. Do you think that was it? But jealous, Jill! Oh gawd, he used to get jealous if I brought a man home. He liked to wear me nighties, Bill did. But he’d get in a temper and rip them all up. I was always having to go and get more nighties from St Vinnies. Gawd knows what they must’a thought.”

“Pat, I’m bothered about how you’re going to manage here without Bill.”

“Yeah,” she says with a long sigh.
“Once you get your eyes fixed you’ll be okay. But you’re going to have to go on a waiting list for the surgery. It could be six months before your name comes up, maybe longer. I’ll have to get housekeeping and meals-on-wheels to come in until then. You’ll have to pay a bit towards it though.”

“Yeah, that’ll be good, Jill. Just till me eyes are done,” she says, heh-hehing in the sly sort of way she has.

I hear that Bill’s funeral is a big Stockton event. He was a member of the Prawners’ Club, the biggest club in Stockton. They pay to bury him. Stockton people look after their own and they like nothing better than a Prawners’ Club wake with free beer and prawns. Everyone is keen to make sure he is gone, that their lawnmowers, tools and sausages are now safe.

I make the referrals and write up my notes. Again I imagine that I have done a good piece of work and that will be the end of it. But it’s only a couple of days before I get phone calls from the housekeeping service and meals-on-wheels, telling me they will not go to Pat’s unless she gets rid of the dogs. It isn’t safe for their workers or volunteers.

“But she’ll chain them out the back if you wait,” I plead. No, that isn’t good enough.

Then the landlord rings. Pat has given him my number. He’s had no rent from them for months and he wants her out.

“You bloody social workers! Do-gooders!” he splutters. “You’re bloody useless. The house is a disgrace. It’s a health hazard. I’m going to see my lawyers. I’ll have her out of there if it’s the last thing I do.”

Aggressive bastard, I think, but it’s hard not to see his point of view. Heart in my boots, I get back in the car and head for Stockton. I’m squeezing the visit in before the clinic at Wallsend hospital later in the morning. As soon as I penetrate the dog barrier, I see that Pat is holding her arm.

“What’s happened?” I bellow. Her right wrist is bent out at an odd angle.

“Oh this…I fell a couple of days ago. I banged me wrist. It’s sore but it’ll be all right.”

“I don’t like the look of it, Pat. It could be broken. I’m on my way to Wallsend hospital. You’d better come with me and have it seen to in Casualty. I can bring you back when I’m finished at the clinic.”

I look in her fridge. That’s the sort of thing we do in aged care: barge in, look in the fridge to see if they’re eating. It’s empty but for an opened can of dog food and a few cans of VB.

“We’ll have to get you some food too, on the way back.”

She brightens up at the mention of food, gathers her old handbag in her left hand, has a quick swig from the glass of beer on the table, and comes with me out to the car, pulling the
door closed behind her. The dogs are going berserk on their chains. It smells musty and beery shut in the car with Pat—I turn the fan up high and lean across to put her seat-belt on.

At the hospital I lead her into Casualty and go up to the desk. The clerk is, without mincing words, morbidly obese. Pat peers at her closely while I provide her details. As we turn away Pat nudges me excitedly, and says at the top of her voice,

“Did you see, Jill, did you see, did you see how fat that woman is?”

Everyone in the waiting room looked at us, some smirking, some frowning.

“Shhh!” I said.

“But Jill, I’ve never seen anyone that fat!” Pat is laughing her head off. I sit her down to wait and she strikes up a loud conversation with a woman sitting next to her, but the woman moves seats. I slink out to go to my clinic. When I get back to Casualty I find Pat sitting in a cubicle with her wrist in plaster. Her face lights up when she hears my voice but I am dismayed to find that her wrist is broken. Now I have a blind and deaf old woman, probably alcoholic, recently bereaved, support agencies refusing to help, with a broken wrist, hostile neighbours, two savage dogs, no relatives or friends, and about to be evicted from her house. I have never encountered a situation with no support services to refer to, no network of family, friends, neighbours or volunteers to help out. I have drawn a blank, and I cannot think of anyone to call on.

Back in the car again Pat seems buoyed and cheerful after all the attention. She holds her cast proudly. At Stockton I stop at the supermarket and the bottle shop. Pat is desperate to get in a couple of cartons of VB. Should I be supporting her drinking habit? Back at her house, I unload everything from the car. It takes several trips back and forth to get in the bags of dog food, the beer and a decent supply of food for Pat, stuff she can prepare easily. She fumbles around with her left hand, but has to ask me to open a VB. She knocks back a few mouthfuls straight out of the can as if she has just crawled across a desert. I can’t see how she is going to manage left-handed.

“Pat sit down for a minute—we need to talk. We have to think this through. You’re just not going to be able to manage here on your own. Housekeeping and meals-on-wheels won’t come because of the dogs. But you’re going to have to leave here because the landlord wants you out.”

“Good riddance, Jill. I hate it here. People come in and pinch me money. They think I don’t know. They’ve really got it in for me around here. I’ll get a Housing Commission, Jill. You can ring up and get me one can’t you? I’ll go back to Cooks Hill. That’s where Bill and I was before Stockton. In Tooke Street. I liked it there.”

“Oh, Pat—if only. I’ll have to put your name down and it’s a three-year wait at least for pensioners. I’ll try to get you on the crisis list but that’s like winning the lottery. I’ve never
managed to get it for anyone yet. We’re just going to have to take it one step at a time. First I need to make sure you’re looked after till you can see again and your arm is healed.”

“Well, I don’t mind leaving this old dump. The bastard wouldn’t do any repairs. And always putting the rent up. It’s a scandal.”

“If it wasn’t for your arm I could get the Tenancy Tribunal involved so you could stay here till you found somewhere else. But you’re not going to be able to manage Pat. All I can think of is for you to move into a hostel I know of over at Mayfield.”

Social workers are supposed to offer help with accommodation or sustenance but it’s the part of the job we really like to avoid. It’s too hard is why. There are few emergency options for pensioners, decent ones that is, and I have never worked out how big a crisis a person has to be in to warrant immediate attention from the Housing Commission.

I know a family of psychiatric nurses, the McInerneys, mother, son and daughter-in-law, who escaped working in the hospital system through buying an old apprentice hostel in Mayfield, offering full board to older people or people with mental illnesses. They seem kind. I’ve referred a couple of people there and they’ve been happy with it—each resident has their own room, it’s close to the Mayfield main street, the food is good, and it’s affordable on the pension.

“The family that run it seem nice,” I tell Pat. “The meals are really good. You can move in till your eyes are done. I’ll put your name down for Housing Commission. If you want to leave the hostel after your eyes are fixed, I’ll help you find a place till your name comes up for a Housing Commission unit.”

Pat doesn’t say a word. I know the main drawback to my plan is the dogs. I can see Pat loves her dogs. They are fiercely protective of her. Without Bill or any family they are all she has in the world. Making decisions for a person—it’s not the social work role I learnt.

“Wherever you live in the future, you’ll not be able to have the dogs there.”

Tears well up in her milky eyes, but she nods. “I know,” she says softly. I get the feeling that this is not the first time that decisions have been taken out of her hands. It’s something she’s learnt to endure.

“I’ll take you over to show you the hostel to see if you’ll agree to go there till your eyes are done. I’ll need to make a time with them. The Council ranger will come and take the dogs to the pound when you’re ready to move. Maybe they’ll get a new home from there.”

Both she and I know that the dogs will be put down. No-one would want them.

A few days later I take Pat to show her the hostel. I can see the days since my last visit have been hard. She can’t use the can opener to open cans of dog food, so she has used the dried food which is spilled all over the floor, but she has learnt to pull the rings on the cans of VB with her
left hand. She tells me the landlord has been around hassling her for unpaid rent and threatening to put her and all her belongings out on the street.

The older Mrs McInerney is a kindly soul and used to odd characters. She takes Pat in her stride.

“So what do you think love. Will you come here and stay with us?”

“I’ll have to think about it,” Pat says. But later when we are back at the house she tells me she’ll go there, not with any enthusiasm. I call a dealer to come and look at the heavy old furniture. She doesn’t seem to have any attachment to it.

“I get all me stuff from St Vincent de Paul,” she tells me. “I just go down there and tell them I need furniture and they bring it all round in a truck. A whole house full. Sheets, towels, the lot.”

Although he says it’s worthless and he will be doing us a favour to take it away, the dealer agrees to come and take the furniture the morning Pat moves out. I manage to get a hundred dollars out of him—I know he will be able to sell some of it. Pat can spend it on some new clothes or something for her room at the hostel.

Guy comes over on a Saturday and we load up his old Datsun ute with all the rubbish. He takes three trips to the dump. Years later he is still talking about it; he’s never seen a house like it. Pat takes a shine to Guy; it’s the high point of her move. For the next twelve years she will give him half a dozen navy singlets for Christmas—he’s still wearing those damn singlets.

The morning of the final move I hurry across to Stockton to be with Pat while the dogs are taken away. But when I arrive the council ranger has been and gone. I know at once from the silence—no dogs erupting from the verandah. I gingerly let myself in the gate and call through the screen door. Deathly quiet. I let myself in to find Pat lying on her bed sobbing. I sit there with her and hold her hand. This is the worst thing I’ve done. I’ve transgressed the basic ethic of care: ‘Do no harm’. I’ve got absolutely nothing to say. After a while she takes a deep breath and sits up.

“Let’s go and wipe your face,” I say to her, just like my mother says to me when I’ve been crying.

Pat has packed up an old suitcase and a couple of cardboard boxes with some ornaments and pictures in frames. She wants to take the rest of the VB so I transfer it to another cardboard box—I don’t know what the hostel rules are about alcohol. I load it all in my car and we drive off to Mayfield. The lace curtain of the next door house twitches back into place. At this moment I cross some kind of barrier. Although I don’t know it, Pat will become part of my life for the next twelve years.
Chapter Two

It’s only looking back that I can see the inevitability of my ending up a social worker. Family folklore designated me the ‘good’ baby: I slept a lot and enjoyed my food—I still do. My older sister, Gwyn, was ‘she who must be obeyed’ and my older brother, Eric, had terrible eczema and screamed whenever he was touched. When I was not much more than a year old, my little sister, Nola (she hated her name) was born and she too had eczema, spat out her food, cried and vomited a lot, and was determined not to follow the family rule of fitting in with Gwyn. It was easy not to notice me in all the turmoil.

Mum and Dad met at a dance at Tyrell House in Newcastle in the last years of the Second World War. Dad was a sergeant, on leave from the islands, and Mum a trainee nurse at the Mater Hospital. He was eight years older than her and a great dancer. He was quite sure right from the beginning that she was the one—she was swept off her feet. At twenty she was a bit less sure; but they married in February of the last year of the war and by Christmas Gwyn was born. When Dad was demobbed and moved home to live with his in-laws and new wife, baby Gwyn had already established her position of power in the family. She probably never got over her outrage at being displaced by Dad, and he probably never recovered from his dismay at finding himself so thoroughly outmanoeuvred. It would be almost thirty years before he had Mum to himself.

A study once claimed to have found that a high proportion of social workers were middle children from warring families. Right from the start Nola refused to accept Gwyn’s alpha status—they had terrible rows. Eric and I kept our heads down and appeared to mind our own business. He carved out a little arena of power through being the only son and retreating into his room of his own. I developed a persona of niceness and helpfulness, while achieving my ends on the sly, sneaking reads of Gwyn’s ballet books and her picture comics of English boarding school girls.

“Mum! Someone’s been touching my books!”

“Gwyn, no-one would be game to touch your books. You must have moved them yourself!”

“I know someone’s been at them. You’re on their side. Tell them I’ll get their books and throw them in the garbage if they dare touch mine again.” Gwyn would storm off into the bedroom, slamming the door.

I managed to play with Eric’s train set and was the picture of innocence when he found it broken. Did he ever suspect? I dreamed of boarding school, of secret passages and midnight feasts. Under my bed was a hidden trap-door to the lands of Enid Blyton’s faraway tree—I especially liked to go to the Land of Do-As-You-Please and the Land of Magic Medicines. I desperately wanted to fix things up, to be a family like those in my favourite book What a Jolly
Street. It was Nola’s book and I coveted it—an American book with stories of the families that lived on Jolly Street. I pored over the map of the street and the houses in the frontispiece, memorised the members of all the families, and made up extra stories about them. Sometimes I even drew up plans for extensions or improvements to their houses. There was no conflict, no death or divorce, no illness, and especially no sex in these families.

The house I grew up in during the 1950s and 60s was in a little street in Georgetown, not much bigger than Jolly Street. We knew all the families in it, mostly with kids around the same age as us and divided only by whether we were Catholics or not. Otherwise we were pretty much the same: our fathers worked in the industries, some as clerks and some as labourers; only our mother and Mrs Gill across the road worked; our houses were three bedroom weatherboard bungalows on small flat blocks with a single garage; each family had one car, usually a Holden; on Sundays we went to Sunday School and the Catholic kids went to Mass. Each household went away on a summer holiday once a year, renting a fibro house at the sea or the lake. If they couldn’t afford this, they would stay with relatives or friends, the host adults sleeping on the divan in the lounge-room, giving up their double bed for the visiting couple, and the kids shacked up together, at least two to a bed.

Our house was in the middle of the street and called ‘Maxmar’ after the son and daughter of the builder. Before we came to live there it was also known as ‘The Ghost House of Georgetown’. Dad bought it for £750 in 1947. It was a good buy; cheap because Mrs Benn, the tenant’s wife had hung herself in the garage, and because Mr Benn, an alcoholic, was still living here, refusing to leave. It took nearly two years of court proceedings to get him out. Mum appeared in Court just about to give birth to Eric, a fact she thought swayed the judge’s decision in her favour. Dad and Mum, Gwyn and baby Eric moved to their new house in August 1948, wheeling all their worldly possessions around from Grandma’s house three streets away. Sixty-five years later Mum is still there.

Georgetown was filled with the smell of the steel industries a mile to the north and the main northern railway line ran along its border. The shrieking of the coal wagons on their way to the port lulled us to sleep while coal dust covered the washing in soot when the Nor’easters were blowing. We climbed through pipe and barbed wire fences to play in forbidden places—railways and drains. Grandma would give us threepence to buy lollies at the corner shop halfway between her place and ours—four cobbers, two grey sticks and eight bullets. When the Gills were the first in the street to buy a television they found all the neighbourhood kids crowded into their lounge room at 4.30 every afternoon to watch The Lone Ranger or Bonanza followed by my favourite The Mickey Mouse Club. Mr Gill was often slow to get around to mowing his yard and the grass would get as high as our shoulders. With the four Gill kids we made up cowboy games in our own prairie.
We lived with the sounds of steam trains, buses racing down the hill at the top of the street, car horns, the steel wheels of the paper boy’s cart, the nickering of the baker’s horse, distant massive booms from the BHP blast furnace, and the race calling from the trotting track on Friday nights. Days were punctuated by the industry whistles: “There’s the four o’clock whistle” or the bell of St Matthews up behind the shops. For forty years my dad carried his heavy old pushbike across the footbridge over the railway line to his shifts at the wire manufacturing works. On day-work or dogwatch I liked to run down to the bridge to meet him coming home and he gave me a double on the crossbar.

Dad was a good-looking man and very conscious of his appearance. His black hair was always immaculately groomed, his blue eyes and skin kept wrinkle free with applications of Herco olive oil cream. That was his smell: the fresh, clean, peppermint smell of Herco. He was a fit man, strong and well until right into his eighties. He was proud of being always mistaken for much younger than he was. As a teenager he belonged to the Maitland Athletic Club and won prizes for javelin. When he took us, on rare occasions, to the playground, he liked to demonstrate his skills on the rings. At five foot six, the same height I grew to be, he always wanted to be taller. The result of this was that he had magnificent posture.

“Straighten your shoulders!” he used to yell at us throughout our round-shouldered teens.

Dad’s vegetable garden was his universe—his place of meditation. He worked in it every day—it must have been a good way to get out of the house and all the arguments. The garden took up half of the back yard and Dad’s mission in life was to improve the soil. When we visited his sister, who still lived on the dairy farm they’d grown up on, he would come home with sacks and sacks of manure, and whenever there was a circus in town he would go to where it had been in the hope of finding more exotic manures: elephant or camel. After he retired the garden got bigger, taking over more and more of the yard, and expanding with gardens at my place and Eric’s. Dad was working in his garden until a fortnight before he died. When the doctor, with a grimace, told us that the cancer had returned and Dad would not live, Dad said he wanted to “let nature take its course” and rejected the offer of chemotherapy to add a few months to his life.

“Plants come onto the earth as seeds, they grow and flower and bear fruit and then they die. You can’t stop the cycle of life,” he said to us.

The hardest thing is to see the garden in Georgetown without him in it.

Dad was a real do-it-yourself man, bent on home improvements. He was always cutting holes in walls for new doorways, painting, or papering. His ideas were up-to-the-minute. He covered the living room ceiling with acoustic tiles so that our family noise would not disturb Gwyn holed up in the front bedroom listening to her classical music and doing her homework.
He renovated the bathroom and chose taps that were so far ahead of their time that for decades afterwards visitors would emerge perplexed after an extraordinarily long time and say “excuse me, how do you turn on the tap?”

It remained a cold and dark house, however, only really warm around the Wonderheater in winter. The main bedroom was usually dark as Mum or Dad were on shiftwork and either one of them would be sleeping. Mum did shifts at the hospital to fit in with him so that there was always someone home to cook the meals and stop us kids from killing each other.

Although there was love, there was also a lot of jealousy and anger in our family. No-one knew what to do with any of these emotions. Everyone competed for Mum’s exclusive attention but she was determined to show no favours, desperate to create a family unlike her own upbringing in which there had been a lot of favouritism, anger and probably some physical violence. Anger was not allowed in our family. So it went underground and became silence, punctuated by slammed doors and screaming matches between Gwyn and Nola. Us four kids have taken most of our lives to learn to communicate with each other.

Working hard to claim the position as nicest and most loved, I was mostly well behaved. But when I was six I was playing at Grandma’s with my only-child cousin, June, riding her big shiny blue tricycle. I adored that tricycle—the seat was high off the ground and it had a little tray at the back to put things in. At home everything was hand-me-down or had to be shared. June, seeing how much I was enjoying myself, wanted her tricycle back. She tried to pull me off it—I hung on and screamed and screamed like a dog hit by a car. I spat and bit and pushed and yelled as if my life depended on it. Grandma came out to see where such a noise was coming from. She hollered at me to get off the trike and give it back to June and to go home. Now. Straight away. Raging and sobbing I slunk off home; I didn’t ever fight like that again.

At school I nearly burst with the effort of being good so that the teachers would care about me the most. I worked hard to do the best school work. I was the staffroom monitor, the vice captain and took the lunch orders at Mrs Gordon’s shop. I devoured the schoolgirl books where the girls stood up for what was right and true—Little Women, Anne of Green Gables, Again the Grey Ghosts. I drew pictures of ugly girls and then with my eraser and coloured pencils ‘fixed them up’ to be pretty. Finally, when I was fourteen I read in a book about a job called ‘social work’ which seemed to be all about being good and nice and helping other people. Fixing up what was wrong. I decided right then and there that this was the job for me.

Although I hate to admit it, Sunday School probably led me in the direction of doing good works. I loved the stories of the Good Samaritan, the loaves and the fishes, Lazarus rising from the dead, and David and Goliath, and didn’t notice that all the good people were men. When I was fourteen I was the organist and a teacher in the Sunday School. One of the boys in
my group was Ken Smith, ten years old, a small, nuggetty boy with ginger hair and freckles. His crumpled shirt hung outside his shorts, his socks sagged into his scuffed shoes, and there was a whiff of unwashed underwear about him.

Ken was always in trouble. It did not take me long to work out that he was very unhappy—his mother had remarried and had two baby boys to her second husband who had no time for Ken. He got hit a lot. The more he got hit the naughtier he was and the more he got hit. He missed his real father, who he idealised but rarely saw. Or maybe the real father had died—I can’t remember. Sunday school was a convenient place to dump Ken for a couple of hours on Sunday mornings.

As we sang the hymns, I was soon aware that Ken had a beautiful singing voice—like a boy soprano from an English cathedral choir. The annual Sunday school concert was coming up and I wanted Ken to perform a solo, thinking it would give him something to be proud of. He went along with my plans because he got to stay behind with me to practise after Sunday school, therefore delaying having to go home. He was going to sing *Somewhere Over the Rainbow* with its soaring notes that were effortless for him. When the time came for the concert I was afraid that Ken would not turn up. But he was there and so were his mother and stepfather. When it was time for Ken’s solo he ran and hid behind the stage of the church hall. While the next act went ahead I went in search of Ken and found him cowering behind stacks of folded tables.

“Come on Ken, you know you can do it. Don’t pike out now!”

“I can’t. I don’t want to!”

“Oh Ken, please do it. For me. You’ve practised so hard.”

Taking him by the hand, I managed to pull him up onto the stage. Even as I played the introductory notes I didn’t know if he would bolt off. But he opened his mouth and sang—beautifully, holding nothing back. It brought the house down—my first social work success story. But Ken would never sing again on the stage, however hard I tried to get him to do so. Much later I wondered about the consequences of that performance for Ken. Did his stepfather beat him for being a ‘fairy’? And Ken formed a desperate kind of attachment to me, something that didn’t, even then, seem quite right, and which I was not able to respond to. For a while he used to come to the beach with me and my friends but after a while he drifted off and after I left for university, I never heard of him again.

Dad so admired Mum for being a nurse that his greatest aspiration for his daughters was that we should become nurses too. For him and Mum in the 1950s, this was a girl’s highest achievement. He never tried with Gwyn who had a mind of her own from day one—if he’d dared to suggest anything she would choose the opposite. But Nola and I were encouraged to think of ourselves as nurses from the earliest age. Mum made us little nurse’s outfits—white
nurses’ caps and aprons with red crosses sewn on and little red capes. We had kits with cotton wool, bandages, Savlon cream and played nurses with our dolls as patients. When we were playing with the gang of kids in the street and one of the little kids fell over and grazed a knee we ran to get our gear to clean the wound up and dress it. When I was ten I was given a real first aid kit in a metal case for Christmas.

Each birthday or Christmas I eagerly awaited a new edition in the series *Sue Barton: Nurse*. I worked my way through her career: student nurse, senior nurse, visiting nurse, rural nurse, superintendent of nurses. Needless to say Sue Barton ended up marrying a doctor and raised four children while supporting her husband’s career. She went back to work part-time when the children were grown. All my favourite stories ended this way: the struggle between being a wife and being a professional always won with the wife choice, signifying children and the end of a career.

At weekends and in school holidays Mum sometimes took Nola and me to work with her. She was the senior nurse in the sterilising department of the Mater hospital. We were very familiar with the Central Sterilising Room: its terrazzo floors, green glass-fronted cabinets, its huge panting and steaming autoclave, and the little glass window to which staff came for their sterilised instruments. I look back in surprise now at our sense of entitlement to be there in our mother’s workplace and the unofficial child-friendly arrangement. Mum would sit us on high stools in the back room stamping piles of paper bags with ‘Two Gauze Swabs’, putting the swabs in the bags and sealing them ready for sterilizing. We were never allowed to go with her into the operating theatres whose doors were just outside the glass window but we could see the people in caps under green sheets being wheeled in.

“Feet and hair are the germiest parts of the body,” Mum told us. “That’s why they’re covered up when they go into surgery.”

Mum wore a crisp starched white uniform and had a male assistant, Bernie, to help her with the autoclave door. Mum was always helping Bernie out with his family problems. He had too many kids and not enough money. There were always one or two junior nurses working there as well. Mum put on a white veil when she went to the wards with her trolley, sometimes taking us along with her. I felt at once excited and frightened of what I might see around the hospital corridors. I hated the smell of disinfectant and steam. I hated the stainless steel kidney-shaped dishes into which unspeakable things might be put. I hated the long tongs and the sharp scalpels. When I was a social worker I never wanted a job in a hospital.

All of us girls went to Newcastle Girls High—a selective government school. It was assumed that we would complete high school and go on to get a ‘qualification’. Gwyn achieved the highest pass in the Leaving Certificate at this high school, and, with a Commonwealth Scholarship to cover all her expenses, had gone on to an Arts degree at Newcastle University.
This level of education was out of the realm of Mum and Dad’s experience—she was the first person in the family to ever have gone to university.

Although we were at the main selective girls’ school in Newcastle, the highest option advocated by the careers counsellor was an Arts degree at Newcastle University followed by high school teaching. The fallback position was primary school teaching at the teachers college or nursing, at that time based in hospitals. Very few girls, there were less than five out of a hundred in my year, selected something more ambitious such as engineering or medicine. Law in those days was for the boys who weren’t bright enough to go to university—they would join a law practice as an articled clerk and study at night school. At school reunions I’ve been sad to encounter these brightest of women, almost all teachers or nurses. I’ve not been the only one to notice.

“Oh!” someone said to me on one of those occasions “Social Work! I thought you would have made more of yourself than that!”

In my fifth year of high school a new girl came over from the Catholic school. Marie shared my interest in jazz and folk music and with her circle of friends we spent weekends playing music and singing. Marie had long brown hair and a voice like Joan Baez—later in life she would be a professional singer. Unlike anyone I had ever met before, as all the girls at school were either fearsomely competitive or disparaging of academic success, Marie openly admired my high grades. In response to my confiding the difficulty in choosing between social work, which would require me to leave home and go to Sydney, or infants’ school teaching, which I could do in Newcastle, she said:

“Oh Jill have you ever heard those infants school teachers? They talk like the children they teach. They never grow up!”

Before my friendship with Marie cooled off when she acquired a boyfriend, we were invited to spend a weekend with her older sister who lived in a flat near Sydney University and was training to be a nurse. Marie and I walked through the old ivy-covered buildings of the university and all of the stories I had devoured: of boarding school and Oxford and punting down the Thames, came alive. Whatever my career choice, it had to be something where I came to Sydney and lived in a university college. Besides, I couldn’t wait to leave home, to escape the claustrophobia of sharing a room with my sisters, of accounting for my whereabouts. This would be my best excuse, a choice to do social work, which was not available at Newcastle University, so requiring a move to Sydney.

In 1970, after the Higher School Certificate results were out, I travelled to Sydney for a selection interview for a State Government cadetship, which would cover university tuition fees plus a living allowance generous enough to enable me to live in a university residence. It was January and on the hot train journey the skin of my thighs stuck to the plastic seat. At Central I
went to the Travellers’ Aide room to adjust my mini skirt, dab cold water on my face, put on some more mascara, before catching the underground up to St James. On the twelfth floor of the NSW Government building in Macquarie Street, I waited with two or three other teenagers in the green and brown waiting room, glared at by a middle-aged receptionist behind a massive desk. We each clutched a sheaf of papers, mine were my references, and took furtive looks at each other. Who would be successful?

A pimply young man in a damp white shirt and crumpled grey trousers finally emerged from the room and the receptionist barked out:

“Gibbons. Your turn. Close the door behind you!”

I’d never been in a boardroom before but this is what it was. Tall windows, grimy with city smog, let in the pale white light of the baking summer day. The room was all puce-coloured paint and dark timber, bottle-green carpet, with a picture of the queen in an elaborate gilt frame above the narrow end of the table, which I had noticed, to my astonishment, was the shape of a giant coffin. At least it was cool in there. Five people, three women and two men, were bunkered down behind the massive table, its dark timber covered with a sheet of glass. They had thick files in front of them, empty cups with the remains of tea or coffee sloshed in the saucers and overflowing ashtrays. The room stank of cigarette smoke. One of the women indicated that I should sit in the single high-backed chair that faced them across the table. It felt like the Inquisition.

I had prepared myself for this moment. I had armed myself with the written references the letter had asked me to bring. I’d gone over and over in my mind how I would make a claim for this cadetship. At the same time I wasn’t desperate for it—I still had the option of accepting my place at university on a Commonwealth Scholarship, but would have to depend on Mum and Dad and any work I could find for living expenses.

“We’ve read your application,” the woman, the one who seemed to be in charge of things, began. Her teeth and fingers were stained brown with nicotine and her bright red lipstick did not quite do enough to divert attention from the down on her upper lip. The others looked fixedly down at the files they had open in front of them and the man on the end took a drag on his cigarette. “What department are you intending to have the cadetship with?”

This was a question I hadn’t prepared for. Intended. I wasn’t intending anything—except the money. I was intending to get the money.

“Er, I’m not sure what departments there are?” Was I mistaken or did the man smoking the cigarette roll his eyes? One of the other women tittered. The woman sighed and went on, “Well, you’ve got Health, that’s where you’d be working with the mentally ill; Corrections, that’s with prisoners; and Child Welfare, that’s with children.”
My eyes widened as my mind sifted this new information, racing as fast as it could: mental illness—wasn’t that mad axe murderers? Prisoners—serial killers, rapists? Children—poor little kids whose parents don’t want them, like Ken—that sounded safer. I should be able to do that.

“Child Welfare—that’s what I’d like to do,” I announced. “Thank you,” the woman said, “that will be all!” The others had their heads down writing in their files. I lurched out the door. The others in the waiting room looked up in surprise. I must have been in there less than three minutes. And references? They hadn’t even asked! A letter arrived the following week offering me a cadetship with the Department of Child Welfare. I had no idea what I was letting myself in for.
Chapter Three

I think that Pat will settle in the hostel—her life at Stockton was a lonely one and she will have company here. It has been a grand old house, one of many stately homes on the hill at Mayfield, a desirable area for rich families until BHP built its steel mill down on the river and poisoned the air. A lot of the big houses, including this one, were converted into boarding houses for apprentices. Now that the steel industry is on its way out they are being put to other uses—like cashing in on the government policy to clear out the ‘chronics’ from the psychiatric hospitals.

I help Pat unpack her belongings—ornaments, vases, photos in frames, a carved wooden box. She shows me that the box is made to look like a book—she slides out the rounded ‘spine’ and there is a tray to put things in: letters, jewellery, secrets. On the front a heart is carved in relief, with the initials ‘JE’ entwined inside it.

“‘The soldiers made these for their sweethearts,” she tells me.

“Who’s ‘JE’ then?” I ask her.

“Dunno. I got it at Vinnies.”

In spite of her deafness, I find Pat to be a sociable and chatty person, so I imagine that she’ll mix with the other residents and find a few mates. I’ve worked out that she’s spent quite a few years of her life in institutions—children’s homes, mental hospitals. I don’t know then that most people from institutions will fight to their last breath rather than go back to group living. When I visit to see how she’s getting on, running the gauntlet of wooden-faced residents sitting smoking on the verandah, I find her sitting alone in the lounge room, doing nothing, staring blankly into space. As soon as she hears my voice she leaps up with delight,

“Jill! Thank God you’re here. Can we go out? Will you take me out?” I realise the hostel is like a gaol to her.

I drive her down to a café in Mayfield—it’s a miserable little shopping centre. I cannot bear seeing her so lonely. I was thinking that this would be one of my last visits; the aged care team has folded up and I am in a new job in rehabilitation for younger people. But there is no-one to refer Pat onto—she doesn’t have any specific needs now she is being cared for in the hostel—I don’t know how to tell Pat that I won’t be coming any more, so I tell myself I’ll see her through until the cataract operation; I’ll visit her in my own time.

She doesn’t like the café. It takes me a while to accept that her favourite place is the pub. Years of sitting in the car outside pubs and clubs waiting for Mum and Dad and fighting with Nola, bored to distraction, has turned me off those places forever. I hate the stinking fug of cigarette smoke, the clinking and jingling of the poker machines, the barking of race-callers on the television sets, and dull-eyed men hunched over their beers at ten o’clock in the morning, a fag hanging out of their mouth, staring at the screen. Pat loves it.
We go to the Stag and Hunter. Pat has a schooner of VB and I have a shandy. We work our way through a few packets of crisps. She tells me about life in the hostel. She has to keep an eye on her handbag, not that there’s more than loose change in there. Pat has always kept her notes in the elastic tops of her roll-up stockings. I worry the tight elastic will cut off the blood supply to her legs but she can’t be persuaded to change, she’s kept her money there all her life.

The others at the hostel all talk about her, she tells me—no-one is friendly. One man went berserk smashing a hole in the wall and the boss had to call the police; the ambulance came and took him away. She’s frightened there.

“When’s me operation coming up?”

“At least another couple of months away Pat.”

If I thought of the hostel as a permanent solution, I have to think again. Pat is only interested in getting back to a place of her own. She talks of nothing else. I’m depressed—finding a place that someone on a pension can afford is going to be near impossible. I’ve got no idea how I’m going to be able to help her with it—but the memory of her on the bed when her dogs were taken makes me feel it’s my obligation. There will be three more years at least on the Housing Commission waiting list. I’ve written a really good letter asking for urgent consideration but her case is rejected. When I ring to protest the housing officer tells me, off the record, that Bill and Pat have been evicted from a Housing Commission flat some time in the past for being drunk and disorderly.

We get into a routine—first the Stag and Hunter, then when she’s downed a couple of schooners, we go to the supermarket to get some snacks for her room. The snacks include a couple of slabs of VB to hide under her bed. Unlike my dad, she’d rather have it warm than not at all. There is something about Pat that makes me unable to abandon her. Her puffy little face and the cunning in her blind eyes hold an irrepressibility that beguiles me. I’ve already spent so much of my life making an effort to be good—it’s relaxing to be with someone so at ease with being bad.

Once I make up my mind to support her until the operation I try to think of some things we can do together that might distract her from the waiting—an alternative to sitting in the pubs having shouted conversations. She still has the money from the furniture dealer to spend.

“Let’s go into town and get you fitted for some new bras,” I tell her. I’ve got the idea that new underwear might cheer her up; make her feel better about herself. The underwear she is wearing is in a terrible state. I know this because she washes it out and hangs it on a string she’s tied between the bed-head and a hook on the window in her room.

Pat giggles—with nothing else on offer, why wouldn’t she do anything I suggest? David Jones is not the only shop in Newcastle with trained corsetieres but it’s the most elegant one and that’s where I intend to go. Pat’s as good as anyone else, isn’t she? My first Christmas holiday
job as a fifteen-year-old was at David Jones. What snobs they were! I was on the glove counter with Miss Hart, who had worked her way up over many years to be head of gloves. It was 1966 and gloves were on their way out so I cannot imagine how they thought that there would be a need for extra staff for the Christmas rush. I gazed enviously across at the busy Christmas gift shop. My feet were killing me. Time never went so slowly.

So I drive into the David Jones car-park and lead Pat down the ramp to ‘Lingerie’. Marjorie, the impeccably groomed foundations consultant, installs us in a fitting room and is more gracious than I had expected. I wonder if she has ever seen a bra as old and grey as the one Pat takes off. It’s Monday morning and business in lingerie is slow—in fact we are the only customers. The old bra is discarded on the floor, Marjorie pushing it to the edge of the fitting room with her toe.

“How long since you were last fitted for a bra?” she asks Pat as she moves in close and begins to measure her up. She reaches around with the tape measure under Pat’s breasts, wincing as she cops a whiff of the beer on her breath—it’s a bit overpowering so early in the morning. Pat doesn’t hear her.

“It must be years,” I say as Marjorie leaves to go and find some bras for Pat to try. Pat peers at herself, squinting up close to the mirror. I wonder if she can make out her sagging breasts and crinkly neck—for once she’s a bit lost for words. I tell her how I used to work here in the school holidays but I have to shout in her ear and she still can’t hear me. Marjorie finally returns with some crisp new bras slung over her arm like a brace of rabbits. They look enormous. Pat is totally enchanted, bending and twisting as Marjorie shouts orders and pummels her into the different styles.

“Bend right over now. Make sure your breasts fill the cups. How does that feel? Does that feel comfortable?” Pat laughs with joy. I send Marjorie out to find some more, “Sexier ones! Have you got some that don’t look so old-ladyish?”

Pat can’t see herself in the three-way mirrors, but she can smell the crisp new lace and feel her breasts hoisted to a height unknown for years. The fitting room chair is covered in bras. Pat deliberates. She takes the bras on and off, stroking them fondly, finally choosing two pink ones and one in sexy black. She keeps the black one on.

Marjorie is entering into the spirit of the makeover.

“Would madam like to try some new slips and panties?”

Marjorie brings another armload of underwear and leaves Pat to make her decisions. Pat puts things on and takes them off, over and over, feeling the silkiness of the slinky slips against her skin and sniffing the newness of the panties.

“Did I tell you this Jill? Back in the War us girls’d buy the most beautiful lingerie from Enid Dayton. Silk it was. And French lace. She used to bring it in a suitcase round the pubs. She
was never quite right in the head, poor thing, since she jumped off the Harbour Bridge. That was 1932. Tried to end her life because her baby died. Sad, Jill, wasn’t it? But she was wearing a taffeta skirt and it acted like a parachute and her life was saved. It was in all the papers. It was after that she took up shoplifting, only the best underwear, and flogging it around the pubs. That’s how she made her living. Oh it was beautiful that underwear!”

We leave the grey bra, old slip and knickers on the floor of the fitting room. At the counter Marjorie wraps the new underwear, the stuff that Pat isn’t already wearing, in tissue paper and puts it in a large bag. Pat pays with some of the money the dealer gave her for her furniture, peering around furtively as she takes it out of her stocking. We go downstairs in the lift and cross the road to the Crown and Anchor—Pat can have her beer in town today—we’ll sit like a couple of ladies after their day’s shopping in town.

Finally Pat’s name comes to the top of the list to have her cataracts done. What a miracle cataract surgery is! It is a day procedure now but in 1983 it involved several days in hospital. Pat is in the female public surgery ward at the Mater Hospital. There is a line of beds on each side of the old windowless ward—no different to photos of hospital wards from fifty years before. I come into the line of beds talking to the sister. Pat, despite her deafness, catches the sound of my voice.

“Jill” she roars as if from a great distance. “Jill, Jill, I’m here, over here! I can see you. I can see you! You are beautiful.” It’s as close to a miracle as I’m ever likely to be part of. Pat is laughing and crying and talking at the top of her voice. The other patients watch in astonishment. “It’s my social worker!” she announces to them all. “I’ve never seen her before.”

In a few days an ambulance takes Pat back to the hostel and on my next visit she is straight onto my case to get her somewhere to live. It’s disheartening to be shown the sorts of places on offer for $35 a week—all Pat will be able to afford on the pension. I’m outraged by the property owners who charge this much or more for nothing more than a built-in verandah in a fire-trap of an old house with a shared bathroom and toilet down the back path. I tramp through ramshackle buildings badly needing some basic maintenance with as many ‘bedsits’ or ‘flats’ squeezed in as possible. Not fit for human habitation most of them—dark, damp, often windowless, they couldn’t begin to engender a feeling of ‘home’ or ‘comfort’. Squalid, demeaning, dangerous. People are burnt alive in places like this.

I have to fit in inspections around my working hours. Sometimes I take Pat with me so she can see why I haven’t found anywhere for her yet. She’d take the first place she was offered, she is so desperate to escape from the hostel. There are better choices in the outer suburbs but this is like condemning Pat to the loneliness of the hostel; I know she will be happiest in the inner city where she can walk to the pub and the shops.
The estate agents call it an education process. They mean that you get so demoralised by the dreadfulness of what you can get for your money, you finally agree to something you would not have considered in the first place. It is a basement of a terrace house in Cooks Hill. The timber terrace above is divided into three tiny flats. The basement has sandstone walls which form the foundation of the house. It has a door onto a small yard and a tiny dirty window. It is barely head height but Pat is not too tall. There is a tiny room with a fridge and a hot plate, and in the yard a shower and toilet in a rough cement-floored shed. Its appeal is that it is only a short walk down the back lane to the Darby Street shops and pubs. And it is cheap.

Pat can’t pack her bags and get there quickly enough. She already knows Mrs Dennison, who owns the terrace and half the cheap rental property in Cooks Hill—she’d have made millions renting out dog-boxes like this. Pat tells me Mrs Dennison lives in a flash house in Sydney. Try to get anything mended in one of her properties and it can’t be done, but the rent is increased every six months without fail.

Despite the meagreness of her basement, Pat loves being back in Cooks Hill. She becomes a fixture at the Delaney Hotel bar. Back then, in the mid 1980s, it has yet to be gentrified. It’s an old-style hotel with yellow tiles on the wall, a high bar with torn vinyl stools occupied by men with sun-blistered faces, staring blankly at their 10am schooners and smoking roll-your-owns, one after the other. On Friday evenings when the bar is packed with happy-hour punters from city shops and offices celebrating the end of the working week, there is a raffle for the fishing club. The old bloke who runs it knows Pat from her days in Tooke Street, and Pat shows me how he puts one of her tickets up his sleeve, then appears to pull it out of the barrel. This causes her to win a meat or vegetable tray more often than the odds would allow. She thinks this is a great joke, laughing at the expression on my face.

It takes me a while to accept that her lifetime of hunter-gathering is her method of survival. On each visit she has new tales of the cadging she’s done since I saw her last. It reaches a crescendo at Christmas when she gets in a frenzy to make it to each of the charity headquarters: Salvo’s, Vinnies, Smith Family, Samaritans to get her name down for a Christmas hamper and, if on offer, to attend their Christmas parties for the needy, scheduled during the weeks leading up to Christmas Day. If the charities are aware that Pat is part of a group that goes around to all of them, they don’t let on. In great excitement, she shows me her pickings—tinned hams and puddings, boxes of shortbread and mince pies, packets of mixed lollies and nuts, frozen chooks. She sometimes joins up with one of the down-and-outers from the hotel to do her rounds so that they can share a taxi fare home with all their booty.

I have an aunt who likes to replace all her electrical items every five years even though they still work perfectly. She is always giving away her old stuff so I commandeer some of it for Pat. One of the first things I get for her is a big television. Next time I visit the television is
gone. Pat is upset, crying as she tells me the man in the upstairs flat has come and pressured her to give it to him for $10. I wonder how he has come to be in her flat—the upstairs flats lead onto the main street whereas Pat’s door opens onto the back yard. I march up the lane and pound on the upstairs door. An immense man with tattoos rips open the door and glares at me,

“Waddya want?”

“I believe you have the television that I lent to Mrs Grainger downstairs,” I squeak, trying not to look terrified.

“She sold it to me. Wanted the money. I wuz doin’ her a favour.”

“Well it’s a misunderstanding,” I say, getting ready to run if things go sour. “It wasn’t Pat’s to sell. I’ll give you the $10. I want that television set back down there by this afternoon or I’m going to the police.”

“Well for fuck’s sake. The stupid cow,” he roars. But he brings the television back—I go round next morning to check.

Now that she can see, it is obvious that Pat is quite a good housekeeper. For the most part she keeps the dank little bed-sit spic and span, collecting bits and pieces from op-shops to cheer it up: plastic flowers, bright cushions, a chenille bedspread. The yard of the terrace is sunny for much of the day and Pat gets a little garden going in the corner. She digs up the broken concrete to plant a few carrots, some silver beet and parsley. She edges the garden with upside-down beer bottles. She gets some geraniums going from cuttings she takes from gardens along the street, using pots she scavenges from council clean-ups. She gets free magazines, Woman’s Day and New Idea, from the op-shop and follows the lives of the celebrities, albeit a few years in arrears.

She saves newspaper cuttings for me—bits of local gossip, or more sensational items like the Siamese twins joined at the head born in Japan, the gangland shoot-out in Melbourne with the surname of one of those involved the same as a man she knew back in Sydney, or the priest charged with child sexual abuse in Griffith, she thinks she remembers from the orphanage she grew up in. At posh private schools, I’d been told, girls were taught that in preparation for a social outing they should read the papers or a magazine and select a couple of conversation topics. Pat is just about as far from a private school girl as you can get in life chances, but she isn’t lacking in social graces.

Towards the end of that year she gets an appointment in the mail for the government hearing centre. I take her for her hearing test which shows she is very deaf indeed; something which isn’t news to me. Six weeks later we go back for the fitting of her hearing aids and at last we begin to be able to communicate more easily with each other, although I usually have to remind Pat to put the hearing aids in when I visit her.
It doesn’t take me long to realise that Pat still likes to pull the men. She’ll bring any willing bloke home from the pub, with bottles of VB in brown paper bags. What I hate most is when I turn up on a Saturday morning to take her out and find one of them sitting and drinking and smoking with her at the kitchen table. They’re all sly, smart-mouthed shysters with names like Norm or Blue and they are amused by my contempt for them. Once or twice, when one or the other of them starts to get rough with her, she goes to the Chamber Magistrate to get an order for them to leave her alone. I can’t understand how she lets herself be treated like this.

“You don’t have to put up with that sort of stuff,” I say to her. I can’t yet see that anyone is worth a respite from the loneliness of her life.

I get to know the state of play as soon as I push open the gate in the high fence, by checking out the condition of her garden bed. If she is drinking too much and has picked up a man, the plants are neglected, desolate. The weeds have taken over. If she is on the wagon and between men, the garden is lush and colourful.

Pat wears a wedding ring and on her dressing table there is a framed photo of a bride and groom, circa 1940s. I have carefully packed this for her each time she’s moved. For a long time I assume this is Pat and the first husband she has mentioned to me, Keith. The bride with her dark good looks could be a younger Pat. One day I ask her again about the photo.

“I got it at Vinnies, Jill. I thought it looked like me.” The bride is in a satin dress and floor length veil, holding a massive sheath of golden flowers. “Bill had a tantrum and ripped it in two. I had to fix it with Sellotape.”

“I thought it was you and Keith!”

Pat laughs so hard her false teeth half fall out. “Oh I never married Keith! Whatever made you think that? Naah! He was married, see, to Carmen. But she was in Callan Park—she went mad when she lost the baby. He never divorced her. He was married to her till the day he died.” She rummages around in her cupboard and pulls out an old envelope with a few photos. One had apparently been of a bride and groom but the groom has been chopped off.

“This is me sister Nellie,” she tells me. “Nellie married Fred. He was a merchant seaman—very handsome. Whooee!” Pat flutters her eyelashes. “The ladies used to fall at his feet. Nellie used to get so jealous. One time his ship was up here in Newcastle harbour…” she starts to chuckle and looks at me warily. “Well he came to visit and we had a few drinks and well you know…one thing led to another.” Pat sighs. “It would’a been alright. Bill was no trouble. Fred gave him $20 and he was happy. But when Fred got home he told Nellie and she wouldn’t have anything to do with me. After that I never saw Fred again. It wasn’t right that he told her, was it Jill?” I don’t have an answer for that. “I was real mad he came between me and Nellie so I cut him off the photo. Edna, me other sister, the one that lived with Mum at Tempe, she told me Fred died. They’ve all gone now I think.”
I feel stifled by staid and conservative Newcastle, the narrow expectations of women’s lives, and the friends who cannot quite comprehend my unmarried and childless life. I like Pat’s comfort with her difference, the sense of the untamed, her ability to be in-the-moment, and her contentment with her life. When we are out and people ask if she’s my mother, I say that she’s a ‘friend’. Pat is more honest than me and always calls me her ‘social worker’. Because I do not really treat Pat as a friend—I never have her at my house or introduce her to my family, which is the sort of thing you do with friends. I don’t actually go to see Pat that often—no more than once a month at the most. It isn’t an onerous relationship. We always meet at her house and I drive her out to the shops, finishing with a drink at the pub.

If she were to show any signs of becoming dependent on me, of having expectations or making demands, it would be much easier to end our contact. She leaves me free to continue our relationship on my terms, getting pleasure from whatever I give—visits, small presents at Christmas and birthdays, holiday postcards, drives in the car—but neither reliant on the gifts nor expectant of them. She gives in return. I am the recipient of a china swan, oddities from op-shops, and snippets of information she saves from magazines and newspapers. All these years later I have some understanding of the pleasure an isolated old woman had from contact with a young social worker, who was more than willing to be entertained by her stories. Sometimes back then I would wonder if she’d rather I stopped calling, especially if I was cramping her style with her men.

One day I arrive and Pat holds a letter out to me. I groan.

“Not Stockton!”

It is the second Housing Commission offer. We rejected the first—it was at Gateshead, miles from anywhere, a bus every two hours. She’d die out there. Now this is a bed-sit at Stockton, where all this began. I know it isn’t advisable to keep knocking them back. We collect the key from the office and I drive Pat over for a look. It’s right up the bridge end of Stockton, on the main road facing west—just a grassed reserve and the river in front, the smoke from the industries getting in the back of your throat when the Westerlies blow. The bed-sit is the second in a row of five, up three stairs with a little verandah at the front. There is one small room plus a tiny kitchen and bathroom, with a shared laundry down a back path. It’s much nicer than the basement in Cooks Hill, a human space, but a long way from the shops and the pub.

“What do ya think?” she asks me.

“It’s up to you Pat. Could you stand to come back to Stockton? There’s nothing to say the next offer will be any closer to town. At least you know Stockton. And you will have to accept something sooner or later.”

“I think I’ll accept it,” she says.
There is a woman on the next door verandah when we come out. She has thick glasses, a severe navy dress like a uniform and a built-up shoe. She gives Pat a look of disdain.

“It’s a good quiet place here,” she says, though she hasn’t been asked. “Are you moving in?”

I am aware of Pat standing next to me, chuckling, nudging me, and that she probably isn’t presenting her best side to her new neighbour. We don’t know yet, but this is Verna and Pat will hate her for as long as she lives here. But it is Verna who will save her life.

“We haven’t decided yet,” I say and hurry Pat off. We drive down the road at the side of the river till we get to the boat ramp and go into the Boatrowers Hotel. Its old public bar probably hasn’t changed for decades—there are still the tiles, the brass footrest and the faded photos of old shipwrecks; and the regulars perched on their stools, reading the form guide, chatting to the barman, or staring into space. There is a mounted swordfish bone and a noticeboard for the fishing club. We get our drinks at the bar and go through swing doors into the little lounge across the black and white tiled hallway. Pat is excited to be back in Stockton and to be able to see it.

“It’ll be OK Jill,” she says. “Yes, I think I’ll come back here. They know me down here at the Boatrowers.”

On the way back to Cooks Hill we stop off at Vinnies and I make myself scarce while she negotiates with the volunteers to furnish the place and help her move.
Chapter Four

Studying social work, which was only available at two universities in Sydney, was a good excuse to leave home, get out of Newcastle. I wanted to put as much distance between me and my careful upbringing as I could—I yearned for a wider world. I was the first in the family to leave, determined to have a room of my own.

It was 1970; I was eighteen years old and living in a college at the University of NSW, having given up the ivy-covered portals of Sydney University in favour of a new social work curriculum at the concrete wasteland of the Kensington campus. College was all I dreamt it would be—lots of hi-jinks and pranks, parties and midnight feasts in people’s rooms, treasure hunts and sports events; just like the boarding school books, except the hallways stank of cigarette smoke, stale beer and incense. The boys carried pompous John Bower’s Fiat Bambino through the cloisters and into the enclosed courtyard in the dead of night—he looked out of his window in the morning to find it sitting there. They filled Ken Armstrong’s room to the ceiling with scrunched up newspapers so that he couldn’t get in. There were fancy-dress parties and balls on ferries, and formal dinner in academic gowns on Wednesday nights in the dining hall. Full board for a ten-week term was $185.

Most of the other students had been at boarding school and it was a slow realisation that they came from another social class to mine. Intending to be kind, John Bower explained to me the importance of breaking, not cutting, my bread-roll and cutting a slice of bread in two, then one side in two again before buttering a quarter and eating it before buttering the next quarter. I couldn’t see the sense in it myself, but he seemed to think it was important. I learnt how all these little behaviours are markers for those in the know about where a person comes from and whether they are worth talking to.

I wore my red pyjamas under a long floral skirt to breakfast in the dining hall and then went back to bed before getting up for my first lecture at eleven. For the first time in my life I grew my hair very long—Mum always insisted that we wore it short. I played my guitar and sang all the Joan Baez numbers in a high quavery voice, wearing a long white muslin caftan with purple embroidery and splits up the side. I made a yellow tie-dyed dress out of a bed sheet and wore it with leather sandals with straps that wound right up to my knees. I plastered on lots of pancake make-up to cover my acne; rimmed my eyes with kohl, coated my lashes with mascara, and wore pale pink frosted lipstick. Long skirts were replacing minis which could go no higher, and bras were on their way out.

Despite the good time I was having, there were moments of terrible homesickness, of longing for Mum and Dad. As they didn’t have a phone, I rang Mum at work and had long conversations. I’d go down to the public phone box with its black machines you had to feed coins into with Button ‘A’ and Button ‘B’. Some time during my first year I was introduced to
one down the street from the university that, by holding button ‘A’ halfway in and listening for a special dial tone before pressing, you could talk for as long as you liked for the cost of a local call. There was a queue outside that telephone box the whole four years I was at university. I wrote long letters home about my new life and Mum wrote every week. The cost of stamps increased from five to six cents.

I kept a diary, which recorded a forgotten concern about ‘going wild’. Some of the girls from school had ‘gone wild’ and this was something I feared. ‘Scoring minus 2,000’ or being ‘raced off’ were terms we use for having sex and this was something I aimed to avoid until marriage. “Be careful,” was the sum total of my sex education from Mum. Abortion was still illegal and although the pill had just come into general use, doctors would only prescribe it for married couples. Horror stories circulated about doctors chastising unmarried women who asked to be put on the pill—even if they were engaged to be married. Some Catholic pharmacists refused to dispense the pill at all and there was a lot of publicity about its dangers for women’s health.

The month I finished school I fell in love with Andy from the Boys’ High whom I’d met at our end of school parties. He was a quiet young man with long curly hair and a passion for surfing. Like me, he hadn’t had a serious relationship before, and was as sexually inexperienced as I was. Our sexual encounters usually took place in his VW beetle—going ‘parking’. In 1970 there were a series of murders of couples at well-known parking spots so my guilty sexual fumbling was infused with an atmosphere of fear.

Not wanting to abandon my plan to move to Sydney or my new relationship with Andy, I persuaded him to come to university in Sydney. I didn’t know why he wasn’t as anxious to leave Newcastle as I was. While I was enjoying my first year living in college immensely, Andy, in another college, was miserable without his friends and family, and too far from the surf. After a year he moved back to Newcastle but we still saw each other at weekends and through the university breaks. This mostly amounted to me sitting on beaches up and down the NSW coast watching him surf.

Though I mooned and held the torch for Andy, I gradually began to find that I could have a good time without him. I became more and more involved in college life and flirted outrageously from the secure position of being unavailable. In college the male and female floors were separate and Lil, our college mistress, launched random patrols after 11pm when members of the opposite sex were forbidden from being in your rooms. At best, we were warned of an advancing raid by lookouts who ran down the corridors knocking on doors.

Sex information was difficult to find, it was a matter of learning from experience. Much of my education came later from my social work lectures and that wasn’t very reliable delivered, as it was, by a middle-aged male academic who appeared to get a lot of pleasure
teaching this subject to a class of eighty young women. I clung to the safety of ‘belonging’ to Andy, dodging any casual sexual encounters that might have been on offer. Liz from the room at the end of the corridor confided in me one night that she had recruited one of the senior male students to initiate her into sex and they were having regular ‘lessons’. Had her psychology major influenced her to approach the subject from a research perspective? I was profoundly shocked, but it was like a veil lifting as I realised that what I had assumed was heavy petting between the various male and female students was actually a lot of real sex happening a lot of the time. Virginity, it seemed, had become irrelevant, wasn’t even part of the language any more.

In my third year of university, after two years in a residential college, I moved to share a flat with a couple of other social work students. I had outgrown Lil’s surveillance of my sex life. Andy borrowed a trailer to deliver an old wardrobe, a dressing table, and an iron bedstead I’d bought from the Tempe tip. He and a friend struggled up the narrow stairs to install them in my tiny bedroom. I painted them lime green to go with a bedspread and curtains I dyed purple. However, my homemaking would be short-lived.

One of the students, Louise, turned out to have a boyfriend who, she announced proudly, was just out of gaol. They spent days at a time in bed having noisy sex, drinking beer, smoking, and fighting. The screaming at each other would escalate until she pushed him out the door, whereupon he paced up and down the street below yelling drunken obscenities and threatening to kill us all. After six weeks of remonstrating with her and living with a knot of anger in my stomach, I moved out.

Andy had a friend from school who was living in a share house at Surry Hills. They were looking for someone to sublet a room while its occupant was on an overseas trip. I left behind the lime green furniture, and moved to Surry Hills with just my clothes, books, and the purple bedspread. It was a small move from Randwick to Surry Hills, but a giant leap for the girl from Georgetown—the next two years would begin my escape.

The old house at the end of a row of terraces was rented by some art students from Sydney Tech and the boy from Newcastle, Russell, who was enrolled in an Arts degree at Sydney University. It had two storeys and a large attic room, a small front and back yard, an outside toilet and a remodelled bathroom. Two doors down was a primary school surrounded by high brick walls with broken glass on top. On the other corner was a shop where we used to buy milk, bread, and soy and cinnamon sweet buns. Across from there was the Clock Hotel.

In this house I entered a world that scared me half to death, but at the same time connected to a need I didn’t know I had—to escape my careful and proscribed upbringing. Russell, a suburban Newcastle boy from a similar background to mine, had become dedicated to Zen macrobiotics. Some months before, his jaw had been broken in an anti-Vietnam war
demonstration, necessitating a liquid diet and resulting in a huge loss of weight. Becoming a thin person for the first time ever, had been a life-changing event for Russell, causing him to eschew materialism and adopt Buddhism. He grew his thin black hair very long, and began to wear Indian shirts, drawstring cotton trousers, with no underwear or shoes. His large first floor room, opening onto the verandah, was bare except for a thin foam sleeping mat and two wooden fruit crates, one for his clothes, the other for his books. When I moved in he was on a grape fast to rid his body of toxins so instead of contributing to the food kitty, each Friday he’d buy a crate of grapes at Paddy’s down in the Haymarket and bring them home in a taxi. He’d give us detailed accounts of how his bodily functions were being affected by his fast, in particular the role of mucous in the body.

It is hard to explain how alien this was to my experience. I was there temporarily, as an emergency. They had no commitment to me other than allowing me to rent a girl’s room while she was away—they couldn’t do without her share of the rent. I lay low and listened—watching and learning.

Bruce was the house leader. As ruler of the roost he lived in the large attic. He signed the lease so what he said was law. Very early on I decided that I wanted to stay in this house—I was excited by the idea of the me that was possible there. I hoped that the girl who was overseas would stay there. But I knew that if I were invited to stay, Bruce’s opinion of me would be critical. At East Sydney Tech his specialty was post-object sculpture. Knowing nothing about art, I had to be educated about what post-object was all about. In high school Bruce had volunteered to help Christo and Jeanne-Claude wrap Little Bay in plastic—I remembered how we had all ridiculed this at home in Newcastle. For his end of year exam Bruce tied all the terrace houses in our row together with string, and took photos of them. Bruce was usually in love with some beautiful fellow art student who did not return his feelings. His strategy for seducing his latest passion was discussed endlessly at the dinner table.

Bruce painted the whole of the inside of the house white because he said art must only be displayed on white walls. The walls were decorated with colourful art posters and with various works of the students in the house, though art as decoration was scorned. Bruce’s pride and joy was his 500cc Ducati, kept on the front porch. On Fridays he would collect our kitty money and ride down to Paddy’s Market to buy the weekly fruit, vegetables and meat. We lived all the week on that buy-up, together with some grains and bread I’d get from the whole-food co-op at my university—my strategy was to become indispensible. I began to cook recipes from the health food bible, Lelord Kordel’s Cook Right—Live Longer, and my savoury pumpkin pie, with wholemeal pastry and full of garlic and cheese, became one of the house’s favourites. By Thursday there were usually only pumpkin and lentils left, so Bruce would select a cheap restaurant from Sam Orr’s restaurant reviews in The Nation Review and we’d all go out to eat.
With an eating background of meat and three veg and two years on bland college food, I was enthralled by this new world of ethnic food and restaurant reviews. I could hardly wait for Thursday nights and my next lesson.

Sometimes Bruce invited me to go down to the market with him—I rarely had classes on Fridays. I had never been on a motorbike before, but I discovered that riding pillion was divine. On weekends, if he was between lovers, Bruce sometimes took me for a longer ride and I learnt to bend into the corners, delighting in the sensuality of submitting to his control. In the end, with the imminent return of Kate, the girl whose room I was occupying, Bruce cleared out his 'studio', the ground floor front room, and offered it to me. He persuaded the others that an extra person to share the rent would benefit everyone.

The other women in the house were also art students. They terrified me—striding about in steel-capped work boots and thick embroidered Indian skirts, with hairy under-arms and legs, smoking roll-your-owns and having hopeless love affairs with absolute cads much older than they were. They kept me at arm’s length, regarding me as hopelessly conservative and up-tight. I tried to ingratiate myself into their approval but at best they tolerated me, scarcely disguising their contempt for Bruce that he had invited me to stay.

At university we were studying group work and our lecturer had become involved in the encounter group movement, very trendy and new in 1972. “Encounter” weekends were organised for the students and for the first time I became aware that others felt just as uncertain in the world as I did. Indeed, the students who appeared the most confident were, behind the mask, appallingly insecure. Another veil was lifting. I forged friendships which were closer than any I’d had before in my life, and I was bathed in an “incredible lightness of being” which carried me through the death throes of the relationship with Andy. But when I wrote to Mum about this new sense of being, she wrote back that she was happy to have her “old Jill” back again. I cried for days. I was not “old Jill” at all—she hadn’t heard me—I had escaped and I was flying free.

In that last year in Sydney, driven by the anger of being two-timed by Andy, I discovered hitchhiking. The new women friends I had made in social work, like me, had no money and no cars. So at weekends or holidays, groups of us, never less than three, would catch the train to the edges of the city, get out on the highway and stick out our thumbs. The other women always seemed to know of a beach cottage we could borrow or a youth hostel where we could stay for next to nothing. Once we got as far as the Glasshouse Mountains, north of Brisbane, to see someone’s friend who wasn’t at home. The sense of danger, of getting into any car or truck that stopped, exhilarated me.

In Surry Hills I managed to cling to my tenancy despite my unpopularity with the other girls, and left only when I finished my degree. I couldn’t wait to get out of Sydney. I hated the
funky air, the dirty streets, the sense of being hemmed in on all sides. I was dreaming of Woodstock and Nimbin and flower power and I wanted to get out into the country, try being a hippie, live in a farmhouse, commune with nature. Before this could be realised I had to make one more escape: I summoned up courage and made an appointment to see Dr Thwaites who headed the professional division of the NSW Health Department—it was not too easy to talk his secretary into allowing me to see him. A small, neat man, he sat behind a vast desk in an office which overlooked Sydney Harbour, eying me with amusement as I began my tirade.

“How could I have been expected to know at eighteen, just out of school, what department I would want to work in? I didn’t know anything about the different departments and the work they did. Child Welfare sounded better than working with prisoners or the mentally ill. If I’d known what I know now I would always have chosen the Health Department.”

“You made a commitment to Child Welfare and they’re the ones who’ve put time into training you.”

“Yes, and all their training has taught me is that what is happening in that department goes against everything I have learnt in my social work degree. The only qualified social workers they employ are in Sydney in the adoptions office, or the supervisor for the cadets. If I want to work outside of Sydney I have to do district officer training and work as a district officer not a social worker. All the social workers in adoption are allowed to do is match written reports about adoptive parents with written reports about babies surrendered for adoption. They never even meet any of these people—the surrendering mothers or the adoptive parents. Can you believe that? And the reports on the parents are done by district officers who mostly have no qualifications at all. As well as that, it’s these district officers who make decisions about removing children from families and then they are put in the most appalling institutions you can imagine or go out to foster carers where, more often than not they are mistreated again. I cannot ethically be a social worker and work in that system.”

I was starting to cry with the horror of it all and the fear that there was no way out. The doctor, being psychiatrically trained, said nothing.

“Please Dr Thwaites, I know that the Health Department is where I belong. I’ve been offered a position in the new psychiatric clinic in Lismore. They’d have real trouble getting a qualified social worker up there. Mental health is where my real interest lies—I’ve got so much to offer!”

He could see how determined I was; my high grades supported my sales pitch; he agreed to begin the paperwork necessary for my employment to be transferred to the Health Department and for me to work out my five-year bond with them. I could have leapt across that desk and hugged him.
Apart from my desperation to escape Sydney and the Child Welfare Department, I was energised into taking risks by the grief of losing Andy. I had always imagined our future together—in our extended family it was usual to marry your first great love. I was determined to show that he had not ruined my life. I bought a car, learnt to drive, packed up, strapped my old red bicycle on the roof, and drove up to Lismore. I found an old house to rent in a beautiful area about twenty kilometres from town, bought a mattress, and moved in. Living alone in the middle of nowhere for the first time in my life was a huge shock. What was I thinking? I’d always been scared of the dark, but I told myself I had to get through this. I remembered Mum saying she used to be scared of being in the house alone in the dark but after a while she got used to it. I did too.

 Barely a year later I had to leave that farmhouse in a hurry. A few months before, Netta, a social work friend from university, had found a job in Lismore and moved in with me. She brought her much older boyfriend Geoff—a confident, flashy man-of-the-world with bleached blond hair, knife pleats in his trousers and white shoes. I was glad to have company. While Netta and I went to our jobs in Lismore, Geoff took over managing the household. In addition to the chooks and dog I already had, he went to local sales taking on the identity of a serious farmer although our house came with scarcely an acre of land. He bought ducks, geese, turkeys, and a calf to fatten and eat. We called the calf Bertie. Geoff fixed the fences and mended parts of the house that were falling down. He had a mad laugh and at first we had lots of fun.

 The laugh slowly faded but the madness stayed. Geoff turned out to be obsessive and controlling. He was madly possessive and jealous of Netta. Their relationship was strange. Netta, who had a special sexual allure that men found irresistible, had clandestine affairs with other men, usually those she met at work, and she always seemed to ensure that Geoff would find out. I guess it was her way of letting him know he didn’t own her. I huddled on my mattress as they argued and yelled well into the night.

 This was bad enough, but at some point Geoff began to try to extend his control to me. It started when I began to go out with my bank teller, Chris—the first significant relationship I’d had since Andy. I hadn’t realised that I was included in the women he regarded as his. Matters reached a head when Geoff had Bertie slaughtered and dismembered by the local butcher. He brought home all the pieces of meat and proudly displayed them on the kitchen table. It made me feel sick—I’d been fond of Bertie, even though I knew this was his destiny. Geoff left the meat covered with damp tea towels on the table insisting that this would age it, improving its flavour and tenderness. After a few days I suggested that it was beginning to smell.

 “I think it’s gone off, Geoff.”
“Of course it hasn’t,” he blustered. But it had—a day or so later when the smell was unbearable, it all had to be buried in the back yard. I was secretly relieved, I think I would have choked trying to eat Bertie. Geoff couldn’t seem to forgive me for being right. He began to accuse me of being a slob around the house—a big joke because at the house in Surry Hills their main complaint was that I was too concerned with housekeeping—seems that being me was going to offend some people no matter what. Finally we argued about something too trivial for me to remember and he took to the idea that I was the cause of all the trouble between him and Netta and if I didn’t leave the house immediately he would shoot me. As he had a loaded rifle propped in the corner of his room and I was quite sure he was mad, I was scared stiff. I got out of there and sought refuge with Chris who lived with his parents and brother in town.

However, I had to leave without my things. On Saturday morning, when I knew Geoff would be at the cattle sale, Chris and I drove back to the house, forced open a window that always had a faulty lock and started gathering up my stuff. There are only a couple of times in my life that I have been as scared. My heart was pounding and I felt as if I was going to vomit as I rushed around throwing my things into bags and boxes, all the while listening out for Geoff’s ute to pull into the drive. I heard later that he was furious when he arrived home to discover my raid; that he was all for finding out where I was and shooting me. For the last few months I spent on the North coast, Chris and I moved to a house on the beach at Byron Bay but I got into the habit of looking over my shoulder.

My friend Val from social work came to visit while I was at the farm and we hatched a plan to sail to Europe the following year. Travelling to Europe had always been part of my plan; finally in the spring of 1975, the time had come. I was glad to get out of Lismore. The hippie life was a bit beyond me—I liked to be clean; drug taking didn’t do anything for me; and I wasn’t inclined to jump into bed with every beaded and bearded New Ager, invariably married, who took a fancy to me. I liked Chris a lot; the weekend of my high temperatures from the smallpox injection we spent in a motel room on the Gold Coast making love and watching colour television for the first time. But Chris had no desire to leave Lismore, no dreams of a larger life; so I left my dog with him and set off to see the world.

Val booked us on the cheapest passage she could find—a six-week voyage on the Italian ship Marconi sailing via the Panama Canal. We found ourselves in a tiny six-berth cabin on the lowest deck of the ship, well below the waterline. In fact our deck was a truncated one tucked away just in front of the ship’s massive propeller, which vibrated us all the way to the Mediterranean. We shared the cabin with a young Irish woman returning to Dublin to get married—her fiancé sounded like an IRA operative; Jenny and Bev, two wild young women from Melbourne; and Mrs Domanski, a Polish woman in her fifties, returning to Krakow for the
first time since the war. Mrs Domanski rarely left the cabin and, as she was a chain smoker, this meant that we passed the whole journey in a thick pall of cigarette smoke. But she mothered us and gave us a sense of security as we struck out to the other side of the world.

The worst thing about our deck was our cabin steward, who spent most of his time in his little cubicle dead drunk, and therefore not up to the job of keeping the showers and toilets clean. Among the passengers who shared our deck, immigrants to Australia returning to visit their homelands, there seemed to be some with terrible bowel problems as the toilets were invariably smeared with faeces.

“What do they do in there?” I would shriek to Val. “There’s even shit on the ceiling!” We began to use the bathrooms on the deck above.

Val and I disembarked in Naples, travelled through Italy and Scandinavia for a few months trying to clock up as many miles as we could on our Eurail passes, and ended up in London where our intention was to find a social work job. The temp agency offered me a position straight away—an unexpected vacancy had come up for a live-in worker at a facility for troubled teenage girls at Ealing. It seemed too good to be true; I had nowhere to live and renting in London would use up my savings very quickly. During my cadetship with Child Welfare, I’d spent time working at a girls’ home where I quickly realized that, although the girls were classified as ‘not under proper care and control’ and locked up as if they were prisoners, they came from families that through marital breakdown, violence or the illness of parents were not able to provide care.

I caught the Tube to Ealing early in November 1975, and walked to the address I’d been given with all my worldly goods in my backpack. The house was lovely and old, a freestanding two-storey in a large tree-filled garden. The trees were golden with the last of their autumn leaves and there was a chill in the air.

“Odd,” I thought when I saw that the front lawn appeared to be covered with furniture. “Are they having a garage sale?” I approached the front door with apprehension. I could see that a number of windows were smashed. The door was ajar. A distressed-looking woman answered my knock.

“Come in. Quickly!” she urged in a whisper and pushed me along the hall. Daubed on the walls in red paint were words such as ‘Fuck you Merrycort’, ‘Nazi prick’, ‘Racist scum’. She hustled me into a kitchen at the back of the house, locking the door after us.

“The girls have been on a rampage,” she explained. “The warden refused one of them leave to go and see her sister. They’ve thrown all the furniture outside. The police have been twice and done nothing. Now they’ve locked themselves in the big bedroom.”

“Where’s the warden?” I asked—I’d expected to report to a Mr Merricourt.
“He’s locked in his office,” she spat out. “He’s waiting for back up from head office to arrive.”

We sat glumly in the kitchen while the woman, who introduced herself as Norma, made a half-hearted effort to peel some vegetables.

“It’s such a shame about Louisa,” she said, “she was so good with the girls. None of this was her fault. I went to see her this morning and she’s had twenty stitches.”

“What happened to her?”

“Oh weren’t you told? One of the girls took to her with a knife yesterday when all this started. She’s in hospital. And you should see her black eye. We had to lock ourselves in here till the police came.”

I realised with a jolt that I was Louisa’s replacement. This was not what I was expecting. My heart appeared to relocate itself in my throat. There was another knock at the front door and Norma looked through the window, “Oh at last. Here’s the social worker.”

She unlocked the kitchen door and tiptoed up to the front door to let in a small black woman. After a few hurried words the social worker disappeared upstairs and Norma came back into the kitchen, leaving the door open.

“It’ll be all right now. Do you want to peel these potatoes?”

After about an hour the social worker came downstairs followed by some big black teenage girls who towered above her. They went out the front and began to carry the furniture back inside. The social worker knocked on the door which said ‘Warden’, waited as the bolts were undone, and disappeared inside. After a while she emerged, called out “Bye now!” to Norma and let herself out the front door while a small older man with a florid face came down the hall to the kitchen. In a thick Scottish brogue, he gushed, “You’re Jill! It’s marvellous to have you. I couldn’t believe the agency got me a temp so quickly. Come down to the office and I’ll give you your keys and let you know what your duties are going to be.”

Norma rolled her eyes as I left the potatoes, heaved up my pack and followed him from the kitchen. In his front room, thick with cigarette smoke, Mr Merricourt offered me a whisky. I shook my head. He had an open bottle and a glass on his desk and had already drunk quite a bit of it, from the smell of him. He gave me some keys, got me to sign some papers, and directed me to the stairs to my room.

“You can start your shift at five this evening—help with the evening meal and supervising the girls before they go to bed. Norma will tell you what she wants you to do.” He bolted his door after I went out.

My tiny room was in the attic. There was a dormer window looking out over the tops of the autumn leaves of Ealing. I had my own little bathroom on the same level. It was really nice—a room of my own after all those hostels and cheap pensiones. Norma came up after a
while, showing me her flat on the floor below and taking me to the common room where the girls were quietly watching TV.

“This is Jill. She’s our new member of staff. She’s from Australia so make her welcome.” They looked up sullenly before turning back to their television show.

At dinner I helped Norma serve out the food and sat in the dining room eating with the girls. We were watching the news on TV and to my surprise an item about Australia appeared—it was a rarity to have anything about Australia in the British news. It was about the new Racial Discrimination Act, which had just been passed by the Australian parliament.

“Oh, look at that!” I said excitedly. “Isn’t that great?” I was thinking of the “racist scum” slogan on the walls in the hall.

“What fucking use do you think that’s going to be?” spluttered Rosie, the biggest of the West Indian girls. “Don’t think those whities are ever going to stop discriminating against us just because it’s the law!”

“Oh, Rosie! Don’t be so cynical. Change has to start somewhere!”

“Who ya calling cynical you fucked-up honky bitch?” Rosie screeched, leaping out of her chair, which fell over with a crash.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean it like that—forget it,” I muttered, while one of the other girls grabbed Rosie’s arm and another picked up the chair. I shut up and began to clear the table.

Later in the evening Norma called me down to the phone in the hall. It was Melbourne Jenny, who’d shared our cabin on the Marconi.

“I got your number off Val. I wanted to tell you I’m off to Scotland in the morning. Bev’s had to go back home—her dad’s really ill. I just wanted to say goodbye.”

“How are you travelling?” I asked. I still had a knot in my stomach from the events of the day. I was dreading the morning.

“Hitching of course.”

“Who are you going with?”

“On my own. Maybe I’ll meet someone in the hostels who’ll team up with me.”

Jenny was fearless—I envied the way she could plunge into things without any thought of the risk. She could take something into her head and then do it, no mulling over the costs and benefits, the possible dangers. She and Bev, at only twenty, had set off from Melbourne with very limited finances. There was a silence as my brain ticked over.

“Are you still there?”

“I’m coming with you!” I burst out. “You shouldn’t do it on your own. I can’t bear to be stuck here. Where do we meet?”

I ran back up to my room and shoved everything back into my pack. I wrote a thank you note to Norma, had a restless night in the narrow bed, and at 6am was knocking on Mr
Merricourt’s door. I heard the sound of him undoing the bolts. He peeped out of the gap left by the safety chain.

“My plans have changed. I won’t be taking up the job,” I said and, without giving him a chance to respond, I hurried out the front door, hoisted my pack on my back, and bounced down the road to the Tube to meet up with Jenny at the station nearest the Great Northern Road. It was November, freezing, utterly mad to be hitchhiking in this weather but I felt as light as air.
Chapter Five

In Stockton, Verna, Pat’s neighbour, while probably only in her sixties, has the look of someone who has always been old: thick and crinkly steel grey hair, silver-rimmed spectacles, and a mouth that even when it is smiling is not smiling. Every time I see her she is wearing grey or navy, either a severely cut dress with buttons and a belt, or a badly tailored suit. The thing that I notice first about her however, and this would surely mortify her, is her built-up shoe on her right foot. She wears black orthopaedic shoes and thick stockings and limps on that shortened leg. Pat tells me different stories about Verna’s leg: that she had a club foot as a baby and her mother put her in an orphanage; that she was knocked over by a tram when she was a young woman and her leg was only just saved from amputation; that she was on a church camp and fell down a cliff when she was a child and her leg was so badly broken they couldn’t make it the same length again afterwards. I am never more reminded of how Pat loves to make life more interesting by creating stories. She is particularly fond of the church camp story, embellishing it with lurid details of the nun who was too drunk to give proper supervision, or Verna escaping from a priest’s lewd advances. Pat takes extra delight in this story because Verna is a devout churchgoer, disappearing off in her little blue car every Sunday. Her housewarming gift to Pat is a shiny new Bible.

At first I hope that Pat and Verna will be friends, even if Verna is only doing her Christian duty. Perhaps she will be of help to Pat, keep an eye out for her, give her a lift to the shops. What sort of fantasy am I living in? Instead, Pat cultivates a vehement dislike of Verna, amounting at times to paranoia, interspersed with brief lulls when Pat might join with Verna in hostility towards one of the other residents.

At Stockton Pat goes back to being a regular at the Boatrowers Hotel. She would be one of the characters on a stool in the public bar, but when I am with her we sit in the lounge across the hall—we usually have it to ourselves. It’s a Saturday morning and we’ve done the supermarket shopping and picked up a carton of VB from the bottle shop. Pat’s having a middy of Tooheys New, and I’ve got a lemon squash—I’m driving. We’ve got a packet of roasted peanuts open between us but I eat most of them. Pat savours her first long sip of beer. It’s been nearly an hour since her last drink. She stays topped up all the time, always the small size Vegemite glass on her table—not ever drunk but never stone cold sober either.

“There was a show on Channel 3 about them kids in the orphanages,” she says, looking to see if she’s engaged my interest. “Gawd, Jill, it’s terrible what happened in them places.”

“But that’s where you were, wasn’t it Pat? Weren’t you brought up in care?”

“Oh yeah, St Joseph’s Orphanage for Girls in Goulburn. I was there ten years, Jill.” I ask her what it was like, and this is what she tells me.
I’ve never been so cold. I used to shiver fit to shake me teeth out. We had these narrow little beds, see, hard as rocks they were. The nighties they gave us was washed so many times there wasn’t any warmth left in them. I used to rub me hands together between me knees, pedalling me legs like this. That’s how Mum used to tell us to get the bed warm. But it wouldn’t warm up at all. You know what I mean? It was freezing. The inside of the big windows was all wet. I’ll never forget it, how it was when we first got there.

It must’a been round July—middle of winter, it would’a been because it was coming up for me birthday. Sixth birthday. It could get pretty cold down in Moruya too, but not like this. They only gave you one grey blanket. Not nearly warm enough. It was the first night of me life that I didn’t have Nellie and Edna in bed on each side to keep me warm. I didn’t even know where they were. They got taken to another room to sleep with the bigger girls.

It took us ages to get from Moruya to Goulburn. All day. It was dark when we left Moruya and dark by the time we got to Goulburn. A horse and sulky was waiting for us at the station, with a man in a big coat; said his name was Bert. Nellie says: ‘He might be a murderer. He might cut us up into little pieces and they’ll never find what happened to us’. Edna says: ‘Don’t be stupid, Dad’ll come looking for us.’ But Dad was back in Moruya, wasn’t he—how long before he’d know we’d gone missing?

But we didn’t have to worry; Bert used to fetch and carry for the nuns. You should have seen his horse. Not like Dad’s trotter. It had grey hairs around its nose—must’a been real old. It had a big dip in its back like this. Bert was hurrying to get home for his tea. Or maybe it was the horse that was hungry. It was a long way from the station, the Home, out near the Kenmore Asylum—a long way in a horse and sulky. And it was bitter cold. We were so cold and tired we had nothing to say to old Bert and he had nothing to say to us.

Then we turns in the gates and pulls up in front of the home. Edna says: ‘Oh gawd, it’s big!’ It was bigger than the Court House in Moruya. He drives us round to a side door and says: ‘Hurry up youse and get down!’ He grabs our boxes and throws them by the door, and knocks on it. A nun opens it up and she was real cross and she says: ‘It’s about time,’ or something like that. That wasn’t very nice was it Jill? ‘It’s about time!’ Not much of a welcome for three little girls when we’d been travelling all that way on our own.

She was in her black and white, like the nuns at the school in Moruya. She’s squinting at us like this, through her glasses. Gawd, she had a mean face, cruel, you know. It was Sister Dominica. Not the one in charge. But none of them were much better; they were cruel them nuns.

There was no sign of any food. The kitchen—that’s where we were, in the kitchen—it was all dark and cleaned up. She told us all the others were already in bed. But it can’t have been that late. Nellie said to her: ‘Sister, we’re freezing and we haven’t had anything to eat
since this morning. Is there anything we can have before we go to bed?’ That old nun said: ‘I’m Sister Dominica to you, young miss.’ But anyway she lit the stove under the kettle and gave us a mug of cocoa and a piece of bread and dripping. Cocoa! You should’a tasted it—just water with a little shake of cocoa powder. Down at Moruya, Mum used to make us cocoa when Mr Heffernan from the big house let us have a billy of milk. It was thick, real creamy, the milk from his cows.

I was near crying, but then Edna started—screwing up her nose like this at the cocoa while Sister had her back to us. I was trying to stop giggling. Edna was good like that. She could always make you laugh. Well Sister came back with a candle in a holder, barking at us: ‘Are you finished yet? Hurry up. I’ll take you to the lavatory and then it’s into bed with you. You mustn’t make a noise and wake the others.’ She took us out of the kitchen into this dark corridor. Just like those horror films it was. Down the end was a big bathroom and lavatory—icy cold. I reckon it was colder in there than the outside dunny at Moruya. Then off she marched us upstairs to this other corridor—doors on each side.

She said to Nellie and Edna: ‘Wait here!’ and grabbed me arm, dragged me inside one of the doors. I was scared stiff. I was pulling back. I’d never spent one night of me life without Nellie and Edna. We always slept together in one big bed. ‘Girls under eight in this room’, she said. Oh, I reckon I had bruises on me arm the way she had a hold of it and pushed me into that room and down to me bed. There was a folded nightie on the end of the bed. Real little beds they were, narrow like this. Sister said ‘Put that nightie on and say your prayers. I’ll be back in a few minutes to make sure you’re lying in the bed ready for the Lord.’ Well, I didn’t have a clue what she meant. ‘Lying in the bed ready for the Lord?’ So I knelt down beside the bed in the pitch black praying: ‘If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.’ Then I heard the door open and saw the candle coming up to me bed. I climbed in and Sister came up and grabbed me arms like this and folded them in the shape of a cross on me chest.

Pat folds her arms across her chest, chuckling and looking around as if she is performing for an audience, although, as usual, there are no other drinkers in the lounge bar.

“Now Jill, if I go to bed and I think I’m going to die, that’s what I do. Turn on me back with me arms crossed over me chest. Then you go straight to heaven see.”

Pat looks up angelically towards the ceiling.

“Can you get me another middy?” she asks, and I go out to the bar to get her one so she can go on with her story.

There I was on me own at St Joseph’s. As tired as I was, I couldn’t seem to go to sleep. It was the longest night of my life—that, and the one when we knew Mum had gone and dumped us.
Except then I was with Nellie and Edna; this time I was on me own. There was a bit of light through the windows at the end of the room, moonlight I suppose it would’a been. I could see the shapes of the beds, but none of those girls spoke a word to me. Too scared of Sister, I’d say. I was thinking if I turn onto me back and cross me arms on me chest again, and if I ask nicely, Jesus might take me right now—up into Heaven where everything is right and I’ll be warm and not hungry any more. That’s what I was thinking, without a word of a lie. But then I thought I hadn’t had my first holy communion yet and I didn’t know if you could go to heaven before you’d done that.

It was a terrible long trip from Moruya to Goulburn in those days. It would have taken us the whole day. It was the furthest we’d ever been and we were just little girls. We didn’t really know where we were going, just that the nuns would meet us and look after us.

I try to picture it. Auntie Glad wakes them before it’s light and they stand huddled in the cold at the corner of the street waiting for the mail truck going into Bateman’s Bay. They are excited to be in a motor truck and they know Mr Dobson, the mailman. He’s a friend of their mother’s.

“This is a fine turn up for the books,” he says to Auntie as he puts their boxes in the back where the mail will go.

“I can’t afford to keep them Bill. Jack’s put his foot down,” Auntie Glad says, pulling out a hanky to mop her eyes. “The nuns will look after them better than I can. At least they’ll get enough to eat. And be educated. They’ll get a good education with the nuns. And it’ll be closer to their dad now he’s got a job with the railway.”

She’s told them that their Dad asked Father Casey at the church to get them places in St Josephs’ Home for Girls at Goulburn. Pat doesn’t know where Goulburn is, just that it is a very long way from Moruya.

“Auntie Glad’s crying—things must be bad,” Pat is thinking, feeling sad as she allows herself to be enveloped in a big lavender-scented hug from Auntie. Mr Dobson helps Pat up the step. It is exciting to be high up with Mr Dobson in the motor, to see the dawn gradually lightening the paddocks as they make their way slowly along the twisting road out of Moruya. They have never been this far into the world before.

It is light, but still cold and early when they reach Batemans Bay—so many big buildings. Mr Dobson sets them down at the post office, talking to a man in uniform there and pointing at them.

“See ya’ ya poor kids. Good luck!” he says, getting back into his truck. Pat feels a bit scared as she watches Mr Dobson, the last familiar grown-up, get in his truck and disappear in a cloud of smoke around the corner. There are other people waiting at the post office for the morning bus to Braidwood. It seems a long way around winding mountain roads to reach
Braidwood, where they wait for another bus to Tarago. At Tarago they have to wait at the station for a long time. The stationmaster shows them into the waiting room with a fire going. At least it is warm. They are already hungry. They ate Auntie Glad’s slabs of bread and dripping back at Braidwood. The stationmaster brings them an apple each.

Pat hides her face with fright while Nellie and Edna squeal with excitement as the great black monster breathing steam and fire throbs into the station. It’s their first real train—before that they’ve only seen one in a picture book. The stationmaster hands them over to the conductor, a red-faced man in a grey hat. Nellie and Edna hang out the train windows getting soot in their eyes, hooting and laughing when the whistle blows. A lady with a blue hat frowns at them. They go to the toilet at the end of the carriage, watching the track speed by at the bottom of the bowl and pulling the silver basin out and in to wash their hands a dozen times. The lady in the blue hat orders something from a girl in a smart uniform. The girl brings a little table which she attaches to the seat in front, and then comes back along the rocking aisle balancing a tray with tea and scones. Pat watches, impressed and hungry. Nellie and Edna say they will be one of those waitresses one day and travel all over NSW on the trains. The trip goes so fast that in no time they are pulling into Goulburn station and the conductor comes down the corridor to help them off with their boxes.

Our sessions at the Boatrowers get longer and longer as Pat tells me more of her story. Our routine changes and we go there first so that the groceries aren’t left in the hot car. Before we leave her unit I make sure she’s put in her hearing aids and that the batteries are working. In the mornings we usually have the pub lounge to ourselves and no-one is interested in our loud conversation. I ask Pat what happened to her mother.

Mum dumped us—we got home from school one afternoon and she wasn’t there. She’d scarpered. We used to go to school and back on the milk cart. It was a fair way out of town to the farm where we lived. At first we didn’t think anything of it—Mum not being there—even though it never happened before. Nellie got on a chair and took the biscuit tin down from the top shelf and we ate all the biscuits that were left in it. They were broken biscuits that Dad used to buy from the grocer in Moruya when he came home Friday nights. We only saw him weekends back then because he was working on the new road. It was the Princes Highway. That was called after the Prince of Wales, Jill, did you know that? When we’d polished off the biscuits we raced down to the creek to catch yabbies with pieces of string. We used to love doing that. Not that we used to catch any. We just got very wet trying.

When it started to get dark we climbed back up the paddock to the house and there was still no sign of Mum, no sign of tea. We couldn’t make it out. I must’ a started to cry because
Nellie went mad on me. ‘Don’t be such a baby. She’s probably stuck in town, can’t get a ride’. Nellie was the oldest see, she would’a been ten, and bossy! Edna and me had to go along with all her schemes. We were the lieutenants and she was the sergeant major.

So Nellie made Edna and me peel some potatoes and she went out and picked some silver beet from the garden and got a couple of eggs from the chook run. We had a bit of a garden and some chooks. She got some sticks and paper and lit the stove, like she’d seen Mum do. She had to stand on a stool to reach the matches off the shelf. She put it all in a pan with some dripping and tried to cook it up. You should’a seen it. I was starving but Nellie couldn’t cook. Naah, she didn’t know nothing about cooking. The potatoes were still hard and the eggs were runny. I was forcing it down like this, ‘cos Nellie would’a slapped me if I’d ‘a said anything. Edna gave me a wink, and we was trying not to giggle, till Nellie noticed and pinched Edna hard, like this, and made her yell out.

Well it was scary when it got dark. Every sound and I would jump. Funny it was never scary with Mum or Dad there. The house was a long way out, on Heffernan’s land. Heffernans were a big family down at Moruya. One of the sons became a doctor. We came across him later when we was living in Sydney. Nellie said she was going to marry him. Naah, he wouldn’t marry someone like Nellie, would he? And one became a dentist, up in Oxford Street. I used to go to him as a dentist when I moved up to Sydney. He was sort of me boyfriend for a while, you know what I mean? He took all me teeth out for me and got me a plate and I didn’t have to pay a thing.

They owned the house we was in down at Moruya. Let Dad keep his trotter down in the back paddock. Mum used to sneak over to their place at night and pinch veggies from their garden. We didn’t have enough to eat see, so she’d go and get the veggies.

So when Mum didn’t come home Nellie told us to wash our faces, just like Mum used to, and we put on our nighties and climbed into bed. We had one big bed we shared. It was out on the sort of closed-in verandah. Sharing it kept us warm, but I’ll never forget that night, not as long as I live. I was lying there listening out for Mum coming home. I could feel Nellie beside me, listening. Edna, she never worried about anything, she fell straight asleep. She used to make noises in her dreams, like this. I must’a finally fell asleep and then, in the morning, there’s still no sign of Mum. Oh, Jill, I couldn’t understand it at all.

Nellie found a bit of old damper and spread it with dripping and we went out to wait for the milk cart to take us in to school. Nellie said to us: ‘Don’t you tell anyone about Mum, you wouldn’t want the welfare to come and get us’. See Jill we knew about the welfare coming to get kids. The O’Leary kids at school just disappeared one day, all six of them. The welfare came and got them in a big black car. So I was feeling sick in me tummy all day. I was trying to stop thinking of Mum. I must’a got even more slaps than usual from the teacher. I always got a lot of
slaps—for not paying attention. When we got home that afternoon we got a surprise to find Dad there. We were so excited ‘cos Dad was never there on a school day. But then we realised he was looking real gloomy. There was an old tin in front of him full of butts. He used to smoke roll-your-own. His eyes were all bloodshot and he smelt of beer—cigarettes and beer and engine grease—those were Dad’s smells.

We were pushing and shoving and throwing our arms around his neck. We were that glad to see him. Then he said, ‘Mum’s gone! She’s gone to Sydney. She’s left us’. Oh, Jill, I just couldn’t take it in. I started to laugh. I thought he was joking and he’d start tickling us like he always did. Nellie and Edna began to blubber and that’s how I knew things were very, very bad because they never, ever cried. Dad put his head down in his hands, like this and me tummy was somewhere up here in me mouth and down in its place was a big black hole. This is what I was thinking: that we’d really done it this time. It was because we were so naughty. Mum always said she would go to Sydney when we didn’t do what she said. I was trying to remember all the things I hadn’t done that I should have and all the things I did that I shouldn’t have. I was trying to work out what I’d done that made Mum go, whether it was me or Nellie or Edna. Edna was the naughtiest but you wouldn’t know because she was also the prettiest. She was Dad’s favourite—Dad thought the world of Edna. Me or Nellie usually got the blame for anything Edna did.

Then Dad told us that we couldn’t stay here at the farm. He said he’d have to ask Auntie Glad to find room for us till he could organise something else. Auntie Glad was Dad’s sister who lived in Moruya. She had the house where Dad’s mother and father lived but they died in the flu epidemic. You heard about the flu epidemic didn’t you Jill? Lots of people died. It was just after I was born so lucky I didn’t get it, eh? I didn’t remember Grandpa and Grandma. I would’a been too young. Nellie reckons she could remember them but I don’t know if you can believe what Nellie says. At Auntie Glad’s there was a photo of them at their wedding, looking like they had pokers up their behinds. Very stern, Jill. Nellie said Grandpa used to give her a whack with his belt if she was naughty. She wasn’t sorry he was dead.

I’ll never forget that day. Nellie for once was quiet, hardly said a word. It had turned cold. Dad lit the stove and made us damper. He pulled down some old boxes from the top of the cupboard and told us to pack our things. Mum took the ports—funny we didn’t notice that before. We didn’t have much to pack. Mum made our clothes from dresses or sheets that Mrs Heffernan up at the big house gave her. My favourite was a white dress with pintucks and embroidery—all done by Mum—and a big blue sash from Dad winning the prize trotter at the Moruya show. Edna and me were fighting over who owned what, and Dad came in and said ‘Come ‘n have a bit of tucker. No use fighting. That’s what probably finished Mum, what sent her to Sydney’. Dad was sort of quiet then. Not like him. Usually he made jokes and tickled us
till we cried for him to stop. Sometimes he yelled at us or whacked us on the behind if we were naughty. I thought he might’a yelled at us now for making Mum go away to Sydney. But he didn’t. He just told us to wash our faces and hands and get off to bed.

That night I woke up and heard a sound I’d never heard before. I can feel Nellie and Edna lying on either side of me. It took me a while to realise what the sound was. It was Dad crying. Oh Jill, he was sobbing. He loved Mum, he really did. I lay there a long time, till I couldn’t hear Dad any more. I made myself think of Mum. I thought about the time Mum borrowed Mr Morris down the road’s sulky, hooked up the trotter and took us down to the beach near Moruya. Bindi Beach it was called. It was summer, a real hot day. She got up early and made a basket full of scones for a picnic. We sang all the way—that was the thing about Mum, you could really have a good time with her. And sing. She could sing like Dame Nellie Melba. Dad used to say she should’a been on the stage instead of being stuck here in the back blocks with three naughty girls. But when we were nearly to the beach a big black snake slithered across the road in front of the trotter. The horse reared up and the scones went flying up in the air falling like hail all across us! We was scrabbling round on the road, on the sulky, trying to collect up all them scones. Laugh? We was laughing fit to kill.

Mum used to like to take us in to Moruya. She used to go and visit Mr Dobson the mailman. Nellie said to me once I’m no relative of hers, that Mr Dobson was my father. Mum’d give us a penny each to go to spend on a cake and tell us to go down to the jetty till the big hand on the School of Arts clock was on five. We used to climb on the rocks around the jetty after oysters. We chipped them off with rocks. I always liked oysters. I would’a been only four back then. I was leaning over too far and the next minute I fell in, right in the deep water. There was a man fishing there on the jetty and he jumped straight into the water and grabbed me and swam in to where I could climb out. Lucky he was there down on the wharf or maybe I would’a drowned. He wanted to know where Mum was but we didn’t know. We couldn’t swim you see. I never went down there on those rocks again after that. So I was remembering those times with Mum and I must of fell asleep because next thing it was morning.

Dad borrowed the sulky and took us in to Auntie Glad’s. We had to catch the hens and put them in a box and take them too. They squawked every time we hit a bump in the road. It was a nice house, that one out at Heffernan’s. We liked it. It might’a been a bit drafty, it leaked a bit. We had rats in the roof. I can remember times when Dad would come home and we’d be sitting around the kitchen table eating one of his rabbit stews. Mum was happy in them days. We helped Mum paper the walls over with magazines and newspapers Father Casey kept for us. We used to go down the chook house, feeling about under the hens for the eggs. There was the creek with its yabbies and the paddock with the black bull from the big house. Nellie said to be careful or it would rush you. We had a pit toilet down the back. We ripped newspaper into
squares and hung it on a nail. That was your toilet paper in those days, Jill. Sometimes the bits of paper were so interesting to read that it took a long time to come out again. Not for me but, I couldn’t read then. Nellie used to tell us that little children sometimes fell down the pit and might not be found for days, or never.

Yeah. That farm—these thick white mists used to come down in the creek valley in the winter. Sometimes they wouldn’t lift for days at a time and when that happened Edna would get a ‘chest’. Once Mum had to get Nellie up in the middle of the night to run over to Mr Morris’s to telephone the doctor for Edna because she couldn’t breathe. Mum sat there for hours rocking Edna and crying with the kettle on the stove to make steam to help her breathe. When the doctor came it was starting to get light and he said Edna was over the worst and wouldn’t die. It was a long time before Edna could go back to school and she was so behind they put her in the class below. She hated that. In summer we had to watch out for red-bellied black snakes. They liked to get down around the creek or after the eggs in the chook pen. We had a dog Dad brought home called Bluey and one time we all run outside when we heard a ruckus in the chook pen and there was Bluey with a snake in his mouth. Bluey killed that snake but not before it bit him and Bluey died too. We howled for hours over that.

I can’t really remember what it was like at Auntie Glad’s. She was married to Uncle Jack. They had some children but they were grown up and gone to Sydney, I can’t remember how many. Uncle Jack, I don’t remember him much. He was mostly away like Dad. He worked on the fishing boats. When he came home he sometimes brought some fish.

She used to get cranky with us, Auntie Glad. Reckoned Mum had let us get away with blue murder. She always had a list of complaints for Dad when he came in at weekends. I remember when we just got there she was having a bit of a beef to Dad. Something about Mum being a tart and he shouldn’a married her. I went with Dad around the back to let the chooks out into her pen. They were a pretty scraggy lot next to Auntie Glad’s fat brown ones. I stayed round there for ages—her fat hens were beating up the new ones, pecking and squawking and not letting them near the water trough. That’s what chooks do.

Pat takes another long draught of beer and goes quiet. Her story has been accompanied by laughing and dramatic gestures, but now I can see tears in her eyes which surprise me—Pat has only cried with me a couple of times: first when Bill died and then when her dogs were taken away. I stroke her hand and she shakes her head, shuddering off the tears, grinning sheepishly. It’s enough for today.
Chapter Six

Many years after Pat died and I stopped working as a social worker, I decide to make a journey to Kenmore to find the old St Joseph’s Girls’ Orphanage. I’ve decided to write Pat’s story and I am doing some ‘research’. I found a video on YouTube of St Johns, the abandoned orphanage for boys in Goulburn. Made at night, it shows a looming building which is surely haunted—it is a Gothic thing to do, to go there at night and make spooky videos, all the while in fear of being caught for trespassing. On Google I find Ken Doyle, a man who spent his childhood in St John’s and whose name comes up because he organised a reunion for the Goulburn orphanages in 2007. The search also finds a newspaper article that tells me that the local council has built an Orphans’ Memorial in Goulburn’s Victoria Park. At its opening ceremony the Catholic bishop apologised “for any pain the former orphans might have suffered.”

I ring Ken who is living in Western Sydney and he has many stories for me—it’s hard to get off the phone. But his perspective of his orphanage childhood is a positive one; he speaks of the Sisters of Mercy with adulation, still visiting one who is now more than a hundred years old. Ken sends me newspaper stories about the reunion and the ceremony to open the memorial. Not many of the girls came, he tells me. He also sends some poems he has written and only these provide a glimpse of a little boy bewildered, bitter and cold to the bone. Towards the end of our conversation he says he has something else to tell me.

“You might not like to hear this.”

“Go on Ken—I want to hear anything you’ve got to say about St Josephs.”

“Some of the sisters used to work at St Joseph’s before they came back to us. They said they would rather work with the boys. They told me the girls were sly and manipulative—devious.”

I catch my breath when he says devious—it takes me back to another time.

“You’ll learn,” they said with a knowing smile. “They’re devious those girls. You can’t trust them.” I was nineteen years old and working over the summer at the King Edward Girls Home in Newcastle as part of my cadetship. It was just a block from the beach, a single-storey brick building around an enclosed courtyard. The massive front door with coloured glass and the tessellated tiles of the entrance foyer were indications of the grand residence it once must have been. There were about thirty girls living there, all between ten and sixteen years old, returned from multiple failed foster placements. The place was supposedly their ‘home’ but it was more like a gaol with the internal courtyard, triple-locked doors, and security screened windows. In his poem Ken wrote that St John’s felt like a cage. The King Edward Home was a cage.

The girls were accompanied to the local public schools, marched home and locked in. Their offences? ‘Not under proper care and control’ or ‘exposed to moral danger’. In other
words their families and the community had not provided shelter and care but it was the girls who were treated as if they were prisoners being punished. I found this shocking and was astounded by the staff’s acceptance of it. They were all middle-aged women, younger than I am now, smug about their secure government jobs, self-righteous about putting these girls on the right path, and focused on the splendid meals served up to them (but not the girls) by the Scottish cook—a savoury morning tea, hot lunch with dessert, and cake for afternoon tea. Unsurprisingly, I felt closer to the girls than the women.

The girls told me alarming stories of what happened in the night when only the resident superintendent, Matron Wallace, was there; of her cruelty in twisting their arms, burning them with the cigarettes she found them with, calling them sluts and half-witted bastards. She wielded absolute power in that little place and the other staff simpered around her trying to anticipate her every whim. She wore thick white make-up like a mask and she liked to eat brains, which the cook was an expert at preparing—fricasseed in white sauce or crumbed and fried. I hated her and she did not try to hide her contempt for me. On one of her days off in the school vacation, when most of the girls were away with families hosting them for a holiday, I approached the mouse of a woman left in charge.

“It’s such a lovely day. Why don’t I take some of the girls for a walk down to Bar Beach?” It seemed so outrageous to me that they were locked in, and, having finished their chores, had nothing to do. I was desperate to do something for them.

“Oh, I don’t think I can let you do that! What would Miss Wallace say?”

“I’m sure I would be able to get her to let us go out,” I lied. “It is the holidays, and the girls have been very well behaved. They always do what I tell them!”

She didn’t want to say yes but she was too lily-livered to say no.

“Well you can only take the trusted girls.” The girls were labelled as “trusted” or “troublemakers”.

There were eight of them, four little girls and four teenagers, bursting with excitement. We paddled in the shallows at Bar Beach and explored the rock pools. I showed the little girls how to put their fingers into the anemones, which would close around them. We strolled along the promenade, watching the swimmers in the breakers, and I bought them ice-blocks at the kiosk. When the older girls said they were going to the toilet I didn’t give it a thought. It was quite a while before I realised they weren’t coming back. The younger girls giggled with excitement and I knew they’d been in on the plan. I was horrified that they could do this to me—couldn’t they see I was on their side?

We searched the change sheds, the beach, around the rock platform to the secluded Susan Gilmore Beach, then the car parks and nearby streets but there was no sign of those girls. Eventually I had to return to the home.
“I’m sorry it seems that four of the girls have gone missing!”

“What did I tell you? I knew you shouldn’t have taken them out. We’ve told you time and time again that they can’t be trusted. But you wouldn’t listen, wouldn’t be told—you and your smart-arse university ideas. What is Miss Wallace going to say?”

The police were called and later that night the girls were located down town with a group of boys. They returned to the home the next morning in police cars, envied by the other girls, triumphant at their escapade. Needless to say I was in disgrace for the rest of my time there—I joined the girls in the category of “not to be trusted.” The staff could not conceal their little smiles of satisfaction—we told you so! Miss Wallace could hardly bring herself to speak to me at all but made it known that she had submitted a formal report on the incident to the supervisor of my cadetship.

I felt sad that the girls had fulfilled the home’s expectations and became wary of them afterwards; but I had some inkling that they were coming from a different place and that I didn’t have to take it personally. At the end of the summer I also wrote a long and impassioned report about all that was wrong in that home, but it was received by my supervisor, a social worker, with rolled eyes—he was rather tired of this angry young woman, who returned from all her department placements with scathing indictments of what she had seen and expected him to do something about it. It would be decades before stories of what happened in that home and others like it, would begin to emerge.

Guy comes with me to Goulburn to find the orphanage, as engaged on this journey of discovery as I am. It is a freezing day in early spring, bitterly cold as only Goulburn can be. The peach trees and daffodils are just beginning to flower but otherwise the trees are bare of leaves. There is a steady drizzle of rain, a biting wind and I am thinking that all the reminiscences of the orphanages—Pat’s, Ken’s, people in the newspaper articles—refer to the cold.

The entrance to the St Joseph’s Home for Girls is difficult to find and when we finally locate it, after three trips along the road, I am completely surprised by how close it is to the old Kenmore mental hospital—the land has a common border. Pat had never mentioned this. We drive down a pitted tree-lined avenue to the orphanage building, which is not visible from the road. The Goulburn Catholic orphanages were closed in the 1970s when they were replaced by smaller ‘family style’ group homes. Since then St Joseph’s has functioned as ‘The House of Prayer’, some kind of exclusive Catholic retreat that no-one seems to know much about. Today it is eerily deserted, and the wooden sign House of Prayer is lying broken in the long grass by the entrance to the driveway. The timber letterbox, a later addition, has been knocked over and mail addressed to The House of Prayer is strewn all about in the grass.
The building rises up looming and empty at the end of the drive—a massive double storey brick edifice with blank windows and a white marble Madonna and child standing guard over the entrance portico. The foundation stone tells us it was opened in 1905, ten years after the hospital next door. The building itself seems in good condition but there are many ramshackle outbuildings and the gardens are overgrown. We have to watch where we are walking as there are several wells covered over with old garden chairs or sheets of plywood, lying in wait to claim unsuspecting intruders. We can see the hospital buildings from here, close enough to be a warning that the orphanage girls could end up there if they misbehaved.

In 1922, about the year Pat and her sisters went to St Joseph’s, a nurse was murdered at Kenmore by a deranged ex-patient who was looking to kill the medical superintendent. There is a memorial to the nurse in the orphanage chapel although she was never a resident of the home. I wonder if the girls in the orphanage told this story to scare one another, and how this might have affected Pat when she’d arrived there.

Leoné from the local history society has advised me that the orphanage, like the hospital, is up for sale and is not occupied—The House of Prayer people, whoever they were, have long gone. The front door is boarded up but curtains hang at the windows, as if someone were still living there. Leoné had a look inside and all the furniture and bedding were still there—the Catholic Church just walked away and left it.

As I am standing taking photos, another car drives up—a four-wheel drive with an older couple inside. They sit there facing the building as if meditating. They make no attempt to acknowledge us. I wonder if it is a past resident revisiting her demons. I want to believe in Pat’s resilience but my social work mind intrudes, suspicious of her waggish stories of the orphanage and its aftermath. It is difficult to reconcile her determination not to play the victim with the terrible, life-scarring stories about children’s institutions that have emerged in the years since she died. Ken Doyle’s three sisters grew up in St Joseph’s in the 1930s and told him it was a sad and lonely place.

“*The girls were not ever allowed to touch each other and if they did so the punishment was cruel. My sister told me her years there were ones she wanted to forget.*”

Another past resident recalled being five years old and having to wash her sheets in cold water on freezing mornings—a common practice it would seem, aimed to deter the children from wetting their beds.

Pat also had many stories of St Josephs.

The nuns had us starved. They used to belt us, too. Did I tell you about Father Griffin? He was a dirty old perve. We had to bring him his breakfast when he came to say Mass. We had to take his tray into the sitting room next to the chapel. We fought for that job because we could pinch a
bit of the food for ourselves. Nellie was the first. She would have been only about twelve. He used to run his hands all over her and that—you know. He used to do that to Nellie and when Nellie went he got Edna. After Edna he got me. He was really a pervert. I wouldn’t talk about a priest like that, but he was. He used to give Edna a big box of chocolates. But Edna caused a commotion by running away—it wasn’t just Father Griffin; one of the nuns used to thrash her with a machine belt. We all had to say prayers for Edna and eventually they found her and brought her back. She never told us where she’d been, not me and not Nellie either.

We must a’ been wards of the state I think. Mum tried to get us back again when she got a job at the Wentworth hotel up in Sydney. She was renting a little house in Erskineville for ten bob a week and she tried to get us out but the nuns said we couldn’t go till we was sixteen. Nellie tried to tell her about Father Griffin but Mum wouldn’t believe her. She said a priest would never do anything like that and Nellie was making it up.

Mum’d visit us down there on a Sunday. She’d come on the train maybe once a month and bring a big port of food, sometimes new clothes—socks and shoes. We were the best dressed out of all the girls there. Dad would visit too—he was working on the railway somewhere round there. He’d bring us things too. We’d just wait for those visits.

But when I was about nine Dad was hit by a goods train and died. Oh, we cried our eyes out about that. We didn’t go to the funeral or anything—kids didn’t go to funerals in those days. I don’t even know if he had a funeral. Only Mum visited after that.

Pat didn’t have much time for the Catholic Church after being belted and half-starved by the nuns and molested by Father Griffin. When I knew her she hadn’t gone to Mass for a long time, though she regularly stopped in at Vinnies to touch them for a couple of new frocks and a food voucher.

At sixteen they turned the girls out of the orphanage. They got them domestic jobs in Catholic families where often enough they were abused again. However, Pat took off to Sydney to live with her mother. She’d been at St Joseph’s for ten years. When she got to Sydney she moved around—she got a job at King Gee for a pound a week, and gave her mother half of it. But she couldn’t stand the work and then Edna got pregnant and needed the room so Pat moved out to her grandmother’s at Peakhurst and began to get attention from boys. They’d walk her home from the station but didn’t try anything else. She moved to an aunt and got a job in the laundry at the end of the street and then to another aunt in Newtown—all these moves in a year. By the time she was seventeen she was homeless and on the game. She didn’t tell me about the first time.

“I used to walk around all night—it wasn’t good. If I went in a pub they said I was too young to get served. I was seventeen but they said I didn’t look sixteen. Then I had the bent
copper on me. He’d leave me alone if I gave him the one for free. I walked out to Newtown every night and stood out there in the doorway all night. Or I went on the tram up and down to the quay for a penny all night long.”

After Edna’s baby was born she began to take Pat to hotels where she knew some jockeys. Edna and Pat and some other girls started to go to the races on a Wednesday—dressing up to the nines. Edna left the baby with her mother when she could or with an aunt. Pat learnt from the other girls that she could make a pound having sex with a jockey, as much as she could make in a week at the laundry, or maybe five or ten pounds if he had won that day. It was only a shilling a night for a room at the Parkview Residential and the jockey would also freight out for a counter lunch and a schooner at the pub.

“Jack Pratt was my regular. He was a star jockey and engaged to be married but his fiancée was a ‘good girl’. She was ‘keeping it’ till they got married. His trainer would tell him not to be ‘at it’ all the time—it could affect his riding. He died on a Wednesday at a race meeting. A fall. It upset me terrible. They said he was laying on the track motionless. Couldn’t get up. He was dead, see.”

Not long after that Pat was working on George Street when a flash car stopped and its driver asked her if she would like to go for a meal. This was Keith, a man nearly forty, who had a restaurant on George Street. Pat would be with Keith for about six years, and would have two daughters with him, Renee and Patti. She was appalled by the experience of childbirth and, though she loved her girls and wanted them to have everything, she couldn’t stand being confined to the house. The relationship with Keith was volatile. He would buy her beautiful clothes and drive her all over the place showing her off. But when he got drunk he was possessive and jealous. He got increasingly violent, holding razors to her throat and ripping up the dresses he had bought her.

“There wasn’t one pub I could go to that he wouldn’t come and find me and drag me out. Then when he got me home it was terrible. He would beat me up for half an hour or more.”

I’ve been reading prostitutes’ stories, seeking out ones that are close to Pat’s era. They reflect Pat’s experience: disrupted childhoods from parents dying or leaving, time spent in institutions or with relatives where there was no love; early exposure to sex, sometimes by fathers or caregivers; mothers with lovers. The girls were vulnerable to the first predatory male who arrived on the scene—often much older than they were and promising love and financial support. With their education cut short, often trained only for domestic or factory work, the girls were drawn to prostitution as a comfortable, even glamorous, way of life, and a source of much more income than alternative work. A pound a week or a pound for twenty minutes.
Yet to be true to Pat’s story I need to hold fast to her refusal to see herself as a victim. She is not “the other”, an object to be pitied, but a woman who was mischievous, playful, flirtatious, salacious and proud. Being devious and manipulative were her survival skills—fighting for a powerful position, having good times in the midst of hardship, using tricks and cunning to carve out some ground, living by her wits. When the war came and the Yanks came to Sydney, Pat seized the chance of an escape to another world.
Chapter Seven

I saw an ad in the paper calling for contributions for a series on women at home in Australia during the Second World War and I thought of Pat. After all, not all the women at home were tending to families or working in the factories. When I showed the ad to Pat and asked if she would like me to put her name forward, she thought it was a great idea. She was thrilled—wanted to be interviewed tomorrow. I tried to prepare her for disappointment; I really didn’t expect to hear anything more; so when the producers contacted me a few months later it was quite a surprise. It was a surprise too that I felt so uncomfortable when they used the word ‘prostitute’. It wasn’t a word Pat and I ever used between us.

On the day of the interview the film crew drove up from Sydney to Pat’s little unit in Stockton. I remember it was a grey wintry day and the wind was blowing west bringing the usual stench from the chemical factories. Pat had prepared herself with an appointment at Antoine’s for a perm and colour, a new polyester dress in a colourful print from Vinnies, eyebrows pencilled in and red lipstick. We were both excited and I was more than a bit apprehensive. They arrived in a station wagon and a van, two young men and a woman looking a bit shell-shocked at the bleakness of the industries across the water behind them and the grim little Housing Commission units in front of them.

The men introduced themselves as the cameraman and the interviewer, and the smartly dressed woman was the director. As they hugged their equipment across the yard and into the unit, curtains at the windows of the other residents twitched with curiosity. The big lights and camera were manoeuvred into Pat’s tiny bedsit until there was scarcely room for her. The woman had a big basket with an electric jug and all the makings for morning tea and she proceeded to take over the kitchen, as well as finding time to powder Pat’s face and position chairs for the interview. Pat was in her element.

I’d heard her story many times and this is how I imagined it.

Pat pushes open the door of the saloon bar, eager to escape the November drizzle and plunge into the warm blanket of cigarette smoke. She closes her eyes for a moment and inhales—stale beer, cheap perfume, cigarettes and wet wool. It’s the busiest time of day, late afternoon, and the saloon is crowded and noisy with the confident twangs of American servicemen and the excited giggles of the young women in their colourful crepe dresses, bright-red lipstick and “Yank catcher” shoes. She loves it here more than anywhere: the Hotel Sydney, corner of Pitt and Hay Streets, next door to the Tivoli and across the park from Central Station. Sydney at the end of 1942 is overwhelmed by its first wave of American servicemen and there is no better place in the world to be.
Under her grey woollen coat she is wearing the new dusky pink dress that Keith has bought her, real nylons she’s cadged from the last Yank she met, and her best suede pumps with the ankle straps. She hides those shoes from Keith—he knows what they mean. She’s left her daughters with Dot across the street. Renee, nearly five, and Patti, just turned three, like to go to Dot’s. Renee calls her Auntie Dot, but Patti has spent so much time there that she’s started to call her Mummy. Dot looks embarrassed and scolds her but Pat doesn’t mind. Dot is in the situation of not being able to have babies, so she loves the girls as her own. She knows that things aren’t the best between Pat and Keith. Any of the neighbours can hear the yelling and see the bruises. She is happy to have the girls for days at a time.

Keith is who knows where—probably up at the Sugar House playing cards with the boys. Pat knows she’ll have hell to pay when she gets home, but it’ll be worth it. Keith doesn’t mind the money, but if he’s got drink in him he goes berserk at the idea of her being with the Yanks. She slips off the wedding ring that Keith gave her to pass herself off as his wife and puts it in her purse.

Pat caught the tram from Newtown into George Street. She can’t walk anywhere downtown without an American coming up and saying, “Can I show you a good time?” It’s just fantastic. They’re nice men too, not like the Australians, not like Keith, and not like the Pommie servicemen who’ve got no money and expect you to pay. No, the Yanks treat her with respect. They don’t expect to jump into bed straight away. They might take her around for a couple of days even, buying her things and telling her how beautiful she is. Whenever she can get out, she hangs around the Cross, dancing, listening to music, walking around the streets, then maybe getting a little room in Bondi—as far as possible from the Consorting Squad’s beat. Especially since the boys on the squad know her so well.

No, the Yanks aren’t “wham, bam, thank you ma’m,” types like the Australians or the Pommies. They like to kiss and cuddle and tell her about their mothers. And they’re clean. They want to see her card from the clinic at the Rachel Forster and they always use a rubber. They’ve got plenty of rubbers along with nylons and chocolate and Lucky Strikes or Camels—so much nicer than Craven As. She saves the chocolate for Patti and Renee and she often has extra nylons to sell. After all, Keith gives her nothing. After a quick poke, the Yankee sends a taxi off with a wad of notes to bring back steak and oysters or a big bag of hamburgers from the Hasty Tasty up in Darlinghurst Road. How can war be bad if it’s brought all this happiness?

Pat pushes her way towards the bar. The saloon is chock-a-block with servicemen of all kinds, roaring and shouting and laughing and trying to drink as much as they can before the quota runs out or six o’clock closing—whichever comes first. Even in her highest heels Pat is still not quite up to the shoulders of these big men. Lots of them are just boys, not even twenty. She squeezes into a group near the bar, where one of her girlfriends known as Big-breasted
Anna is smoking and flirting with a giant of a man, who is staring with a kind of dumb fascination down her cleavage. He is a bit older than the others, some kind of officer, though the officers mostly drink up at the Australia or the Wentworth. He grins when he sees Pat pushing in, scarcely up to his elbow.

“Hey you guys,” he calls to a couple of buddies, “Buy this lady a drink. She needs warming up!”

She has a scotch and water though she wonders if you need the water. She wasn’t born yesterday and she knows that the Missus who runs the hotel gets the barmaids to water down the spirits. And it’s as rough as guts—they fill the good bottles of spirits with cheap stuff. Better than the beer though: they pour all the drip trays back into the kegs at the end of the day. Most of the drinkers can’t tell the difference.

“I’m Jake,” one of the Yanks says, while his friend turns away to talk to someone else. He offers her a Camel and holds her hand while he lights it for her. As she inhales, she draws in the wet wool smell of his uniform, the Old Spice aftershave they all wear, and the mint of the inevitable chewing gum. He’s around the same age but not as tall as the bloke talking to Big-breasted Anna but he’s a good size of a man, big shoulders, mousy hair slicked back. His ears stick out a bit and his nose looks as if it’s been broken more than once. It doesn’t go together with his hazel eyes—she could lose herself in those eyes—they are so gentle. A bit bloodshot though. And he’s cut himself shaving—there’s a spot of dried blood on his chin.

“Why don’t you tell me who you are gorgeous little thing?” He leans towards her, his breath a mix of beer and cigarette smoke and chewing gum.

“They call me Pat,” she says, flirting with her eyes, “Where’re you from soldier?”

“Detroit,” Jake tells her.

“Where the heck’s that?” she shouts above the noise.

“Near Chicago!” he laughs. Pat keeps her mouth shut. She’s got no idea where that is either. “You should see it in the winter, it gets real cold. Everything’s white from the snow. You can go ice-skating.”

That sounds nice. Pat has seen pictures in books of people ice-skating in white boots and fluffy hoods. She imagines herself dressed like that gliding around on the ice with Jake.

“What do you think I do back in Detroit?” he asks her, teasing, leaning down to look in her eyes which are still dreaming about skating.

“Maybe you collect the garbage!” she shoots back, laughing. “I mean the trash. You call it trash.”

He slaps her hand. “Cut the sass! I make Chevrolet cars. You know what they are? Detroit makes cars. Ford, General Motors.”
She looks at him not knowing what to say. Keith likes cars. He’s always wanting a new one, that’s why he puts up with her earning good money. But he’s never had a Chevrolet.

“That’s what you do in Detroit,” Jake tells her. “You leave school as soon as you’re old enough to be put on with your Pop and brothers at the car factories.”

She’s bored now. She isn’t interested in cars or fathers or brothers.

“You been in Sydney before?” she asks him. She doesn’t want to talk about Detroit any more.

“Nope. It’s my first leave. I been up in Guadalcanal. You heard of that?”

It sounds familiar. “Was it bad?” She wants to know.

“Nah. Not where I was,” he tells her. “Just hot. Bloody hot.”

“You seen any Japs?”

“Nope. The Nips sent a plane over every night. Just to keep us awake. We called it the washing machine ‘cos it went round and round. Once in the daytime we saw a heap of planes and then we heard an almighty ker-bang! We could see a twist of smoke going up, way in the distance. It would’a been a ship hit. We never knew if it was one of ours or one of the Japs.”

It’s already closing time and Chuck, the big man with Anna, says, “Guys it’s suppertime. I’m starving. Let’s go up the Cross and get something to eat!”

A few of them push and lurch out onto Pitt Street. The taxis are always banked up near the Sydney and the Capitol, on the look-out for the Yanks—they’re great tippers. The Diggers get furious when the drivers keep going round the block rather than pick them up.

They pile into the taxi, Pat and Jake squeezed in the front next to the driver. Pat knows Eddie, he’s always hanging around trying to get the Yank fares—he gives her a wink and takes them on a roundabout route up to Bayswater Road, dropping them off at the Caronia and grinning at the good tip on top of his extra-extra fare.

The men order bottles of Tooth’s and pull out their shakers to salt up their beer. The Yanks all do that. They hoe into plates of steak and chips like there’ll be no tomorrow. Afterwards they want apple cobbler with ice-cream. Then they take off down to the Roosevelt Club in Orwell Street for dancing. Jake is a good dancer—most of the Americans are. There is a local jazz band on the stage. It’s hard to push around the floor because it’s so crowded in there and some of the men and the girls are a bit the worse for wear, staggering about, bumping into you. It annoys Pat. Can’t they hold their drink?

“Do you go dancing in Detroit?”

“Jesus do we go dancing?” Jake’s eyes light up. “Detroit is the centre of dancing baby! We got all the black people coming up from the south to get away from the Ku Klux Klan and work on the assembly lines. You don’t know jazz in this country like we got in Detroit. Lots of days I’d get to work and I hadn’t been home all night!”
Pat has seen the black servicemen around the streets but they aren’t allowed in The Sydney. They have their own clubs and pubs, decided by the generals. Some of her friends spend all their time with the coloured boys—they tell Pat they get better money and a better time. But Pat feels a bit frightened of them—they’re so big.

The band are putting away their instruments. Jake pushes their way through to the bar to buy a couple of bottles of Johnny Walker for later.

“So what we gunna do now Pat?” Jake asks, looking expectantly into her eyes. “I’d really like to spend some more time with you.” He smooths back a strand of her hair.

“Let’s get a taxi, I know a place we can go,” she says, feeling warm all over. Someone who wants to spend more time with her!

Jake collects their coats. He’s none too steady when the cold air hits. He’s hanging on tight to his brown paper bag of Johnny Walker. Out on the curb there are a lot of Yanks and girls jostling around for taxis. She’s not surprised that Eddie is there again—it must be seven years since she first got to know him as a consequence of ending up in his cab with lots of different customers. Eddie looks out for her when he can, and if business is slow, or she doesn’t have enough for the fare, he cuts it out with her. You might say he is sort of her boyfriend. The other drivers know they are friends and turn a blind eye when she goes to his cab and not the first one in the queue. She’s fond of Eddie. He isn’t rough and he’s quick. And he isn’t jealous of the Americans, not like Keith. Eddie likes their money too much. She never lets on to the Yanks that she knows Eddie.

“I hope Ruby’s got a room!” Pat says.

“Yeah, I already took the Black Panther down there and she’s not full up.”

A group of Diggers, pissed as all get out, start shoving a Marine who had his arm around two girls.

“Whores! Slags!” they hiss at the girls, “bloody murdering bastards,” they say to the Marine. A Marine shot a girl dead in Brisbane the other week—it was all over the newspapers—they said it was an accident. There is a bit of pushing and shoving and Pat thinks one of the Diggers is going to throw a punch. His mates are egging him on to do it. But suddenly Chuck is there and collars the Marine and pulls him away and the Diggers, only little guys compared to Chuck, grab their mate and slink off.

Jake and Pat kiss and cuddle in the back of the taxi on the long ride down to Bondi. She is feeling a bit fuzzy herself but she loves the taste of his mouth, his breath—cigarette smoke, mint and salty beer. It’s better to use Ruby’s rooms at Bondi than the ones around the Cross which are always being raided by Bumper Farrell and his pals from the Vice Squad. You can’t relax. If Bumper sees her on the street with an American he says,

“Hands down America, she’s my property!”
“How are ya Bumper?” she says back to him as cheeky as you like.

Bumper knows all the girls. They’ve all been up before the magistrate at Darlinghurst dozens of times. They spend the night in the cells, laughing and singing and sobering up. The Vice Squad boys get down as far as Bondi sometimes, but Ruby has her lookouts and it is mostly safe. Ruby’s rooms are bigger and cleaner than the ones up at the Cross. Ruby calls them flats, though they are just one room with a bathroom down the hall, but they have a little gas burner and a sink. You can bring in some food and boil some water for a cuppa. Ruby’s daughter Joanie comes round every morning with clean sheets and towels. Pat leaves a port with a change of underwear down there.

Like all the Yanks Jake has plenty of rubbers. But that first night he just falls asleep—like a lot of them he’s too tired and under the weather to even bother to do more than sleep, snuggling into her back. Next morning is a different story, but he is quick enough—panting and gasping and letting out a great shout when he comes. He says it’s been a long time. She strokes his hairy chest. That’s why she likes them—the Yanks. They don’t leap out of bed the minute they’re finished. They act like you’re more than just a piece of meat. They put a bit of romance into it. Well, sort of. Most of them anyway.

Sometimes she tells the Yanks about Patty and Renee, inventing a husband killed in action. They feel sorry for her then, and buy toys for the girls. They are so homesick those guys and don’t know whether they are going to ever get home to see their own kids or to have kids at all. She wonders if she will be able to touch Jake up for some treats for the girls.

“What’ll we do today gorgeous?” he asks her, lying on his back and smoking. They go out to the taxi rank and get a cab to Luna Park. The rain has stopped and it is a clean and fresh day—almost summer. The harbour glitters in the sunlight as they drive over the bridge. Jake is impressed—Sydney really can put it on when it wants to. From the bridge they can see the huge laughing clown face, its red lips forming the gate to the fun park. Pat loves to go there. She can’t think of a time she is happier than being with one of her “boys” at Luna Park. She loves every bit of it. Coney Island and the turkey trot which makes her shriek with laughter as she lurches along it. Or clinging on to her man and screaming with terror on the big dipper. Best of all is the ghost train. It slides around in the pitch dark and skeletons or hooded figures jump out at you. It is the scariest thing and the Yankees hold her really tight and make her feel safe. At the end, after all the rides and the ice-creams and chips and milkshakes, he will always want to go on the Tunnel of Love, little boats going through a dark winding cavern, and then they kiss and kiss and fondle and cuddle. It is just the best sort of day she can think of. Pat always tries to take them in the day when the harbour is glinting in the sun and the bridge rises massively above them against the blue of the sky. At night there is the Roosevelt club for dancing and the room at Bondi—you don’t need to go to Luna Park at night.
When they are driving back to the Cross, Jake pays the cabbie to stop and take their photo in front of St Mary’s Cathedral. He tells Pat he is going to send it to be put up in the old monastery in Detroit. The Yanks love to take photos. Pat has no idea how many photos there might be of her cuddling up to one of them in front of some Sydney landmark. On this day she is annoyed to see Keith approaching. Sometimes when he isn’t caught up with his mates, he gets overcome with a possessive fury and drives around to all her usual haunts looking for her. It’s such a nuisance. He marches up to them and says to Jake, who is at least a head taller than him, twenty years younger and with a powerful set of shoulders,

“Hey buddy, this is my girl. How about you clear off?” Jake is lost for words. Pat holds onto his arm tightly and says to Keith “How about you clear off. I don’t want you any more.” Keith stands there a minute, his face full of rage, wanting to smash the Yankee in the nose, and then huffs off. He knows it isn’t worth the trouble you’d be in for beating up a Yank soldier. She’ll pay for it of course, when she eventually gets back home. But right now, right here, she can’t be bothered to worry about it.
Chapter Eight

We were both in our mid-twenties, intent on being wild and free. Pat’s couple of years with the Yanks in Sydney were the source of the stories she told for the rest of her life—for me it was the year and a half I spent on the road in Europe in the 1970s.

It was May, 1976. Jenny and I abandoned the New Zealand boys in Monaco after the Grand Prix. We’d met up in London, making an arrangement to share expenses travelling in their Kombi through France, Spain, Portugal and Morocco. After two months we were ready to kill them. It was fortuitous that they’d run out of money and had to head back to London. Jenny and I were bound for Greece, hitching and camping—cars and trucks screamed to a halt to pick up two young females, and, despite their enthusiasm, the drivers were invariably chivalrous, buying us coffee and food and never expecting sexual favours. Men found Jenny quite alarming. She didn’t flirt or accede to them. She spoke her mind. They didn’t know how to take her. She had a loud voice and an eccentric dress style, a long mane of thick curly brown hair, hated alcohol but could cook up a great meal on her little one-burner camp cooker. She knitted a lot, was addicted to chocolate, and understood women’s lib. When she wasn’t driving me mad, I loved her fearlessness and refusal to conform.

We hitched to Switzerland and then on to Austria via Liechtenstein just to say we’d been there, and to avoid Italy with its bottom pinchers. Each night we put up our little two-person tent in campgrounds and slept on the hard ground using newspaper as insulation. In Austria we began to be picked up by eccentric Dutchmen driving alone to the Mediterranean for their summer holiday. They invariably drove very slowly, stopping every couple of hours to make real coffee on the little burner they carried with them and sharing their large caches of Dutch chocolate and biscuits with us. The second Dutchman, Wienert, had a large Alsation in his Kombi and a nervous tic which involved licking his lips a lot that I knew was the side-effect of one of the anti-psychotics. Wienert shook a lot and drove in a spontaneous manner without using a map, taking off up whatever street occurred to him. This meant we’d go round and round in circles whenever we came to a town and Wienert was very grateful to us when, following the road signs, we directed him through to the other side. He must have spent days trying to get out of some places before he met us. Wienert kept his wine in the kettle and boiled water for his coffee in the teapot. We drank the coffee from saucepans because there were no more cups due to Wienert’s habit of leaving his crockery on the bench when he took off in the Kombi. Until we took things in hand, any journey began with a deafening crash of crockery sliding onto the floor and breaking.

The Dutchmen proved to be preferable to the Yugoslavs, whom we began to encounter on the Adriatic coast. They were really scary. Unlike everywhere else we’d hitched, we felt at risk in this country. Drivers invariably propositioned us, turning nasty and dropping us off when
we rejected their advances. Our approach changed. Jenny set out to appear quite mad—talking and giggling loudly—being so raucous that the men would let us out of the car with relief. In the sullen little villages and cafes with only men, people regarded us with hostility and suspicion.

This was Croatia and in 1976 it was part of communist Yugoslavia. Jenny wanted to see Dubrovnik so we were on the coast road, not the main motorway through to Greece. The drabness of Communism was a shock. The buildings were grey, the shops were grey, the people were grey. It was as if the control that’s required to impose equality has stifled all the colour of human society.

On the road you’d meet lots of other travellers in youth hostels and camping grounds and there was endless advice passed on about fabulous places to go, or boastful accounts of a local person inviting you to their house and you might end up staying for weeks becoming lifelong friends of the family. This was a fantasy we all harboured. In England’s Lake District this had happened to Jenny and me when an attractive middle-aged woman had taken us home to her thatched cottage and put us up overnight in the dearest little bedroom with a bed each, made up with crisp lace-edged sheets. Next day her husband, an airline pilot, arrived home and wanted to know what we were doing there and Rothy had to rather hurriedly drive us back to the motorway. I think she was lonely or maybe she was just trying to get up his nose.

So we were chuffed when the two thickset young men who picked us up on our way out of Dubrovnik, began to talk about their family’s farm and how they would like to take us there for a visit. That’s what we thought they were saying anyway being that our communication was in a few broken words of English, my schoolgirl German, and lots of sign language and facial expressions. We were on a mountainous part of the coast with the sea down hundreds of metres in a hot blue haze on one side, and tree covered hills on the other. The road twisted and turned, passing tiny villages with just a few houses, dogs and chickens scurrying away from the car. On small farms in the narrow valleys on the high side of the road women in headscarves worked the fields with donkey-pulled ploughs. We met few other vehicles.

We rounded a bend and the boys pointed to a house far away up the side of a hill. “Unser Haus, our house!”

We turned onto a gravel side road that wound up the hill. It was late afternoon and we were tired. The shadows were lengthening and there was no sound but the buzzing of insects and the car engine. The car struggled up the steep rutted road, the house was still a long way off. All of a sudden the boys pulled into a clearing and stopped. They leapt out full of enthusiasm and indicated that we should set up camp in this spot. This was not what we’d expected—no sign of a plump happy Mama welcoming us into her home with tea and cakes and insisting we sleep indoors in soft beds.
Hesitantly, protesting a little bit, we got out of the car. At the boys’ insistence we pitched our tent and set up camp, brushing off their attempts to help us. Using sign language and a few words of German they told us they were going off to bring back food, that we’d have a party. They jumped into the car and we listened to it drive off back down to the main road. This was when some kind of survival instinct kicked in—something I had more of than fearless Jenny. I listened for the sound of the car fading into the distance and said, “Right! We’ve got to get out of here quick.” My heart was pumping fast.

“What?” Jenny was puzzled but also uneasy.

“We’re in the middle of nowhere here. That stuff about the farmhouse is bullshit. They’ve stuck us here and gone to get friends. Goodness knows what they’re intending to do with us. We’ve got to pack up and get back down to the road.”

We launched into emergency mode, a well-drilled team, packing up the tent and all our belongings that we’d only just unpacked. Dusk was falling and as each second passed my fear increased. It must have taken us less than ten minutes to take down the tent and pack—so quickly, though we were panting with fear. Then we set off down the road—it was probably about five kilometres back to the main road. It was getting darker and darker and we were nearly running with our heavy packs. The road twisted down the steep hill. We’d not gone far when we heard the car in the distance, returning. What might they do when they saw us escaping?

“Quick. Over the side!” I urged Jenny and we dived off the side of the road, leaping right into the void, hitting the ground metres down, stumbling and rolling further downwards into scrubby bush scratching our faces and hands and tearing our clothes. We slithered down further, huddling deep below the road in thick bush. Gasping with fright we listened as the car sped up the road above us. The noise of the occupants yahooing out the window told us that there were more than two boys in there—my hunch had been right. We heard the car arrive at the clearing and then a hush as if the world were drawing its breath, as the boys registered that there was nothing there, the clearing was empty. Next a furious shouting erupted as they crashed through the bushes, enraged, rushing about looking for us.

“Could they still find us here?” I wondered, shaking, hugging my pack, curling into the smallest ball I could, cowering under the bushes.

After what seemed a lifetime, the car started up again and began to drive slowly down the road. It was dark now. We could see glimmers of the headlights above us and as the car drew closer, there was more flashing as if they were shining a torch out to the sides of the road. But we were down a deep gully and they would not have expected us to jump off such a sheer drop. So quiet was that valley that we could hear every gear change as the car made its slow journey all the way back to the road. Would they come back up again? We held our breath.
Would they lie in wait for us, knowing we would have to emerge some time? No—we heard the car speed off on the sealed main road.

It took us a while, panting and giggling, beside ourselves with fright, to clamber back up to the road. The bank was really steep and it was hard to get a foothold in the loose gravel—we kept sliding back, trying not to make so much noise that we would drown out the sound of the car returning, and always at the ready to plunge down into the bushes again. Back on the gravel road we crept along in the dark in silence, listening for the car. By the time we reached the main road it was late, maybe after ten. We’d passed through a little village before we turned off up the road, so we walked back there. We were still listening for the car and half running because there wasn’t much cover at the side of this road. The village had no more than a few houses and a closed shop, but we were never so glad to see such a place in our whole lives. It certainly wasn’t the sort of place to have a hotel or a guesthouse, so we chose a house with a light in the window and pounded on the door. The woman who answered looked alarmed to find two disheveled and half-hysterical girls on her doorstep. We tried to make her understand that we were in trouble, that we needed the police, and shelter for the night. She wasn’t friendly but nor did she turn us away. Using sign language she made us understand that a house three doors down would offer us accommodation; she just shrugged and held up her hands at the mention of police.

The house she’d directed us to was dark, and when the lights went on and the door finally opened to our knocking, there was a woman in a dressing gown with an old man peering down the stairs from behind her. We held out some money and gestured that we wanted a bed for the night and she seemed too surprised and too impressed by the money, not to let us in. We were shown to a basic little room upstairs with two single beds. I don’t think we slept much. In the morning the old man brought us a cup of black tea and a dried piece of toast with jam. There was no sign of the woman—she’d probably already gone off to work.

The road from Dubrovnik across the mountains to Macedonia was remote and little used. There were no buses—we had no alternative other than to continue hitching. The next morning we sat on our packs at the side of the road for more than an hour, debating what we would do if our pimply boys turned up. Finally, a truck with two laughing men and a teenager crammed in the front, stopped for us. They managed to squeeze up and make room for us and our packs in the cabin of their truck. But we hadn’t gone far when suddenly the driver turned off the main road onto a gravel side road. Oh no! Not again!

“Let us out, let us out!” we yelled, trying to reach across them and open the door of the truck. I don’t know who got the bigger fright. The driver, a fatherly sort of man, used some broken German to explain that a bridge was down, this was a detour. I didn’t believe him. But before we could figure out how to get out of a moving truck, whether to take another leap into
the unknown, the driver pointed to the side and we could, indeed, see up a small river to a bridge in an obvious state of collapse. There were also some trucks coming the other way. Hours later, when we arrived in Skopje, the teenage boy insisted on taking us home to his family’s house and we stayed there for three days, nurtured by his warm and lovely mother, his teenage wife and two sisters. We were paying our way, but finally felt we were having our idealized backpacker experience. Yet on the last day the boy and his father took us to a local café and indicated that they expected us to go somewhere upstairs and have sex with them. We stormed back to the house, gathered up our belongings and left, trying not to let on to the women what arseholes their husbands were.

We were making for the island of Skopelos, which someone we’d met on the road had advised us would be less crowded and greener than the more southern and well-known Greek islands. Our last lift was with a silk manufacturer who put us up at his mother’s house in Volos, the departure point for the ferry to Skopelos. The silk man showed us the warm room with all the cocoons drying out ready for making the thread. The next morning we were up early and the old mother made Greek coffee, which she served with hot rolls and honey; we hugged her when the silk man arrived to drive us to the ferry wharf.

We hung over the rails of the ferry watching with black-clad local women and backpackers speaking all kinds of languages, as it was loaded with pallets of produce for the islands. The ferry pulled first into the island of Skiathos where a lot of the backpackers disembarked—this was good, it meant that we were getting off the main tourist track. But there were still enough of us on board so that when we docked at the wharf on Skopelos local people rushed to meet us with offers of rooms. It was June and the season had only just begun. We found ourselves commandeered by a nut-brown ex-seaman named George, who spoke in phrases lifted straight from the American gangster movies from which he’d learnt English. With a lot of gesticulating and shouting, Jenny, who was much better than me at bargaining, negotiated a price for board that we could afford with our depleted resources. Ignoring her protestations, George grabbed Jenny’s pack, and made for the entrance of one of the alleys that wound up the hill between the white houses.

George’s place was cheap because it was a long way up the hill. We were puffing and panting by the time we got there, to be greeted by his wife Maria with squeals of delight. Maria spoke no English at all but proceeded to mother us with such passion that we all cried when we left after a month with them.

Skopelos is quite a large island with a sizeable village gathered around a port crowded with timber fishing boats. The narrow cobbled streets are accessible only to people and donkeys—no cars. The island is planted with olives and the little farms graze goats and sheep...
from which the local people make their own cheeses and yogurt. Bee hives among the olive
trees provide honey to eat with the yogurt. People live from fishing and from the summer
tourists.

Every morning, before the heat slowed everyone down, the women scrubbed the street
in front of their houses and a man swept the streets, his donkey carrying panniers for the
rubbish. It was far from peaceful however. Indeed it was the noisiest place you could imagine.
In the cool of the evening the people sat on their doorsteps, chatting at the top of their voices,
shrieking with laughter. Children shouted and played and cried. Highly amplified music or
television on loud volume blasted from the doorways. At four o’clock every afternoon a boom
which shook the village announced the ferry from Volos, setting off a flurry of people rushing
to the pier to requisition tourists or collect supplies. It was useless to try to sleep till after
midnight. But at 5am the noise would begin again: first the birds and the loud braying of
donkeys in the distance; then an ear-splitting clanging of bells—the place was packed with tiny
churches. The early morning street sellers began their rounds with the chock chock of donkeys’
hooves on the cobblestones, bawling their wares: ‘Kalamari!’ or ‘Tomate!’ You could hear them
coming half a mile off and retreating half a mile further on. Finally the workmen started.
Everyone was working on something—the chink, chink, chink of hammering stone or metal, the
scream of electric saws or drills, the scraping of cement as bricks are laid or walls rendered. The
walls and floors of the houses were so thin that anyone walking upstairs was like a herd of wild
elephants, and people talking two houses away sounded as if they were in your room. We would
hear doors slam and women talking in the street as they walked up to the bakery to bake their
bread and their casseroles—the houses didn’t have their own ovens. At about 8am we’d give up
trying to rest and struggle, still bleary-eyed, down to the front to find a café for sheep’s yoghurt
and honey and thick, syrupy coffee.

At first we were concerned because there seemed to be no beach near the town. Our
dreams of falling out of our front door and into the Mediterranean evaporated as we learnt that it
was a few miles to the nearest swimmable beach. We discovered we would have to catch the
local bus, which went around the island twice a day. The first morning we bought bread and
fruit and, along with a number of other tourists, all speaking languages other than English,
waited at the bus stop. When the ancient bus pulled up there was standing room only, the seats
already occupied by villagers going out to spend the day on their land armed with baskets and
plastic bags filled to bursting, garden tools, and maybe a live chicken or two. They were greatly
entertained by the tourists, taking delight in the foreign children, and shrieking with laughter
when everyone nearly fell over as the driver, honking the horn furiously, tore around the narrow
bends.
On that first morning we got off when the other tourists got off and followed them down a narrow cliff path to a beach. To our horror, the ‘beach’ consisted of black pebbles—as Australians, we were still shocked by what was classed in Europe as a beach. Some of the people stopped here and others kept walking. We continued on behind them—maybe there would be a real beach over the next headland. It was hot and the path was steep and to our disappointment we topped the rise to look down on another black pebble beach. But the water was glistening, so clear that you could see the pebbles on the bottom—we couldn’t wait to get in and cool off. Then we realised that this was the ‘free’ beach—no clothes.

We knew of the European fondness for nude bathing, and, until our unfortunate experiences of Yugoslav men, we had been keen to go to a naturist island on the Adriatic Coast. As if it was something we were quite used to doing and had absolutely expected, we took everything off and began a six week idyll of lying naked in the hot sun, swimming in clear, deep water, and making friends with a large group of young Germans, most of whom were students from Berlin with left-wing views we shared; quite a few of them were studying to be social workers. There was a comfortable sensuality about this naked crowd without the slightest suggestion of sleaziness. I made good progress with my German and even Jenny began to learn a few words. At the end of long days in the sun we would pack up to meet the bus back to the village. If we missed the bus our only option was to walk. In the evenings we’d arrange to meet in one of the cafes for dinner, going back into the kitchen to point to the fish or the food that we wanted.

Jenny had captivated Michael, a German man with a bushy beard and a precocious nine-year-old daughter, Simone. I was surprised to see Jenny responding to his attention; in all our time together she had never shown an interest in men. In the meantime, I was obsessed with Costas, the waiter from one of the cafes. He was a student in Athens, working the summer holidays back home on Skopelos. He was dark and handsome with shy eyes and only a few words of English. After he finished work in the evenings he would lead me out of the village and up through the olive groves to an empty cottage, which belonged to his family. He lit a paraffin lamp and we’d climb a ladder to a loft that was entirely covered with a straw mattress. A dozen people could sleep up there. He was a gentle lover and, I think, a bit put off by my boldness.

One day our group from the beach missed the bus back to the village—we were walking back along the road. Patches of sunlight shimmered between the long afternoon shadows of trees. The heat of the day was beginning to fade. The only sounds were the loud hum of insects, distant chirping of birds and soft chattering and laughing of the people on the road. As if from nowhere a huge energy flooded me. I began to run. I was weightless. I was singing. I ran,
feeling more happy and alive and strong in myself than I had ever felt in my life. I ran the miles back into town as if they were no distance at all.

The time in Skopelos came to an end. George and Maria had a booking for their room and the Germans were returning to Berlin. Jenny and I decided to go with them—she would hitchhike with Hermann, one of the social work students. A female companion would be an advantage to him for getting lifts; but she had to go via the Black Forest where he wanted to call in on his family. I would go in a VW beetle with Matt, thin and bearded and Jesus-like, and two girls that none of us liked at all, but had travelled from Germany with him. Michael, who had a job and more money than the rest of us, was taking the train with Simone. It took five days to drive to Berlin. I cried for the whole of the first day—leaving Skopelos was like having my heart wrenched out. We were stuck in summer traffic jams all the way up through Yugoslavia; the two German girls fought about everything—in particular they were not happy that I was tagging along; and Matt had a crush on me—at night I would wake in the tent we shared and find him gazing at me with moony eyes.

It felt like the ultimate test of character, crossing East Germany on the final 600 kilometres of concrete highway, flat and boring grain fields stretching into the distance, stopping illegal. In Berlin Michael had prepared a lavish welcome to his home over the bus station. He was a metro bus driver, and, as union delegate, got to rent a huge apartment, which trembled as the city buses thundered underneath. It was only a block from the Wall, and I kept losing my bearings in the streets as the Wall forced me to take circuitous routes to get from one place to another. Michael sublet one of his rooms to Ülli, a postgraduate student, who was on holiday in Italy. I was staying in Ülli’s room which had such a high ceiling that the bed was a mattress on a mezzanine, reached with a ladder, and reminiscent of the cottage on Skopelos. I was sharing the room with Michael’s large cat, Fred, and two carpet snakes.

Jenny finally arrived with Hermann, recounting gruesome tales of their hitchhiking that far outdid my ordeal stuck in traffic jams and sharing a tent with the ogling Matt. A man it would seem is a major handicap to hitching a ride. Michael spoilt us dreadfully. Early each morning he’d go out to buy a selection of fresh rolls, meats and cheeses for breakfast. There were dozens of different kinds of breadrolls, each to match a particular type of cheese or meat or jam. In the evenings after work he’d buy us flowers and chocolates—always larger and more splendid for Jenny. They shared his room and his bed and I was jealous and frustrated. Yet I loved everything about Berlin. It had retained its artistic and political culture. To keep it populated, the West German government offered generous student scholarships so it was full of university students. Most nights we’d go to wine bars and pubs, in cellars or old warehouses, and drink Weissbier in big glass tankards with a shot of raspberry cordial. Michael’s favourite
haunt was Wasserman, which had great live music; there was another bar decorated with toilets called Das Klo (‘The Loo’); and others offering stand-up comedy, poetry readings or cabaret. My German was getting better and better—sometimes I could even follow some of the comedy routines and political banter. In bars and at parties we would break into loud renditions of The Internationale. Everywhere there was discussion of the assassination of Allende and collections taken for the people of Chile. There was a large anti-Fascism exposition at the Museum with shocking photos of the genocides of the Second World War; West Germany’s left thinkers were trying to get the country to confront its past.

When Michael was working, Jenny and I would take Simone around with us—her mother occasionally turned up and took her out but Michael was clearly the main carer. Simone was constantly eating sweets, supplied by the grown-ups around her, and as a result her teeth were all brown and powdery. Jenny and I tried to get her to eat fruit and vegetables instead and she was quite amenable to our attention. I could see that Jenny was a mothering sort of person.

One evening Ülli arrived home from Italy. He strode into the kitchen like a Norse god in full motorcycle leathers and long boots. This was desire. There was never any question about where I was going to sleep. For a week I was in bed with Ülli most of the day and in the evening we’d go off on his BMW to pubs and shows and parties. He taught me to hold his snakes, and I found that I loved their cool silkiness as they searched for warm spots on my body. We’d go to visit an old lady whose whole flat was full of birds, to buy eggs for his snakes.

But reality was closing in. Jenny and I were just about out of money and would need to either work or return to Australia. I had four years of a bond still to redeem and the Health Department had begun to send threatening letters about it. And Ülli, despite embodying every woman’s fantasy, was really not a very nice person at all—he was an indifferent lover and contributed nothing to the running of the house. He was like an addiction that you know will only harm you. When a distressed girlfriend appeared on the doorstep wanting to know why he had not let her know he was back in Berlin, I realised that I needed to get out of there.

Michael and Jenny had concocted a plan that he and Simone would come to Australia the next summer. We had a huge farewell party in the flat to which all the Germans from Skopelos were invited as well as all the ones we’d met since being in Berlin. It seemed an awful lot of people, and it was sad, we felt so much a part of them. The next morning Ülli managed to get out of bed early and, in a borrowed car, drove us to the border gates. We looked in dismay at the line of hitchhikers. Jenny went across to where all the trucks were parked, waiting to be passed for the crossing, and got us a lift with a Dutch truckie that took us all the way to Utrecht, where we could make our way to the ferry port to England.
I borrowed money from Mum and Dad to travel home by plane with a stopover in the US—it was much more expensive than a ship, but I didn’t have time to spare. In a freezing November New York I stayed for ten days with Bruce from Surry Hills who was minding a large artist’s loft in SoHo. He was working on a post object sculpture of New York garbage, so at night I went with him through the icy back streets looking in the bins and dumpsters for interesting pieces of rubbish—broken toys, kitchen utensils, a shooting target silhouette with bullet holes in it.

New York with Bruce was like being in the centre of the universe. Every street and building was familiar from a book or play or film or song. The loft overlooked busy Canal Street and the exit to the Holland Tunnel. I would watch as cars which had broken down in the tunnel, a common occurrence—I was astonished at the number of rusty old clunkers in New York—were pushed out by special pushing trucks and left in an area for dead and dying cars. The whole building vibrated with the subway that ran underneath it.

Bruce had another guest—Michael was a stockbroker from Sydney, much older than us and a patron of the arts. Michael was a very flatulent person and his habit of breaking wind loudly would send us into hysterics.

“Michael have a bit of decorum!” Bruce would scold and Michael would look only a bit sheepish. One time when we were sightseeing a black man thought that Michael’s loud fart had been directed at him, and turned on us as if he were going to beat us up or pull a gun or a knife.

“No man!” Bruce remonstrated, “It’s not you. He can’t help it. He’s got a health problem. A bag, you know.” Bruce patted his stomach and we rushed off before the man could decide what he wanted to do. New York was a dangerous place then, full of crack cocaine. There were lots of robberies and murders in the streets and particularly on the subway. Bruce instructed us where we could and couldn’t go.

Life didn’t begin until after 10pm—we went to a Lou Reed concert and sat in the seventh row for $9. We splurged going to the tiny Reno Sweeney’s nightclub to hear Stéphane Grapelli, the great French jazz violinist; and Bruce pocketed an ashtray for me as a memento. We saw The Threepenny Opera at the Lincoln Centre, and, late one night, unbelievably, a film about Eugene Ionesco, which Ionesco himself introduced. Ionesco and Theatre of the Absurd had been obsessions of mine at school—I didn’t even know he was still alive. We walked across the Brooklyn Bridge, which Bruce advised me is a sculpture not a bridge and went to a party thrown by the Australian Consulate to celebrate the opening of the Australian Biennale in Sydney. Bruce pointed out Christo and Robert Crumb and Andy Warhol. I caught the free ferry to Staten Island and back to see the Statue of Liberty. From the viewing platform of one of the Twin Towers Bruce showed me how there was an optical effect looking down the second tower that made it look as if it was curved. But I couldn’t stay any longer—Bruce was busy with his
sculpture and I had arranged to spend a few weeks in San Francisco with a woman I’d met on Skopelos, before the final leg home to Australia. Bruce persuaded me to take the helicopter shuttle from the top of a Wall Street building to the airport—it felt like I was departing from the highest point of my life.
Chapter Nine

When the earthquake hit Newcastle on 27th December 1989, there were only a few of us at work and, after ten minutes of not really believing the intense jolting and rocking we had experienced, we evacuated the building. Located on a grassy hill some distance from the centre of the city, our offices did not appear to be damaged, but we began to hear sirens, emergency helicopters clattering overhead, and turned on the radio to find that many buildings had fallen down and some people had been killed. We were warned to stay clear of buildings, as there would be aftershocks. The sky was cloudless, a brilliant blue, with a cool breeze keeping the heat at bay—it was a perfect summer day. I remember thinking how bizarre it was to be having a natural disaster in such beautiful weather. There was a general feeling of panic until we managed to account for our families and friends—not so easy in the days before mobile phones. The power was off and the city centre was closed down for weeks. In that state of suspended reality, it took me five days to remember Pat. When I did remember her I had to talk my way through the barricades to go to check on her—the old house in Cooks Hill could well have fallen on her head; but it hadn’t, and she was full of stories about how she and everyone around her had fared. Being Pat, there was not the slightest trace of, “Where have you been?”, “How come you didn’t come to see me sooner?”

For Pat and me coming back to real life after our adrenalin-charged reckless years, was like an aftershock. In many ways I had wanted to stay overseas—I easily imagined myself living in Berlin, New York or San Francisco. But I missed Mum and Dad, and I was sick of saying goodbye to people I really cared about. I’d met young people on the road, usually travelling on their own, who had been travelling for years, getting dead-end jobs wherever they could when they ran out of money. I knew I didn’t want to be like them.

At the end of 1976 I arrived home in Newcastle to the obligation of working out four years of my cadetship’s bond—responsibilities crowded in. I was twenty-five years old and for the first time in my life I had no goals; all the things I’d dreamt of doing I’d done. I was not aware that I was conditioned, like all young women of my time, to have my own life only to a certain point, at which I was expected to fall deeply in love and harness my life to the ambitions and needs of a husband and family. That hadn’t happened. I was restless and discontented.

I had decided I didn’t believe in romance, and I’d had enough sexual experiences to learn that there was no perfect lover out there, needing to be found. Romance was the stuff girls’ heads were filled with through fairy stories, books and magazines. Jane Austen and her cold closed-down men had a lot to answer for. I’d been drawn to those distant men, whom only I could change, and then wondered why things didn’t work out like they did in the books. All the stories ended with the wedding plans—they didn’t go on to the years afterwards. In my work I was well aware of the number of marriages that were crap, and made women miserable. For a
long time I held onto the anger of being two-timed by Andy, of being lied to. Honesty, I decided, was the most important thing in a relationship—honesty was my mantra.

Guy remembers the first time he met me—before I went overseas; I was visiting Newcastle briefly from my job on the North Coast. I went to hear my brother’s jazz band play at the George Hotel opposite Newcastle Station. It was a tall skinny hotel, old and brick, and the jazz was up two flights of stairs. Being on my own, I joined a group of young women the members of the band were flirting with and Guy saw me across the room and wanted to know who I was. He came across and introduced himself and we had a pub-style conversation about my life in Lismore. Come to think of it, that was unusual—a man who listened. That was all I remembered. But Guy claims he kept thinking of me for another two years till I moved back to live in Newcastle and he came across me again.

We’d both sowed a lot of wild oats in those two years, and living back in Newcastle I wanted to party. I had not maintained any friendships from my seven years away—the women in my age group were absorbed with marriages and babies. While I was overseas Guy had formed a close friendship with my brother. Eric had just been dumped by his girlfriend and was on the rebound. The three of us used to hang out together at the Star Hotel or the Merry Magpie Wine Bar—the local pickup joints.

Guy had a reputation as a real ladies’ man—he had a lover for every night of the week—not the kind of bloke I was looking for. He drove a decrepit blue Datsun ute and was chronically short of money because he’d recently started up a boat-building business and the older man he went into partnership with had turned out to be an alcoholic, who cleared off leaving him to pay all the bills.

Guy began to call round to Mum and Dad’s where I was living till I got a job—he even managed to engage Dad in conversation which was nothing short of a miracle, Dad being a taciturn man. The Whitlam government, which had been spending up big on social programs before I went away, had been ignominiously replaced by the conservatives and cost cutting had filtered through to the states. Getting a job was not as easy as I thought it would be. I was quite low—being unemployed was degrading. To tide me over, I was offered a job working in the kitchens at the hospital until I could get a social work position. I tried to avoid the shifts in the doctors’ dining room where I was invisible, truly a nobody, classified as such by my green uniform. An aged care and disability outreach service finally offered me their social work position; not what I had in mind; but anything was better than the humiliation of the doctors’ dining room.

For my birthday that year Guy made me a present—a steel candle-holder with my name cut into the sides for the candle to illuminate. This unexpected gift put his cards on the table.

“I really like you a lot. Do you think we can try being more than friends?”
“There’s lots I like about you,” I responded—I was still in my honesty phase. “But I have no intention of sharing you with all those other women you see.”

“Give me a couple of days!” Guy spent a whole evening on the phone to all his lovers. “I need to tell you things have changed. I’ve met the love of my life. I’m committed to her now and I won’t be coming round any more.”

The first weekend Guy and I were together was at a house we borrowed at Upper Allyn. It was a beautiful location in the foothills of the Barrington, where a row of workers cottages had been sold off as weekenders when the sawmill closed. A whole group of us drove up there, including Jenny who happened to be visiting from Melbourne with Berlin Michael and Simone. Michael had fallen in love with Australia as well as with Jenny and was planning to settle here. Although it was only November we were having a hot spell and Guy and I went down along the river to a deep waterhole. We swam naked in the icy water, then stretched out on the large rocks warmed by the sun. There was a kind of creeper in the trees that showered down a thick veil of white blossom when the breeze blew.

I began this relationship with great reservation. I was not at all sure I was ready to settle down. And if I were, I wasn’t sure that Guy was the one for me. But as well as being an attentive lover, Guy was a great friend and companion. He really liked women—often preferring their company to that of men. Women were interesting people; sexy but not objects; they were not the enemy. Guy held nothing back—before him, I would try to cajole and manipulate men into loving me, and would feel their reluctance, fear of commitment.

More than loving me Guy liked me. I made him laugh. We shared a passion for jazz, for movies, books and ethnic food. I taught him about travel and politics. He gave me a safe space to learn to express anger and to build confidence in my sexuality. I didn’t “fall in love”, but love grew for me based on his commitment, friendship and honesty. If we were boxers, we would be punching in the same weight division. In all my previous relationships the force of my personality bent and twisted the hapless object of my affections, and I would be accused of being controlling and aggressive. In Guy I met my match. He was no mooning boy searching for his identity. Guy was comfortable in his own skin and impervious to my shoving and pushing.

At first I harboured a knot of anger about Guy’s lack of money. I even suspected he was after me for my money—after all I had $2,000 saved in the bank. However, I came to see how I had been brainwashed by fairy tales and romance novels into thinking that at some point in a woman’s life a man would appear to take over responsibility, provide a house, an income and an identity. I had always wanted to be unconventional so why should I expect to be supported by a man? Mum always earned more than Dad. I had a good job and could support myself; Guy worked hard but didn’t make heaps of money. The anger vanished overnight.
Instinctively I didn’t want to be a wife. I had no wish for a wedding, for a public display of our feelings for each other—to me these were very private. A relationship, as far as I could make out, is a very fragile thing. I told Guy right from the beginning that if he messed around with anyone else, if he were ever dishonest with me, he’d find his suitcases on the front verandah.

The challenge for me has always been to discover and maintain my own pathway. Somewhere inside I knew that being a wife would do something to my sense of self. I had been so well-trained in the culture of a woman devoting her life to husband and children, that I would have no protective shield to prevent me from sacrificing myself. If I were to marry I would be caught, hooked, trapped, finished. Not by him but by me. That was how I felt. It is how I still feel.

“Oh you’ve been together thirty-six years it’s just the same as being married,” friends say if I correct them when they refer to Guy as my “husband”.

It’s not, it’s not!

Like my year and a half backpacking in Europe, Pat’s war is of mythical status in her memory, all heartbreak, fear and pain forgotten. When I look it up, I find that all the Americans had gone by the end of 1944—they’d been in Sydney not much more than two years. I’m curious about what happened to Pat after the fun times were over, in the years before she found herself in Newcastle. One hot day, bored with the routine of the supermarket and the Boatrowers, I take her for a drive up to Port Stephens. She’s wearing a new button down dress that she got from Vinnies and it looks quite smart. She’s stopped going over to Antoine’s in the city for her hair and appears to be doing it herself, buying a red rinse at the supermarket and cutting it in a rough pudding-basin style. Her feet, as usual, look desperate to get out of the black patent heels they are squeezed into.

Pat laughs with delight when we pull up at Shoal Bay. It’s one of those blazing blue days—the glare of the sun on the water hurting my eyes, Tomaree towering above the entrance to the bay, boats bobbing in the breeze. It’s a weekday and not many people about. I sit Pat on a bench in the shade, while I have a swim.

“Gawd, Jill, ya don’t want to let any blokes see ya in that swimsuit. They’d really want to give ya the go for.”

Afterwards I go and buy fish and chips at the corner shop and we eat them straight from the newspaper before crossing the road to the Country Club so Pat can have her beer. It wouldn’t be a good day without one. She looks around the lounge bar to see if anyone has noticed how good she looks, but there’s hardly anyone there. She begins to tell me about what happened after the War.
You wouldn’t believe how quiet it was, Sydney, after the Yanks left. It was terrible, just awful. A bunch of us girls took to sitting on the wall behind the brewery on Broadway, drinking till two or three in the morning. The blokes from the brewery used to bring us out jugs of beer. There was a clean-up campaign going on about that time. Clean up Sydney, clean up vice. Bumper’s boys’d come round and stop right in front of us sitting on the wall. But we were ready for ‘em—the jugs were in the bushes. We’d have a swig and put it back under the bushes. The copper’d say to each of us, ‘Get up and walk a few paces!’ I’d be tryin’ not to laugh out loud and concentrating hard on each step, showing I could still walk straight. When the coppers were satisfied and went on their way, the jugs came out again.

We’d sit there till the fellas from Johnno’s two-up school, that was the one up in Oxford Street, came down with their pockets full of money. The two-up school used to finish around one in the morning. The fellas’d come down and eye us on the wall there behind the brewery, make their choice and say, ‘Come to a room.’ They’d have hundreds on ‘em that they’d won at the two-up. They paid for the room and we’d get five or ten pounds besides. They had bags of money. The two-up fellas were all married, so they’d hurry home after they’d had their fun. The bloke I’d had would give me a drink and say, ‘you’re right now. Get out of ‘ere. See ya next week or so. Be round two or three in the morning.’ Then I might get half an hour’s sleep but no more because the Vice Squad raided us every morning. Every room in every residential. We’d all break up and lie low till The Dawn Patrol went through. ‘Are yer working?’ the coppers’d say if they caught us and they’d put us in the van.

They’d never pinch us at Christmas time. It happened just the once. You should’a seen us in court, all done up in our best dresses, crushed up and puffy-eyed from a night in the lock up—and terrible hangovers, terrible. The magistrate says to us, all lined up in the courtroom, ‘Happy Christmas—all discharged!’

All the girls’d meet up again around half past ten under the Hotel Sydney—the lot of us. ‘Is anyone missing?’ We needed to look out for each other. Someone might have been bumped off. We were always careful like that since that Yank murdered all those girls in Melbourne. If any of us didn’t turn up, Billy, the useful at the Sydney, used to ring Long Bay to see if we were there. Billy Green was his name, an ex-boxer. If any of us were down there he’d say to the sergeant, ‘I’ll be down there to get her.’ If he’d had a bit of a jump on the wharf he might have a few bob to get us out.

But in the long run I ended up with too many convictions for the booze—they gave me twelve months. Twelve months to the day at Bloomfield. I went there three times—I was three years in Orange altogether. I’d come out and get another heap of convictions and back to Orange I’d go. Any time I didn’t want to stay there, I’d get a few bob together and go for me
life. All I had to do was walk into Orange, get on the bus and go, get on a train at Lithgow and then back to Sydney. I’d be missing for two weeks or three weeks or six weeks and then I’d be caught again in Sydney and back up to Orange.

It was a terrible place, you can’t imagine how terrible. I knew quite a few of the patients there because of the booze. They were all kinds of people: doctors, solicitors, actors. Drying out. My doctor told me it was the doctors that were hardest to get off the booze. One of them was dying from the drugs and drink and it was said that nothing would save him, he’d die in the night. But my doctor put him in a soda water bath, full of soda, kept changing the water to get the paralysis out of him, and gave him orange drink, gallons and gallons of it. That man survived. He got to use his legs and walk again. It was written up in the paper. He couldn’t thank my doctor enough.

The gardener there at Bloomfield was a young society fellow—Charlie his name was. In for the booze as well. Me and him used to run off together into Orange. Till we got caught that is, in a room in town. We’d got in a taxi in front of one of the nurses—that’s how cocky we were. But this nurse rang the cab office and asked the cabby where he’d dropped us and then he got two cops to come with him and sprung us. ‘You think you’re the Superintendent!’ I screamed at him. Charlie and me had polished off a bottle of whisky by then and we were on to the second one. ‘Come on, be a good girl now,’ one of the coppers said. Kind. The other one was trying to hide a smile. The nurse grabbed me by the arm and took me back to the hospital. Charlie had to go to Orange police station and was charged with taking me out of the hospital. He got three months. He’d never been in jail before. But my doctor went into the station in the morning and spoke up for him and they changed it to a bond. He was a society fella, Charlie.

I had a nice girlfriend at Orange. Margot was her name. Margot put herself in for a year for the booze. Put herself in. She worked in the office for the superintendent, typewriting. You should of seen her—she had a beautiful face and all her own teeth. Her sister had a chemist shop at Wynyard Station and used to send up lots of cosmetics. I’d do Margot’s washing and get makeup in return. I knitted for her too. I knitted for all the nurses, and Mrs MacIndoe the doctor’s wife, and the MacIndoe children. Knit! I was always knitting. Mrs MacIndoe used to say that she’d never seen such an even knitter. I used to run the MacIndoe’s place. They had three drunks doing the house and three drunk men doing the garden for a quid a week, each. Fifty two quid a year. Mrs MacIndoe used to say to me, ‘we’ll go in to Orange now. Concentrate on what we want for the house.’ We went to Woolworths and I did all the shopping. I’d pocket a few quid worth of coins from the change. By the time I was back at Orange for the second and third stints, I was living at the doctor’s place—I never went back to the ward. I pinched his beer and put water back in his whisky but I was a good housekeeper and good with the children, so they liked to have me there.
I could finish the McIndoe’s housework in half a day. Then I’d put on me good clothes and go up to the Mission at the hospital and ask if anybody wanted anything from the shop or from the staff dining room. I might have a cup of tea in the staff dining room. They’d let me do that. Then I’d go the rounds of the wards, helping out the nurses. They all liked me—the patients and the nurses.

There was a group of girls from the Burnside Home in at Orange one time, only sixteen or so, and I used to spend time with them. Dr MacIndoe told me to get those girls well. He hated to see young people inside. About five of them there were—I got them all well. But one of them got in the family way to an attendant and when she was having the baby up in the Mission the nurse comes to find me, telling me June, that was her name, is singing out for me. Dr MacIndoe asked me to come up and give him a hand with her but I told him ‘Not on your life’—I wasn’t going in a room where a baby was comin’ into the world. The next thing he comes out and says, ‘A fine baby boy!’ Six pounds that baby was and everyone in the hospital came from all directions to see him. But in the morning matron took him away. She told June he had to go to a home. I asked what would happen to him then, whether he would be adopted, and the nurse told me that wouldn’t happen because June might get well. It was still her child. She’d signed no papers or anything. Now you wouldn’t believe this Jill but years later, I saw June outside the Hotel Sydney. She was with the father of that baby and she had another one there in a pram. She called out, ‘Pat, Pat! Is it you?’ She told me she’d married the father and was as good as anything. They had the little boy with them.

I told Dr McIndoe everything, everything about my life. You know what he said to me? I never forgot it. He said ‘You mightn’t have been a chosen child Pat, but for every fallen angel, someone has put her there.’

The last time I was convicted, I was sent to Kenmore, the big hospital in Goulburn. Dr McIndoe tried to get me transferred over to Orange so I could do his work. He said he’d never seen such a worker. But I said, ‘No, I’ll stay in Kenmore.’ See, I knew it round those parts—I grew up at St Joseph’s. But Kenmore was really old-fashioned compared to Bloomfield. The patients couldn’t escape. There were pits dug around the wards. I worked in the shop serving the wards. The patients would come up with a nurse for cigarettes; or if their people were visiting there’d be two scones and butter with a cup of tea. One shilling and sixpence. Two tomato sandwiches or cheese. I worked for Mrs Stephens. She was an army nurse—bought the canteen at Kenmore after the war. I cooked her dinner and served in the shop. Some of me old friends from the drunks ward would come up to the shop and if Mrs S. wasn’t looking, I’d sneak their money back on the cigarettes. Cigarettes were one and six. My room at Kenmore was beautiful; big and nice furniture. Mrs S. gave me thirty bob a week and it was nice tucker. I ate dinner with her and did her bedroom.
So that’s how I found out that Kenmore was where Carmen finished up. Keith’s wife. She went mad after her baby died—and that’s when he took up with me. Keith’s mother looked after her till she couldn’t cope any more with Carmen belting her up and then they put her in Callan Park and, at the end, Kenmore. The doctor at Callan Park told Keith ‘Don’t come near her. There’s no hope for her.’ She was completely berserk at the finish—no control over herself at all. I got a shock to see Carmen again—that was the last time I saw her—in the refractory ward at Kenmore.

It upset me, the refractory ward, really upset me. The patients would be sitting there in straightjackets, flies all around them, rocking and humming. They were shut in their rooms at night just on a piece of canvas on the ground with nothing over them. If they wet or dirtied themselves, the nurses just left them there. There was stinking sewage running all over the courtyard. The doctor came through and just passed them by. When they had to eat, the nurses shoved it into their mouths while they spewed it up and spat it out. The nurses threw it back in, hitting them in the face to make them swallow it. Years later I still go mad with hate when I see the nurses from Stockton hospital come in the Boatrowers to go in the power raffle. I just fill up with hate, remembering how they used to treat those poor people in the refractory.

I finished me time at Kenmore in 1953 and went back to Sydney. That’s where I ran into Old Bill. ‘E was down for the Easter Show. I was drinking again, even though I had a bond to keep off the beer for two months. Bill walked up to me and said, ‘You’ll get pinched luv!’ I could see he was a bit retarded. He’d been in the hospitals at Peat Island and Morisset so he knew about drunks. ‘I’ve got no convictions for booze,’ he told me. ‘I’m renting a place at Cardiff in Newcastle. Why don’t you come up there—I only want me washing done and cooking.’ The doctor at Kenmore’d said to me, ‘Pat when you get out of here, pick up with somebody and git. It doesn’t matter where you git. Newcastle or somewhere.’ So I went up on the train to live with Bill for two months, the time it took for the bond to be wiped. And that’s where I stayed, with Bill. He fed me good tucker and took me everywhere and didn’t want to have sex at all. The worst he did was wear me nighties. I never went back to Sydney and I never got convicted for the booze again.”

I think about how Pat bustles around her unit making herself busy, just as she did to get through those long years in institutions, making a life out of it, making a story out of her life, insisting on enjoying herself. I wonder how Pat made those girls from Burnside well. Maybe she just listened to them. Maybe it was enough that she had come from a tough background herself. I remember how in the 1970s when I started in social work, mothers of illegitimate babies were being persuaded or coerced into surrendering their child for adoption, something I knew was wrong even then, and made sure I wasn’t a part of. Pat left her girls with the woman across the
street; she didn’t sign any papers for adoption either. She never tried to find out what happened to them, how their lives turned out.

And me? Well, I never do get around to having children. Being in a relationship with Guy and having a job and a mortgage—because after a couple of years back in Newcastle I buy my first house—is as much tying down as I can manage. I am holding on to a sense of me and my life as best I can and it never seems that it will be possible to do that if I were to have children. I would disappear completely.

The thirty years from 1953 until 1983, when I met Pat and Bill in Stockton, remain unaccounted for. They started off in Cardiff, spent quite a few years in Tooke Street, Cooks Hill, a place that Pat remembers fondly, before moving to Stockton. They were pretty much an institution in Stockton when I met them. I’m sure during all that time Pat has been drinking, cadging and taking up with men; and Bill was causing his various kinds of havoc—stealing anything he could lay his hands on, and ripping up her nighties. But having Bill to care for, to cook and clean house for, was enough to keep Pat outside of the court or psychiatric systems.

In the lounge of the Boatrowers, I make some audiotapes of Pat telling her stories, and she writes me out some others. She is keen for me to write about her, especially after the television interview, but my life gets busier and busier—there is less and less time for Pat. In 1990 I move from a social work job in rehabilitation to developing a new social work program and teaching at the university—it is more demanding than anything I have ever done before. Two decades will pass before I finally sit down with the tapes and notes and begin to write Pat’s story.
Chapter Ten

One day as I get out of my car to cross the wide grass forefront to Pat’s, Verna emerges from her unit, hurries down the few steps and lurches across towards me.

“You’re her social worker, aren’t you?” she pants.

“Well sort of…” I trail off, knowing that this is what Pat would have told her.

“Jill, that’s your name isn’t it?” She stops for breath, and I look at her, trying to will away the diatribe I can see she is ready to launch into. “It’s just not right, I’ve got to speak up.”

She takes another breath, gives me a sly glance. “She’s drinking in there. Lots. I don’t know whether you realise but she’s a drunk. She has the bottle shop bring her up cartons. All the time. And then she’s got men coming. They come up on their way home from the pub. They’re making a terrible noise till all hours of the morning. It’s not allowed you know. This is Housing Commission. I’ll have to report it, you know, if it goes on, report it. You’re not allowed to be drunk and you’re not allowed to have men stay over. Not in the Commission. She’ll be thrown out if it goes on. You have to speak to her, get her to stop it.”

I’m burning up. I hate Verna, hate her for making demands, for having expectations of me, for opening up the fear that I might have to find another place for Pat.

“I’m sorry Verna. Pat’s always been a party girl, even now she’s old. It’s hard to get her to change her ways. But I know it’s not right if you’re being kept up at night.”

What’s the word for Verna that jumps into my mind and takes away any empathy I might have for her? Sanctimonious. That’s how she comes across and it annoys me. I am disappointed that Verna and Pat have become enemies—far from my stupid idea that Verna might be a friend for Pat.

“Some of those men she lets in are terrible types,” Verna continues, getting her second wind. “They’re not safe, really they aren’t. They drink all her beer and then they go. That’s all they want. I tried to warn her but she told me to mind my own business. Not in very nice language either I can assure you. I was upset for days. My health isn’t the best you know. I can’t have this worry, I really can’t.”

I can see Pat is peeking out of her curtain, watching our exchange.

“I’ll have a word with her, Verna. I’ll try to get her to be more considerate. But I can tell you now that she doesn’t take much notice of me; I’m not sure that it will get her to stop.”

“Oh, you’re wrong there,” Verna says, and a nasty tone comes into her voice. “She thinks the world of you. Jill will do this, Jill will do that. Jill gave me this, Jill told me that. It’s all I hear. Believe me, she’ll take notice of you.”

“Well, I’ll talk to her and I hope it gets better. I’m sorry it’s not turning out well.”

And with that I flee up the couple of stairs to Pat’s, no longer looking forward to the visit, wondering if she’s got a man in there with her. Pat has the door ajar as I come up to it and
lets me in quickly with a sheepish look. The unit looks reasonably tidy. A huge dressing table with three mirrors takes up a lot of the room. Pat has all her makeup and jewellery arrayed on it—it’s all come from the op-shop. I can see the open carton of VB sticking out from under the bed and the Vegemite glass of beer is in its usual place on the table.

“What did that old witch want?” she asks at the top of her voice as soon as she’s closed the door behind me. “Was she telling stories about me? They’re all lies, Jill. She wants me out. That’s the trouble. She’s got a friend from the church she wants in here and she wants me out.”

“Oh, I don’t think that’s right Pat. She told me she’s concerned about some of the men that are coming here. She’s worried they might harm you.”

“Men? Men? Here? She’s lying Jill. There aren’t any men coming here.” She pauses for effect. “She couldn’t mean Gordon. Old Gordon was up here once. I’m sure it wasn’t more than once. He drove me up with my groceries. I wanted to thank him so I cooked him some tucker. He lives upstairs down at the pub and doesn’t get much good tucker. Just the once Jill. There’s nothing wrong with doing someone a favour is there?”

“I thought it was nights she was talking about.”

“Nights? Well that was tea that I gave Gordon. Oh she might have been talking about Jack Brady. He drives me up home from the Boatrowers some nights, always makes sure I get in the door safely. You can’t be too careful round Stockton. Then I put on the TV to watch the late movie. That’s what she must think is men in here. The movie going. The silly old bat. She’s never had a man herself Jill so she doesn’t like it when she sees me with one. She’s jealous.”

Pat takes a slurp from her Vegemite glass and chuckles, laughs, looks at me to see if I’m laughing yet.

“Oh, Jill, guess who I saw. Guess who was over at the Boatrowers, come over from Cooks Hill. Joe!” Pat announces triumphantly. “He heard I was over here so he came over to say hullo. Did you know Joe used to be on that tram I took from Newtown down to the Quay, Jill. He was the conductor. Isn’t that the biggest coincidence you ever heard? Yes he remembers me catching that tram.”

As Joe is clearly at least ten years younger than Pat I know this is completely absurd. Pat is trying to entertain me, she knows she’s in trouble. I sigh.

“Pat, Verna’s worried about you but she’s also upset at the noise. We can’t afford for her to be making complaints to the Housing Commission. You have to hang onto this unit. You’re just going to have to be much more careful, keep the noise down and make sure she can’t hear men in here at night.”

“I’ll be quiet as a mouse Jill. You’ll see. Don’t think that old cow is going to get me out of here.”
Pat takes up her big handbag, touches up her lipstick and scurries with me across the grass to the car, head in the air, knowing for sure that Verna will be peeping from behind her curtain. We head down to the supermarket and the bottle shop. At the Boatrowers, to avoid Pat’s stories of persecution by the neighbours, I steer Pat onto talking about the Yanks.

One morning I arrive to visit Pat to find Joe installed in her kitchen. He’s lounging against the bench, a man close to seventy with the mottled face and bulging nose of a dedicated drinker. There is still a bit of ginger in his thinning hair matching the brown of his few teeth and the ingrained nicotine on his fingers, fumbling now with a rollie. A great beer-gut hangs over the top of his stubbies, poking out between the missing buttons of his faded Hawaiian shirt. There are two Vegemite glasses of beer on the kitchen table. Pat looks pleased with herself. Joe looks at me slyly—‘it’s me or you, sweetie’, his bloodshot eyes seem to say.

“Don’t judge,” I chant to myself.

“Jill, Jill. This is Joe. You know, I’ve told you about him. Joe from over Cooks Hill. He’s just dropped in. I’ve told him all about you.” Pat beams with delight.

I take in the rumpled bedclothes, the saucers full of butts, the almost empty carton of VB, the two greasy plates waiting to be washed at the kitchen sink. God’s Police. I hate myself for minding. It’s her life, isn’t it?

“Jill you wouldn’t believe it, Joe’s been telling me how he used to be a conductor on the tram that went from Newtown down George Street. He remembers how I used to catch the tram!”

Good grief, how many times is she going to trot it out? I’m sure my antipathy towards Joe is plain on my face. I wonder what’s in it for Joe here—free grog, a cooked meal, pinching some of Pat’s money for the pokies or the horses, and sex? Surely not.

Joe has a kind of simmering anger that can’t be concealed behind his attempts to ingratiate himself to me. A friend of mine had a father like him: you would be sitting around the table enjoying lunch and someone would say something seemingly innocuous, which would set him off. The mood would change, his face would go red, everyone would be holding their breath like you do when a child has fallen over and there is that long, long moment before they start screaming. He’d start roaring and raving, calling his daughters stupid, ignorant sluts, ranting abuse at all and sundry. The awful thing was that the family just accepted it, placating and soothing him. It was always the end of the party.

Joe is like the men I’d sometimes met in Pat’s kitchen at Cooks Hill—powder kegs waiting to go off, stinking of cigarettes and beer, swaggering, persuading her to cook them a dinner, wash their clothes. I could not hide my contempt for them and they thought that was amusing. They would regard me triumphantly. ‘That up-herself social worker!’—Pat faithfully reported the things they said about me. After the first few experiences I knew that I had to
disengage from the power struggle. I had to care for Pat unconditionally. I was not there to keep her company seven days a week. My visit once in a blue moon was no compensation for a life without men.

But Joe! Good god, does he expect me to include him on our drives to the shops and the pub? Pat has never had a phone—the rental would be too big a hole in her pension. So with Joe on the scene I begin posting Pat a note when I am coming over to visit so she can get him out of the way. This works well. She knows when to expect me, I pick her up, off we go in the car, and Pat begins a litany of complaints about Joe. She seems to need someone to complain about—first it was old Bill, then Verna, now Joe. For all I know she talks about me like that to other people. Verna doesn’t try to waylay me again but I expect to hear from the Housing Commission at any time, or from Pat to say she’s being evicted.

I was a child of the sexually repressed 1950s, a teenager in the rebellious 1960s and a young woman in the sexual awakening of the 1970s. Only in the 1980s did feminism begin to get through to me with a dawning consciousness of how tailored to pleasing men my up-bringing had been and how women’s sexuality was focused on satisfying men, fulfilling their fantasies, and obliging them by having orgasms to provide evidence of their expert love-making. As much as she wanted to convince me she was in charge of her own life, Pat’s apparent need to have a man to please at whatever cost, offended my new feminist principles.

During my childhood I had been all but oblivious to sex. Living in the suburbs I didn’t have the opportunity of a farm girl to learn about the sex and reproductive lives of animals; and I was only fifteen months old when my youngest sister was born. I read plenty of romance stories, but in those days these never included anything more than tight clinches and passionate kisses, all designed to lead up to a marriage proposal, after which it was assumed a woman lived happily ever after. I was lucky not to ever have been sexually abused—not just lucky but as a result of the vigilance of my mother, who disclosed in her old age that she had been molested as a girl by a family friend. Once my little sister, my cousin and I ran and locked ourselves in the garage, when our piano teacher arrived for his lesson smelling of beer, and leering at us. We knew something was not right. When Mum came back from the corner shop she sent him packing.

There was no sex education in our primary school. We were all shocked by one of the older girls, Sally-Anne, whom we all admired because she was so pretty, but who took all her clothes off in full view in the pool dressing sheds, while the rest of us used our beach towels in elaborate procedures to ensure that our nakedness was covered at all times. One morning the sixth class teacher, Mrs Martin announced: “We are putting a waste bin in the toilet for the sixth class girls. If anyone doesn’t know what it’s for please come and see me after class.” My face
burned, my stomach tightened and the knot in my chest made it hard to breathe. Some of the girls in the class tittered. I did not know what the waste bin was for. But I knew it had something to do with why Coral and Gwen Pevey, the twins from 6B, commanded a group of girls in the corner of the playground, a group to which my cousin June was admitted but I was not. Coral and Gwen were identical twins—big, well-developed and powerful. They had knowledge which the rest of us did not, and they shared that knowledge with a select few. Somehow I knew that their special knowledge included the reason for the waste bin in the toilet.

Mrs Martin was my favourite teacher. She made everything interesting. She had an English accent, ginger hair and nicotine-stained fingers. She often told us about her sons—Giles and Nigel—of whom she was very proud. To me, with their English public school names, they were like characters from The Famous Five, my favourite book. I tried hard for Mrs Martin’s approval by doing the best work I could. Yet as much as I loved her, there was no chance in the world that I would go to Mrs Martin and tell her that I did not know why the waste bin had been put in the toilet.

June was three weeks older than me. Her mother was my mother’s only sister and June was her only child. June was in all my classes at school and I described her as my best friend, although there were times when I was unbearably jealous of her. We spent most of our time out of school together. June was well aware that I did not know why the waste bin was being put in the toilet. At recess after the announcement she got me aside,

“I need to tell you something about the waste bin but you’re to promise not to tell your mother.”

“Cross my heart and hope to die!”

“Mum said you’re not to ask your mother about the waste bin. It would really upset her. You’re not to ask her, okay, understand?”

“Yes, but…?”

And that was it, no explanation, nothing more. For months I endured the isolation of exclusion and ignorance. Coral and Gwen taunted me from their coterie in the far corner of the playground.

“Don’t talk to her. She knows nothing. Her mother says she’s not allowed to know!” they whispered and giggled as we filed into school. June, who might have thought she was protecting me in some way, would not share the privileged knowledge and I could not hurt Mum by asking her. At some stage, I can’t remember how long it was, Mum handed me a little booklet put out by the sanitary napkin company.

“I think it’s time you read this,” she said. “Let me know if you have any questions. Don’t show your sister.” Hot-faced I read the shocking information about periods and babies. I
was horrified, even though there wasn’t actually anything in it about sexual intercourse. I had a
million questions, but there was no chance I was going to ask Mum. I would not ask anyone.

In high school my friends were from the same kind of protective families as mine. One
was even from a Muslim family, something that I understood to be just another religion like
being Catholic or Methodist. We tried to pool our knowledge but it was hard to come by. We
were more concerned about trying to persuade our parents to allow us to wear a bikini,
swimming attire that was not considered appropriate for nice girls. For we girls in the 1960s,
learning about sex was still confined to learning about menstruation and reproduction, nothing
at all about male or female sexual arousal and satisfaction. Girls learnt from their boyfriends—a
highly biased and usually very limited source of information. It would be a couple of decades
before female sexuality would be discussed openly in teenage magazines. At high school the
toilets out in the schoolyard stank and belched vile-smelling smoke from the incinerators for the
sanitary napkins. The newly available tampons were not considered suitable for teenagers.
Everything sexual was slightly on the nose.

When I got together with Andy just before I left Newcastle, I began an intense,
controlling and possessive relationship that was to last nearly four years. That was me, the
intense, controlling and possessive one. Our sexual ignorance meant that our sex life was more
than lack-lustre, with neither of us understanding anything about female sexual arousal. Andy
did his best—insisting that I begin to use tampons and suggesting that I learn about
masturbation. Even when Andy went back to Newcastle, we persevered with a long-distance
relationship—he was my first love and I expected to spend my life with him. But in my last year
of university, I learnt that Andy was seeing a girl called Margaret who was very sexy indeed. I
was devastated—I felt betrayed and broken-hearted; but my outrage fuelled the biggest fearless
act of my life: when I graduated I packed up everything and went to live and work on the North
Coast. I was determined to face down my patheticness.

This was the 1970s and the sexual revolution was well underway. I had the benefit of
safe oral contraceptives and a general misconception of sexually-transmitted disease as a thing
of the past. I was on a tailor-made low-dose pill, which had been developed by a pioneering
professor of gynaecology at my university. I used the new Forum magazine to educate myself
about female sexuality—yet this didn’t really translate to the bedroom, where the men I was
meeting were still focused on their own satisfaction, with their partner’s orgasm only required
as their badge of success. If their enjoyment were measured by their ability to ‘give’ a woman
an orgasm then if I were to meet with their approval I would mostly have to fake it.

On the North Coast and in Europe, I took every opportunity to make up for my sexual
ignorance, to seek out sexual experiences with different men, to learn “how to do it right". This
was often a disappointing exercise. Indeed, I can’t imagine how grim things might have been for me sexually if I hadn’t met Guy.

Guy’s parents, I learnt, were vastly different to mine in their openness about sex. They had a first edition of the Kinsey report on their bookshelf and were accustomed to wandering around naked on their rural property. They had managed to avoid inculcating their children in any religious instruction, or sexual guilt. Guy provided a safe space for me to build confidence in my sexuality, although he could not always conceal his surprise at my ignorance.

My new sexual emancipation extended into my work. I became very interested in the sexual rights of the aged and disabled movements of the early 1980s. I persuaded Guy to accompany me to a sexual rights for the disabled forum held in North Sydney, attended by about five hundred people, people with disabilities and their carers. I would not have admitted to the surprise I felt at the numbers of severely disabled men and women insisting on their right to have a sexual life. Medical specialists addressed us on the possibilities of sexual activity for people with physical limitations; a woman from Forum magazine demonstrated a range of sexual aids; and another woman from the sex workers’ collective talked about their work as sexual surrogates. I related all this to the group of young adults with disability that I worked with in Newcastle. Some of their parents and carers were less than impressed. When the next forum was held I loaded some of these young people and their wheelchairs into a station wagon and took them to Sydney to see for themselves. I guess I had become something of an evangelist, as became apparent when one of the young men drew me aside and asked me if it was normal not to be interested in sex. Many years later, a man who was a client at this time, told me that he had been angered by my questions about his sex life in our first interview.

So there are these two sides of me with Pat. Although I’ve fought off sexual ignorance as best I can, I’ve not been able to avoid internalising the inhibitions, the sexual repression of my family and upbringing. Like the feminist sex wars, I struggle between seeing prostitution as the sexual exploitation of women, or seeing it as women making their own choices about their lives. Although I think I’ve accepted and even celebrated Pat’s past as a prostitute, I can’t begin to understand what she is doing in the present. The idea that she is making herself available sexually to the old alcoholics from the pub makes me very uncomfortable indeed. This discomfort and the assumptions I make about Pat and Joe lead to whatever is going on in my head when something really shocking happens.

One Saturday I arrive at Pat’s and she doesn’t answer the door. I am puzzled because I have written to let her know I’ll be visiting—she has never not been ready. I go around and pound on the back door and when there is no answer I try to peer through the little kitchen window. I catch a glimpse of a muddle of blankets on the floor through the doorway from the
kitchen into the bed-sitting room and on the blankets I can see Pat’s legs, which are moving. As if I am doing a Rorschach test, I register this image and complete it: she is down on the floor with Joe, having it off. She is on the floor, my mind tells me, because there is not enough room on her single bed. I am so embarrassed and annoyed, that I drive off back home. Joe has finally triumphed.

On Tuesday at work I get a phone call from the hospital. They have a Mrs Grainger admitted and she is asking for me. She’s fallen and broken her leg. It’s a nuisance I don’t need. When I can get away I make my way to the hospital where, at the nurses’ station, they tell me that Pat broke her leg in her unit and wasn’t found for a few days. I’m dumbfounded, and feel bad about my annoyance at being dragged into another of Pat’s crises.

As usual Pat is delighted to see me. “Jill, Jill, you’ve come!” She is all trussed up with her leg suspended in the air with a pulley, monstrous screws protruding from the plaster. It’s the bones below the knee that have been broken, tib and fib. I take her papery old hand.

“I can’t believe this! I was just round at your place on Saturday, Pat. You didn’t answer the door. You were all right then because Joe was there with you.” I’m trying to make sense of this. Had Joe been rough with her and made her fall? She doesn’t question me. Yes, Joe was there at some time. She can’t wait to tell me the story of how she lay there for three days thinking she was going to die. How she called out and knocked against the wall again and again hoping that someone would hear her. How she could only reach the VBs under the bed to drink and that they had run out when Verna finally decided that the tapping on the wall wasn’t normal and called the police.

Incredibly, it isn’t until I walk away from her hospital bed that the tableau flashes into my head with its new meaning. Joe wasn’t there when she fell. Pat was not down on the floor with Joe—she was down on the floor because she had fallen. I’d seen her there two days before she was found. I go hot and cold all over, shaking, and have to sit down on one of the chairs in the hospital foyer, until I can pull myself together. She wouldn’t have lasted much longer. She must have heard me knocking that Saturday morning but just then in the hospital she didn’t say a word. Didn’t you think it was strange when I didn’t answer? I’ve never not been ready for you before. Not a word. It said a lot about Pat—no expectations, no demands, no blame.

I carry the shame of this for many years—Guy is the only person who knows. Pat gives me her keys so that I can go in and clean up the unit. It is a penance I feel I deserve. A person stuck on the floor for three days leaves quite a mess. But there is something I have to do before the cleaning. The first day I go over I take a bunch of flowers and chocolates and a card. I knock on Verna’s door and present them to her.

“You saved Pat’s life!” I say to her. And you saved me from the responsibility of an old woman’s death.
“At first I didn’t think anything of the knocking on the wall,” Verna tells me. “But then it went on and on, and I thought that I hadn’t seen Pat around for a few days and so I’d better call the police.” She is pleased with herself—maybe it’s the most exciting thing that’s ever happened to her.

It is six weeks before Pat returns to her unit. It is clean as a new pin with food in the fridge, the carpet shampooed, a new quilt on the bed and a carton of VB tucked into its usual place. As far as I know Pat never sees Joe again.
Chapter Eleven

I loved being a social worker. I couldn’t have imagined being anything else. I loved the work with elderly people that had brought me into contact with Pat. When I was nearly forty I applied for a position teaching social work in the new course at the University of Newcastle. “You an academic! That’s a laugh! You’re too practical,” one of my old bosses said.

As I sat waiting for my interview, a social worker from Sydney who I knew and admired, emerged from the interview room.

“Jo! You’re here, you’re applying for the job!” I squealed, delighted that there would be the possibility of her coming to Newcastle.

“Jill! Yes! It’s such a great opportunity to create a new course, to change things in social work. I couldn’t resist it. But I haven’t got the job yet.”

I was so confident that I was not in her league and therefore had no chance of the job, that I treated the interview as a bit of a joke. It would otherwise have been an intimidating process. Around a vast table sat six professors, five of them male, looking very important indeed. I soon had them laughing at some of the answers to their questions, and left the room thinking that I had entertained them but nothing more. So I was incredulous when the social work professor rang me that evening to offer me one of the jobs.

“We all liked your sparkiness,” he said. “And Jo is to have the senior position. Will you come and work with us?” It seemed like the opportunity of a lifetime.

I had no idea how different an academic culture would be—a culture in which higher degrees, research, publication are the only currency—where my practice expertise and experience were of lesser value. Those of us who began the social work program—we were joined by another two a year later—were full of missionary zeal. It was to be like no other social work curriculum in the world because it would be the first to implement problem-based learning, a teaching model for which Newcastle University had an international reputation. We catalogued the qualities and skills of the most excellent social work practitioners, and made this the vision of our end result. I was continuing to visit Pat and even thought of bringing her in to meet the students, so that they might learn from her, as I had, about non-judgment and acceptance. But by this time it would be like bringing in a friend or a member of my family so I let it go.

Pat’s perception of Verna as wicked and conniving increases, despite Verna saving her life. After the fall, I endure long litanies of complaints about Verna and half the rest of the Stockton community. Pat seems unable to live without thinking she has enemies everywhere. I can see how judging, disapproving eyes have been part of her life since childhood. And they are real—I am aware of how people stare and mutter when we are out together. Like Pat, I feel defiant and
energised by the derision. However, I have grown to hate visiting the unit. Driving over to Stockton makes me sick with the memory of my failing her. It really would be more convenient for me if Pat were closer to town, closer to me. With her enthusiastic support, I apply to the Housing Commission for a transfer to a unit in the inner city.

One day I arrive home to a scrap of a letter from Pat to say she’s had an offer of a unit in Hamilton South, a suburb just ten minutes from my place. This is great news. I ring the Housing office to collect a key and drive over to pick up Pat to go to inspect the new unit—as long as I get to Stockton early enough she will not have set out for the pub. I wait while she puts her teeth in, changes into a clean dress and combs her hair. We are both excited at the prospect of her escaping from Stockton. The bed-sit is on the ground floor of a four-storey block—we don’t yet know that it is an area earmarked for younger residents with mental health and addiction problems.

The nearest pub is the Mary Ellen—a bit gentrified for Pat and much further away than the Boatrowers from her Stockton unit. An essential part of the inspection, we go to check it out, sitting at a table in the deserted public bar so that Pat can have her middy while thinking over the pros and cons of moving from Stockton. I wonder if she will be accepted in Hamilton South.

The unit is larger and newer than the one at Stockton, but it is dark and has no little garden outside. Pat is keen to accept it. I help her fill in the forms and a few weeks later Vinnies moves her goods and chattels and I drive her to her new address. Before we leave Stockton for the last time I knock on Verna’s door to thank her for all she’s done for Pat; in other words for saving her life. Pat watches darkly from the car. Verna hardly says a word—she must be delighted to see Pat go.

At Hamilton South Pat seems frailer than at Stockton. The neighbours, mostly single younger men or women, keep to themselves and she finds it difficult to walk as far as the shops, though they are only a block away. I arrange home help for her and when I visit we go to the Mary Ellen. Between my visits she relies on her cartons of VB to be home-delivered from the bottle shop on the corner. It might be lucky that Pat isn’t long in this unit—it isn’t really right for her lifestyle.

In 1995 I was in Launceston at a national social work conference with the theme Science and social work: Are they compatible? For a reason I didn’t quite understand the theme had created a lot of controversy. Many social workers, it turned out, thought that social work had nothing to do with science. In a session I attended to hear a paper given by a friend, one of the other speakers had a profound effect on me. Jim Barber was arguing that social work was resistant to accepting science, that most social workers used political, philosophical or religious foundations for their work. By excluding science and scepticism, social work, he said, has produced many
practitioners who operate by politics or faith alone. He cited the tendency of some social workers to follow the latest therapeutic or political fad—co-dependency, transactional analysis, structural family therapy, Marxism. Some of their practices made him angry. Good intentions, blind faith, he argued, could cause harm.

It was another veil lifting—I recognised myself as a social work true believer. For more than twenty years social work had been my religion, the way and the truth and the life (John 14:6). Had I really travelled such a short distance from Sunday school at St Matthews? I was feeling excited and embarrassed, wondering why I hadn’t thought of this before. As the session ended I was stunned that not everyone was having the same reaction. Some people booed. No-one gets booed at a social work conference—social workers specialise in being nice. Over discussions at morning tea I found that others were dismissive of, even angry about Jim’s criticisms. I lay low.

In the next session a marital therapist extolled the virtues of love in his practice. “All you need is love,” he maintained. It was not coming across as enlightened. I was getting a creepy feeling in the hairs at the back of my neck that he practised ‘love’ in more ways than one. I was squirming. What a sleaze! I was thinking that this was exactly the sort of thing that Jim had been talking about. But at the end of this man’s paper he was given a standing ovation.

When I got back to my hotel room, buzzing with a new freedom that I could hardly yet understand, I was startled to find an envelope slipped under the door. It held a note scrawled on paper with the hotel crest: Mrs Grainger found dead in her unit yesterday. Please phone Hamilton Police. Pat—I let out a sigh of relief because it wasn’t Mum or Dad or Guy who were dead. I sat on the bed trying to let the news sink in. I hadn’t even thought about Pat dying—she’s seemed such a survivor. I was feeling bad that I hadn’t visited her before this trip, hadn’t been calling nearly often enough.

I used the phone in the room to ring the police. I was put through to the sergeant who was in charge of the case. He seemed a pleasant person, taking the time to relay the story to me. The home-help had reported to them that Pat wasn’t answering her door. The police broke into the unit and found her dead in her bed. There was no evidence of foul play and the police doctor confirmed the impression that she had died in her sleep. The sergeant asked me if there were any family to be notified but I knew of no-one. I wondered if she had her hands crossed over her chest, as the nuns had taught her, so she would go to heaven if she died in the night.

“Who found her? Who went in there?” He told me the police went in first. “Did you find her money?” She was always frightened that her neighbours were after her money—there were always a few residents who needed quick cash for drugs. Who would have found the wads of notes she always had stuffed down her stocking or in her shoe or in the umbrella near the door?
“No. No money.”

Who would have taken it? An old woman died in her flat alone. Who would miss the cash? There was never any explanation. I would never know.

So it happened that on the same day I lost my faith, I heard about Pat’s death. She was always a willing listener to the events in my life and now there’d be no chance to tell her that losing my faith was like the falling away of a protective skin, making me feel raw and vulnerable, but at the same time free. For years social work had burdened me with the obligation to make things better, now I was released from my mission to fix everything up. Social work and our perfect course and its graduates would not solve all the problems of the world. Though there was a chance that they might influence policy change or draw attention to injustice, social workers were more typically only able to achieve small acts of kindness, and always at the risk of unintentionally causing harm. My sadness and guilt about Pat’s lonely death vied with the joy I felt as I let go of the responsibility of making things right.

The next day I flew home. I went to the police and the funeral parlour and the Public Trustee. Pat didn’t have a will. Why would she? She had nothing and no-one to leave it to.

I was the only mourner at Pat’s funeral. The Public Trustee had arranged it in the smallest chapel at the Crematorium. They put a notice in the paper but only the man from the funeral parlour and me turned up. He read a poem about friendship and I put daffodils on her coffin. She liked daffodils. I thought that someone else might have turned up. I had some sort of fantasy that one of her daughters would appear. But no, there was just me. The Public Trustee paid the funeral expenses, topping up whatever was in her bank account.

A couple of months later I got a phone call from the Public trustees office asking me to collect a box of Pat’s things. No-one had claimed them and I was the only person they had listed as connected with her. There was an envelope of photos, faded and ripped. Some were those she had showed me. Others were of people or places I had no idea about. There was her ‘wedding ring’ taken from her finger after she died. Only I knew it had come from Vinnies. There was her carved wartime box and the two old vases she kept on her dressing table. All that was left of her life.

The new and dispassionate engagement with social work did not lead me to like what I did any less. I continued to enjoy working with the young students, standing by as their eyes opened to the world, always trying to find ways to make their learning exciting and fun. I liked my social work colleagues, typically kind and warm people whose ongoing contact with human suffering meant that their values were in the right place: relationships and generosity above material wealth or personal ambition. I began a Ph.D on survivors of child sexual abuse, which challenged and absorbed me for the next five years, teaching me a lot more about a scientific
approach to knowledge. I was, for the first time, more able to see my profession through critical eyes, to see that good intentions could result in harm, that many of us had been too quick to follow the latest therapy fad, and that almost all of us had no idea how to critically examine research outcomes, or to evaluate, even in the most rudimentary ways, our own practice.

Over the next years I worked to develop the curriculum in critical thinking but I was to discover that, like the audience of the “all you need is love” speaker at the conference, students were much more attracted towards ideologies and faiths, than to research and critical enquiry.

Emotionally, I began to let go of control, the control that happens when you want to take things in hand and fix them. Although the people in social work I was meant to help taught me this over and over again, and Pat embodied this lesson most of all, it was only after the conference that I was able to sever my compulsion to fix and the belief that I had control. In the words of one of my students I “chilled out.”

It is more than fifteen years since Pat died. Retired from work I sit at my desk in my room of my own, surrounded by memories and with all the time in the world to write. Pat’s story is always there. I listen for the first time to the audiotape we made in the lounge of the Boatrowers of Pat talking about her childhood; I watch the DVD from the War Museum archives, read the handwritten pages clipped with a bobby pin that Pat prepared for her television interview, and examine the envelope of photos from the Public Trustee. I dig out my work diaries and find notes about Pat I made when I first met her, nearly thirty years before—even then I thought I would write her story. There is more—the box of letters I sent home from my European trip, carefully collated with numbered pages by my mother; the audiotape I sent home from the apartment in Berlin; and all the notebooks and diaries in which I have jotted my thoughts and experiences over the years. As I begin to share my stories of Pat with others, I am forced to realize that the story is not just about Pat—that the reader is just as interested in me, and that it is the interplay between us, our relationship, that forms the essence of the story. This makes me uncomfortable—I find it hard to believe that anyone wants to read about me.

I apply for Pat’s death certificate, believing that it might give me her real name. After paying forty dollars I am astonished to find that the only information on the certificate is what I gave the police—it even names me as the informant. I have imagined that in the registry of births, deaths and marriages, deaths are matched up with births, but it seems that there is no such efficiency in the public records. I also try to contact the Catholic organisation that holds the archives of the orphanage. There is surely a record of three sisters admitted in the early 1920s. But my letter is returned unopened and I am later told that the nun in charge of the archives suddenly died. As I draw to the end of writing this story, I contact the organisation again and have a response from Sister Angela now in charge of the archives. Sister Angela is
very helpful and tells me that the records from the early days of the orphanage are in quite good shape. But to her surprise and my astonishment, she can find no record at all of three sisters admitted at that time—even allowing for Pat having changed her Christian name as well as her surname.

There is one last thing that troubles me and I go back to my work diaries, which I’ve kept all this time, to try to work it out. I was quite good at keeping boundaries between myself and my social work clients, and fairly clear about ethics. So why did I not end my association with Pat when I finished my job in aged care, why did I continue to visit her for the next twelve years until her death? I know the year I first met Pat and I find it there in my diary, in January 1983, “Mrs Grainger, Stockton, 10am”. I knew that I began a new job some time that year, but what I had not remembered until I read my diary was that the aged care team was disbanded only three weeks after I first visited Pat—she must have been one of my last cases. Three weeks after my first visit! This was exactly the same time that Bill was found dead, she was given notice to leave her house, and she broke her arm. She was almost completely blind and had no prospect of cataract surgery for months. The agencies I had tried to refer her to had waiting lists or would not go there because of her dogs. Then there were the dogs, and me arranging for their removal. And incredibly, in one of those three weeks, between meeting her and going to a new job, my diary records that I went to a summer school on women in welfare where I finally ‘got’ feminism. All of this gave me a new understanding of why I had stayed involved—I felt that I could not leave this woman who was more alone than anyone I had ever come across, and I did not. But later on, when Pat could see again and I’d found her the flat in Cooks Hill—why didn’t I stop seeing her then? Throughout my life I’ve been drawn to people with an irrepressible enjoyment of living, a “rich and dependable sense of life and joy” as I read in a film review recently; and to people who make no demands. This was Pat.

It takes me six months or more to get the courage to watch the video-recording of Pat’s interview that I’ve ordered from Canberra. Made in 1995 when she was still living in Stockton and just months before she died, it is fifty two minutes in length and is held in the archive of the Australian War Memorial—Pat was proud of that. Mind you it took them six months to locate it for me. I wait until I’m home alone and put the disc into the DVD player. The first image is of the corner of the kitchen chair, chrome with grey vinyl, the setting I’d scavenged for her from my aunt’s house. Now, here is Pat, squinting into the camera, smiling flirtatiously. She would have been seventy-seven then, and looks younger than I remember her. It’s a strange sensation seeing someone you’ve known well, but dead for sixteen years, fully alive again in front of you.

It was such a delight to see Pat basking in all the attention. She fell in love with the interviewer straight away, casting him coquettish glances, giggling like a schoolgirl. It must have taken more than an hour before they were ready to begin. Despite her hearing aids, the
interview proceeded with some difficulty as Pat struggled to catch what the interviewer said, or more often what he meant. She recounted with great enjoyment all her stories, of Jake and the Hotel Sydney, Eddie the taxi driver, Bumper Farrell and the girls sitting on the wall behind the Broadway brewery, drinking buckets of beer brought out to them by the workers. But the interviewer wanted more: how she got started in prostitution, what it was like the first time, what exactly the Yanks did that made them so preferable to the Diggers, why she had abandoned her daughters and whether she had ever tried to contact them again. These were things I had never asked Pat and I sat there on the periphery, worrying about what I had let her in for. But Pat was the consummate performer, answering only what she wanted to answer and deflecting the probing questions as easily as she must have done all those years ago in the courtrooms.

As I watch the video again I note that the interviewer never did find out much about the Americans, except that they wanted company and a good time, not just a “quickie” like the Diggers. And Pat said about her daughters, that you just have to leave parts of your life behind you, there is no going back. She has nothing to say about starting to get paid for sex, just that she was homeless and poor and it was better money than other ways of earning her living. In response to his question as to whether she had enjoyed sex in her role as a prostitute, she said, “Oh no, I just got it over with as soon as I could, and got the money.”

At the end of the interview the cameraman wanted shots of Pat walking down her front steps and along the street towards Stockton. She has put on her woollen coat and scarf and clutches her large handbag. I remember her smell—cheap perfume, slightly beery, and mouldy like an op-shop; I hear her chuckle, her “wouldn’t you?”; feel the papery skin of her hand as she would put it on my arm to emphasise a point. The director gave her a massive gift basket all done up in cellophane with a pink ribbon, bringing it inside and presenting it to Pat with a flourish. It didn’t seem like much compensation for outing herself as a prostitute on national television, but Pat was absolutely delighted.

When the series finally appeared on television Pat’s segment lasted no more than thirty seconds in the third episode. Pat Grainger—prostitute across the bottom of the screen gave me a jolt. Pat told me that one or two drinkers at the Boatrowers saw it, but most Stockton people were not ABC documentary viewers and probably thought Pat was delusional in her claims that she was on TV anyway. But the bit I remember the most, that I have never forgotten, was her response to his final question: “If you could sum it all up, your years in prostitution, if you could use just one word to describe it after all this time, what would it be?”

I held my breath. I knew what he is digging for. It was like a confessional, looking for remorse, shame, regrets. I watch it unfold on screen. Pat doesn’t answer straight away. She sits
and thinks and I was wondering what on earth was she going to say. She looks straight at the camera and smiles. Watching the video I remember that moment, something I will never forget.

“Pride”, she says. “That’s what I feel. Pride! I’d do it all again if I had the chance.” And she begins to laugh at the expressions on our faces.
Critical Exegesis: Angels In The House: The Prostitute And The Social Worker
Introduction

I met Pat Grainger in January 1983. I was a 32-year-old social worker in an aged care outreach service; she was 66 and had been referred by a caller who didn’t leave their name. My information was that an old woman was making a nuisance of herself wandering blind around the streets of Stockton, a suburb of Newcastle. I could not have anticipated that our first contact would be the prelude to an association which would last until her death in 1995. Over this time I changed jobs twice and helped her move house four times, and in the course of our unlikely friendship I became acquainted with her story.

In 1989 I organised for Pat to be interviewed for a television documentary *When We Were at War* which subsequently screened on ABC television (Butt 1991). Although her appearance in the third episode was momentary, the tape of her interview is lodged as a historic record at the Australian War Memorial, validating her pride in her adventures as a prostitute in Sydney prior to and during World War II. Pat wrote down some of her recollections in preparation for the documentary interview, fastening them with a bobby pin, and we made some audiotapes of her talking about her experiences. We talked then about my writing her story, something she was very keen for me to do, but although I made some initial attempts in the early 1990s the project was put aside when a new academic job began to absorb all my time and creative energy. After I retired in 2009 I began to take classes in creative writing where I gravitated towards the non-fiction. And eventually I returned to Pat’s story—still waiting to be told. I took out my notes and tapes and began a task that was much more challenging than I had ever expected.

What has been my motivation in writing Pat’s story? Over the twelve years that I knew her, no family or friends from the past ever appeared in her life. She was the most alone person I had ever met. The surname she had adopted, ‘Grainger’, was the name of the man who had offered her shelter in the role of his housekeeper in 1954 and who died within weeks of my first meeting her. Whenever I asked her about her real name, she changed the subject. She didn’t want to be found. Recently I was excited to find that I could purchase Pat’s Death Certificate because my name was mentioned on it. But after I had forked out the $50, I was flabbergasted to find that the only information on it was what I had provided. I had imagined the State’s recording of births, deaths and marriages to be a scientific process that matched deaths with births and marriages; that would have the means to trace a person’s real name through Centrelink or some such means. Nothing could be further from the truth. Pat died in her Housing Department unit, alone, and therefore her death was subject to a coroner’s report. Despite this, the details on her death certificate were only those I had given the police. She died as anonymously as she had lived out her later years. I often wonder if her daughters, women older than me, had ever tried to trace her.
In William Zinsser’s *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir* (1998), he recorded interviews with a number of best selling North American memoir writers. One of these was Russell Baker, author of *Growing Up* (1982), a memoir of his large extended family in New Jersey during the Depression. Reflecting on his motivation for writing the story, Baker said that his “prime interest was to celebrate people whom nobody had ever heard of. And whom I was terribly fond of, for the most part, and thought deserved to be known” (1998 25). I, too, wanted to give a face to a woman who died a nobody, without a real name—to memorialise a person who might otherwise be seen as of little value. In Joan Didion’s words could I achieve a “minor but perilous triumph of being over nothingness” (1968 66)? I would set out to write what Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson would classify as a “nobody memoir” (2010 275).

Hermione Lee in the introduction to her essays on life writing, *Body Parts* (2005), began with an anecdote from Boswell’s *Life of Johnson*, which Carlyle had used to illustrate a point when writing about biography in the 1830s. Boswell and Johnson were walking along the Strand when they were accosted by a prostitute. Brushing off her advances, they began to discuss the wretchedness of such women. This story was limited to just a couple of sentences in *Life of Johnson* but Carlyle deplored the easy dismissal of the woman into oblivion. He argued that the underlying task of biography is to uphold the sanctity of human lives, rescuing lives, “however obscure, from oblivion”, believing in “the power of small anecdotes, and little details…..to bring a whole life home to us” (Lee, 2005 2). From the perspective of the two literary men, the prostitute was a ‘wretched’ person. Was the anecdote included only to illustrate their higher moral status because they brushed her off?

More recently the dismissal of the life of an old woman without social status is evident in the male reviewer’s comments on a documentary *Tea with Madame Clos* (2010), a film made by Australian director Jane Oehr about her visits over several years to an old woman in a French village. The reviewer wrote that “Oehr has found a character she is clearly taken with and invested her with more importance than she deserves. Most of us have met people significantly older than us who have fascinating stories to tell about places we’ve never been and long-gone eras we could barely imagine. Either they’re all worthy of their own film or none of them is” (Palathingal, 2010). *More importance than she deserves, all worthy or none*—such a sense of moral judgment seems to go back to a time when life writing was considered only relevant for the most important people in society, for role models, and therefore mostly for white upper class men.

In her analysis of two autobiographies in which the authors adopt a second voice—a mother in *The Color of Water* (McBride, 1996), a brother in *Brothers and Keepers* (Wideman, 1984)—Jane Danielewicz (2012) wrote that “[b]ecause of power differentials, some individuals will never occupy a place of articulation. However, on behalf of others, not all writers are
content with this state of affairs and refuse to accept the constraints (social, moral or otherwise) that inhibit and silence such speakers” (275). I want to join with writers who challenge the view that life writing is only for the worthy, and to entice the reader of Pat’s story to come to value a ‘nobody’, an outsider, a woman in some ways as far as possible from an ‘angel in the house’, who had been a prostitute and an alcoholic, had given her daughters away, and who died without anyone even knowing her real name. I hope that the reader, as I was, is confronted with their moral judgments and assumptions about prostitution. I hope that I am able to convey Pat’s love of life, her refusal to be cast as a victim or to blame others, her naughtiness and spirit.

However, in the course of telling Pat’s story another story kept intruding. I was dismayed to find that my readers were passably interested in Pat, but wanted to know more about me. In spite of my resistance, my story became intrinsic to the narrative. I considered myself also a ‘nobody’—an ordinary person from a working class town who spent twenty years working with people who included those on the fringes of society. In the notes accompanying the documentary memoir The Beaches of Agnes (2010), the writer asserted that Agnes Varda uses her films to take “the side of women, presenting them, not as beautiful, dangerous, unknowable objects of desire, but as complex, intelligent, vulnerable, and desirous human beings” (2). I hope that my memoir will be able to convey women’s complexity, difference and vulnerability on a journey which sifts through the light and shade of our lives and our relationship in a way that values us as women and in so doing participates in challenging the legacy of the angel in the house. On this journey I have lived the critic, Vivian Gornick’s observation (2001) that “penetrating the familiar is by no means a given. On the contrary it is hard, hard work” (9).

**Genre: Writing memoir**

Life writing is an umbrella term that is used to include autobiography, biography, essays, letters and memoir. In recent decades it has come to be accepted that life writing can be a pastiche of different literary styles and can blend biography and autobiography, fiction and non-fiction, prose and poetry, words and performance. Works which involve a mix of styles have been termed ‘hybrid’ (Kirchstein 2001 2; Marrone 2001 115). Since postmodern theorists have called the concept of truth into question, it has been acknowledged that life writing is inherently subjective, that memory is selective and writing about lives, one’s own or other peoples’, is unavoidably an act of interpretation and creation by the writer. This process has been described as “mediation” involving the “attempt to transform lived experience into the medium of written language” (Feigel and Saunders, 2012 241).

Alfred Hornung (2010) described three processes of mediation in life writing: memory, technique and transdiscipline. Constructing memory as mediation allows for its subjectivity, the
inescapability of its cultural and historical context. Memory mediates between a person’s past and present. “Mediation…has already occurred in the act of auto/biographical remembering that precedes any auto/biographical writing” (Feigel and Saunders, 2012 242). However this is not a one-way process because life writing is not only a product of cultural memory but also participates in its production (Erll in Feigel and Saunders, 2012 242). Smith and Watson (2010) expressed this as: “there is always the possibility of changing the rules—although not of escaping rules altogether” (57). Thus storytelling through life writing can, at worst, reinforce stereotypes, but it can also bring change to cultures through consciousness-raising, the recording and validation of difference, and the creation of possibilities.

The second process of mediation, technique, Hornung described as the medium through which the self is represented: biography or autobiography; fiction or non-fiction; text, image or performance—or the combinations of these that have come to be accepted in current life writing. Hornung’s third mediating process, which he saw as closely linked to technique, is the way that life writing is transdisciplinary, interacting with a range of disciplines such as “creative writing, performance, politics, sociology and cultural studies, comparative literature, war studies, ideology, gender, philosophy, critical theory, and cultural memory” (Hornung in Feigel and Saunders, 2012 243). Throughout my writing of this memoir I was strongly aware of the impact of these three processes: the fickleness and instability of memory; the blending of fiction and non-fiction, biography and autobiography; and the interaction with sociology and gender studies, the discipline of social work, and the context of history.

The critical literature on life writing as mediation emphasises “the work such mediation performs, whether cultural, national, political, pragmatic, social, familial, psychic or aesthetic” (Feigel and Saunders, 2012 244). There is an acknowledgement that life writing plays a role that is larger than what was once believed to be a recording of historical fact. Paul John Eakin (2008) suggested that life writing, as individual works of self-construction, can contribute to building a new society with new sets of norms and values.

The critical literature of recent years has commented on the proliferation of life writing and there is much discussion about why this is so. In her introduction to forty contemporary memoir pieces from the *Griffith Review*, Julianne Schultz (2007) reflected on the current popularity of memoir. She proposed that along with reality television, blogs, Facebook and Twitter, the interest in memoir is evidence of “a hunger to connect with the real happenings in real people’s lives—both banal and extraordinary. Authentic, resonant tales of lives gone right and wrong satisfy this need” (vi). Similarly, Janet Mason Ellerby (2001) argued that at “the core of the popularity of the memoir is a hunger for a connection with other people that springs from a particularly modern lack of intimacy” (190).
Another point of view is that the popularity of life writing reflects the growth of individualism in developed societies. Gornick (2001) suggested that greater numbers of people now have the privilege of an examined life:

...today millions of people consider themselves possessed of the right to assert a serious life... a life one reflects on, a life one tries to make sense of and bear witness to. The age is characterized by a need to testify. Everywhere in the world women and men are rising up to tell their stories out of the now commonly held belief that one's own life signifies (90-91).

So rather than seeking intimacy, people in individualist societies are socialised in the belief that they are individually significant, that their stories deserve to be told and will be of interest to others. They have a sense of entitlement that their story is worthy of its place in history.

From another perspective, the secular nature of modern life in Western societies means that religions which once assisted humans to confront their mortality—mostly by holding out hope of some kind of after-life—no longer offer this comfort to many people. On a visit to Easter Island I was awed by the efforts to which humans had gone to leave their mark on the earth in the face of their mortality. Writing a memoir, documenting one’s life in words and on paper, offers a tangible recognition of a life, the illusion that one will not just pass into nothingness. As Eakin (2008) put it: “lurking somewhere in the telling of any life story is a facing down of mortality, the will to say that one’s life has left a trace, that any self and life have value” (129).

Life writing has sometimes been seen as a means through which the writer comes to terms with issues in their past, a form disparaged by some critics as ‘bibliotherapy’. Natalie Goldberg (2005) proposed that “writing is a path to meet ourselves and become intimate” (xiii). When this recounts past abuse, such life writing has been labelled as ‘confessional’ or as the commodification of tragedy. Yet such stories can be emancipatory for more than just the writer. This is especially so when life writing exposes experiences that were previously secret. Criminal or evil behaviour is sustained when hidden from public censure. This was a central finding in my 1999 PhD thesis which explored the support needs of women who had been sexually abused as children. More than therapy or compensation, these women yearned to have the seriousness and prevalence of child sexual abuse publically recognised and the perpetrators called to account. In the decade since then, this has been largely realised, culminating in 2013 in Australia by the establishment of a Royal Commission into the institutional abuse of children and in Britain by the exposure of the many years of paedophilia by celebrity Jimmy Saville. In addition to their testimonies in the courts and in the media, the memoirs of men and women who were abused as children can be seen to have played a part in this social change. As Ellerby
suggested, memoirists may “write not just for self-awareness but to confront the moral dilemmas of a dissonant culture” (2001 xx).

Thus the growth in life writing can alternatively be regarded as responding to a need for making connections with others, representative of an element of narcissism in individualist cultures, dealing with mortality in increasingly secular societies, raising consciousness of issues which need change, or a psychic journey offering a means for gaining insight.

In life writing that is now considered ‘first wave’, autobiography and memoir were the domains of men and for people of importance whose lives were considered worthy of recording. From the 17th to the early 20th centuries, life writing was generally regarded as a “master narrative of Western rationality, progress and superiority” reflecting the culture’s individualism and the concept of the “self-made man” (Smith and Watson, 2010 6). Women’s lives were not of sufficient import or interest; their stories of everyday lives, relationships and family concerns not considered to be in the same class as the autobiographies of public figures. Their life writing in this period was likely to be in the form of letters or journals. Margaretta Jolly (2001) wrote that “to have done something ‘great’, and to recount it with a sense of destiny—have disqualified many women life-writers from formal acceptance into the canon. The difficulty of attributing ‘meaning’ to a life that has appeared random, private, passive, and incoherent has been a major stumbling-block in the evolution of a women’s tradition of autobiography” (946).

A ‘second wave’ of life writing reflected the civil rights movement of the mid 20th century and was informed by Marxism, Freudian theory and linguistic analyses (Smith and Watson, 2010). A body of life writing referred to as transgressive narrative began to emerge. In these autobiographies and memoirs, people from groups who had been marginalised, including women, voiced their experiences and in so doing drew attention to inequalities of race, ethnicity, class, gender, age, sexual orientation and physical ability. Transgressive narratives set out to challenge stereotypes and to change cultures of belief about people who are ‘different’ from the dominant Western white male. As Sam Keene (1991) wrote, “We gain personal authority and find our unique sense of self only when we learn to distinguish between our own story—our autobiographical truths—and the official myths that have previously governed our minds, feelings and actions” (34).

Memoirs provide images of unique life paths, the struggles of people who have spent a lifetime clambering to be themselves in cultures that assign limited roles. In my career as a teacher of social work, I often used life writing instead of textbooks to bring the immediacy of peoples’ experience of marginalisation to the students. I found that students’ values and beliefs could be profoundly challenged by reading an autobiography of an Aboriginal person, a victim of child abuse, or a refugee. I set assessment tasks that required the reading and critical
examination of an autobiography chosen by the students from a list, involving examination of their thoughts and feelings, and awareness of their assumptions and beliefs on reading the work. Creativity and storytelling are parts of a culture that have the power to maintain myths or to change them.

Critics and theorists of women’s autobiography align it with transgressive narratives, arguing that only the privileged and powerful group in patriarchies, men, can claim the isolate individualism and self-consciousness that traditional autobiography was seen to require. The ‘second wave’ of life writing paralleled second wave feminism which introduced a context in which women’s life writing could be re-evaluated and appreciated for its distinctive qualities. From this emerged a genre of women’s memoir, which has proliferated over the last three decades. Previously scarcely visible and lowly valued, stories of ordinary women began to draw the whole spectrum of female experience into the public domain. Ellerby proposed that “memoir offers a threshold from which we step into the dynamic, complex experience of real women’s lives” (2001 xx).

Memoir was traditionally seen as a lesser genre within autobiography. This led Helen M. Buss (2002) to say that she “found in the memoir the perfect medium to embroider [her] own rebellious discourse. I liked that it was a marginal form…I felt marginalized myself, so the marginal nature of the discourse suited me” (xv). Susan Stanford Friedman (1988) wrote that for women and marginalised groups “alienation from the historically imposed image of the self is what motivates the writing, the creating of an alternate self in the autobiographical act. Writing the self shatters the cultural hall of mirrors and breaks the silence imposed by male speech” (41).

Women’s memoir has been seen as transgressive particularly when it brings into the public domain experiences of violence, sexual orientation and discrimination. To this could be added the insidious way in which older women have been rendered invisible in cultures that value women for their appearance and reproductive roles. Although women have had some success in becoming valued for their paid work, this recognition can disappear when they retire. Older women’s memoirs may have become a narrative way of elbowing our way into cultural existence—of refusing to be invisible, and refusing to be stereotyped. In Buss’s words, the “memoir is increasingly used to interrogate the private individual’s relationship to a history and/or a culture from which she finds her experience of herself and her life excluded” (2002 3).

Jill Ker Conway’s best-selling memoir, *The Road from Coorain* (1989) described growing up in Western NSW and escaping the emotional demands of a dependent widowed mother to pursue an academic career in the US. In her interview in Zinsser’s book, she said that one of her motivations in writing her story was that there were far fewer autobiographies by women than by men:
Traditionally there has only been one female autobiography for every eight written by a male. And the romantic plot has so dominated the way women write their narratives that, to the extent that these women’s books exist at all, they obscure how the woman chose to make her life (Ker Conway, 1998 46-47).

It interests me that Ker Conway saw women’s stories as dominated by the idea of romance and I recognise this in many best-selling memoirs—all ending as the woman finds her knight in shining armour and supposedly lives happily ever after (De Blasi, 2003; Duncan, 2006; Gilbert, 2007). In addition to, or as an alternative to romance, women’s stories also tend to focus on their roles as mothers or daughters (Blain, 2008; Johnson, 1999; Modjeska, 1990). Ker Conway wrote that she wanted to present a woman’s life outside of female archetypes which are inseparable from family and erotic life. She wanted to exemplify a “more inclusive feminism” (47). She was challenging a theme in life narratives of women that life ‘happens’ to them, that they rarely presented themselves as ‘agents’ of their lives. She wanted to highlight the choices that she had made. “Philosophically, you only have to perform one free act to be a free person. Granting all the ways in which we’re shaped by society, nevertheless one free choice changes the outcome” (45). My story is about two women who chose not to be wives or mothers, who did not rise to great heights in their careers, and who had a bond that was neither based on family ties nor romantic love.

What is considered to be a ‘third wave’ of life writing (Smith and Watson, 2010) has moved forward from transgressive narratives with their role in cultural change and the inclusion of marginalised groups, to a postmodern perspective which affirms the unavoidable subjectivity of each person’s memory and interpretation of his or her own life and the lives of others. Autobiographical criticism in this third wave has challenged gender and ethnic essentialism, focussing on ideas of identity and agency. Critics were interested in the extent to which life-writers are constrained by the culture in which they are writing—in both what they choose to tell, and how they remember and construct their experiences. Are they really able to “transgress” or is this an illusion?

In this third wave of life writing it was no longer considered possible to clearly distinguish between fact and fiction in life writing, or to believe in an essential ‘self’. Claire Marrone (2001) wrote that postmodern literature “questioned central concepts in life writing, namely the possibility of a unified self, the validity of memory and the notion of ‘truth’” (115). So Ellerby (2001) made no claims for writing ‘fact’ in her memoir, arguing that “all I can do is persevere in the journey of the examined life, acknowledging the interplay of blindness and insight as I strive for reflexivity, perhaps even wisdom—the most genuine subjectivity I can construct” (44). Judith Butler (1990) referred to this as a ‘performance of self’, and later Buss (2002) wrote that “the term ‘performance’, which implies both scripting and improvisation, as
well as the possibilities of variations in incremental performances over time, also suggested these senses of the self as ‘awareness in process’ and ‘energy’, rather than self as a fixed entity” (20). Leigh Gilmore (1994) coined the term “autobiographics” to represent those “shifting elements of identity and truth that writers draw upon in the act of self-representation.” The cover notes of her book *Autobiographics* (1994) go on to say that although women were unavoidably captives of their culture, their life writing provided a sphere in which they, as marginalised subjects, could “assert themselves as agents of language and experience”.

These ideas have assisted me in locating my own memoir within a ‘hybrid’ genre, a blend of biography and autobiography, fact and fiction. While I recorded Pat’s story as she told it to me, I have found no way of checking her facts. Indeed, I know that she loved to spin a yarn.

Furthermore, my family and friends would remember and account for our past in very different ways than mine. Memoirs offer images of a broad spectrum of unique life paths and can bring into the public domain the lives of people who have been marginalised as ‘other’. Both Pat and I resisted being cast in traditional roles of wife and mother, tried to carve out pathways of our own determining, with only glimpses of the extent to which our freedom was limited.

**Memoir criticism**

What do critics consider to be ‘good’ memoir? Zinsser (1998) proposed that a good memoir requires:

…two elements—one of art, the other of craft. The first element is integrity of intention….Memoir is how we try to make sense of who we are, who we once were, and what values and heritage shaped us. If a writer seriously embarks on that quest, readers will be nourished by the journey, bringing along many associations with quests of their own. The other element is carpentry. Good memoirs are a careful act of construction. Memoir writers must manufacture a text, imposing narrative order on a jumble of half-remembered events. With that feat of manipulation they arrive at a truth that is theirs alone, not quite like that of anybody else who was present at the same events (6).

In all the critical discussion of life writing and memoir it seems that so much is said about the craft and so little made of the art. Gornick (2001) and Zinsser (1998) saw the art coming from the integrity of the narrator, the genuineness of the writing. Goldberg (2005) suggested that “the great value of art [is] making the ordinary extraordinary” and in so doing “awaken[ing] ourselves to the life we are living” (266-267). Gilmore (1994) conceived of self-representation as a mix of artistic practice and political discourse, acknowledging that it is often only in retrospect that the political perspective comes into focus.

Linda Joy Myers (2011) compared memoir writing with Van Gogh’s art, writing that “his paintings are his memoirs, his take on that moment in time when he captured life as he saw
it and felt it through the medium of paint” (2). Life writers use words as their medium but as artists “it’s the specific brush stroke of each memory that creates an image in the mind of readers, stirring their own associations toward a similar feeling, or desire, or moment of aha…lifting the stories into a realm where others can be moved” (ibid). This reinforces the idea that it is the depth and honesty of the work, the quality of the perceptions, that make it ‘art’.

Opening her book on writing personal narrative, Gornick (2001) reflected on a eulogy at a funeral she had attended where a professional woman spoke of her relationship with the dead woman, a doctor who had been her mentor. Gornick found herself extraordinarily engaged by the speaker and tried to figure out why. She wrote that the speaker’s “open need to make sense of a strong but vexing relationship” aroused strong feelings in her about the “the warm, painful inadequacy of human relations” (4). Like the speaker at the funeral, I set out to narrate Pat’s story but found the story became about my relationship with her and further, about myself and my relationship with my career in social work. I struggled with how to bring this ‘alive’ for the reader. I turned to Gornick’s anecdote:

The better the speaker imagined herself, the more vividly she brought the dead doctor to life. …The story was not with the speaker or the doctor per se; it was what happened to each of them in the other’s company….Of the various selves at her disposal ….. she knew and didn’t forget that the only proper self to invoke was the one that had been apprenticed [to the older doctor]. That was the self in whom this story resided. A self—now here was a curiosity—that never lost interest in its own animated existence at the same time that it lived only to eulogize the dead doctor (5-6).

Gornick proposed that the task of the successful narrator is to have insight that organises the writing, to be someone the reader trusts “will take us on a journey, make the piece arrive, bring us out into a clearing where the sense of things is larger than it was before” (24). She referred to Rousseau, often seen as the first memoirist, describing his intent as going “in search of [my self] in your presence. I will set down on the page a tale of experience just as I think it occurred, and together we’ll see what it exemplifies, both of us discovering as I write this self I am in search of” (91). Similarly, Schultz was of the opinion that “grounding stories in lived experience is one of the best short cuts to good storytelling, and the frisson that comes from knowing that ‘this is a true story’ gives it extra urgency (2007 vii).

Taking this further, Janet Malcolm, a New York journalist and one of Sylvia Plath’s biographers, wrote that “imaginative literature is produced under the pressure of an inner interrogation….Poets and novelists and playwrights make themselves, against terrible resistances, give over what the rest of us keep safely locked within our hearts (1994 63). I certainly recognised in myself a resistance to the idea of personal exposure. Yet good memoirs, I read repeatedly, should recount a journey of growing self-awareness and honesty in examining
the past. Baker reflected on his first and unsuccessful attempt at memoir: “What I had written, though it was accurate to the extent that the reporting was there, was dishonest because of what I had left out. I had been unwilling to write honestly. And that dishonesty left a great hollow in the center of the original book” (1998 34).

It has been the experience of some writers that a distance of time is necessary before a good memoir can be written (Zinsser 1998). Frank McCourt did not write the best-selling memoir of his childhood, *Angela’s Ashes* (1994), until he was in his late sixties though it had been whirling around in his head for years. He said he could not have written it while his mother was still alive. Similarly, Ker Conway wrote “I think you have to be at least twenty years away from what you write about to have the necessary detachment” (1998 59). Both McCourt and Ker Conway commented that they would never have been able to publish their memoirs till their mothers died. It is possible that coming to write Pat’s story more than fifteen years after her death, and a couple of years since retiring from social work, I am only now sufficiently distanced to be able to develop Phillip Lopate’s “double perspective” (2005), a reflexive voice which includes the narrator’s past and current selves.

I began this project with an assumption that I knew little about the craft of creative writing or the genre of memoir. What draws me to read other memoirs is in some cases a sharing and validating of experience: of the gendered lives of women; of growing up in Australia in the 1950s and 1960s; of being part of a family. Zinsser (1998) wrote that readers like to draw comparisons in life stories with their own quests. In other cases reading a memoir provides me with a window into a life quite unlike my own, one that enables me to appreciate the richness and breadth of human experience.

As my decision emerged to write Pat’s story as a memoir rather than as a biography or biographical fiction, I recognised that I was familiar with some of the protocols of memoir writing from my forty years as a social worker and social work academic. Lee (2005) listed the range of areas which might inform biography: “history, politics, sociology, gossip, fiction, literary criticism, psychoanalysis, documentary, journalism, ethics and philosophy are all scrambled up inside the genre. But the target of all these approaches is a living person in a body, not a smoothed-over figure” (3). I became aware that my knowledge in the fields of counselling, ethnography, sociology, and social policy as well as the social work concern with ethics and morality would all be useful in the process of making sense of Pat’s and my stories, of being the “intelligent narrator”.

The psychological and counselling aspects of social work knowledge and skills meant that I was not unfamiliar with the personal exploration that writing a memoir would require. Katherine Whitelaw described a process that was familiar to me as a narrative counsellor, when she wrote that the tasks of biographical fiction are “gathering information; finding patterns;
weaving threads together; filling gaps with imaginative recreation; discovering multiple narrative possibilities” (2004 11). Yet it was a daunting idea: there were parts of my relationship with Pat that would be difficult for me to put on paper. Zinsser, having interviewed the memoir writer Eileen Simpson, recorded her view that “the knowledge, learned in her separate career as a psychotherapist, that the past is best confronted [was a] a good lesson for all memoir writers apprehensive about opening Pandora’s box” (Zinsser 18). However my motivation in writing this memoir was not personal development, or “bibliotherapy”. I was clear about the boundary between literature and psychotherapy. I would be the agent of this story, the artist and the artisan, on a quest with an unknown destination.

**Relationship memoirs**

Autobiography has traditionally been the story of the narrator, with relationships (with lovers, spouses, parents, friends, children and mentors) peripheral to the central character. Women’s life writing has been considered to be much more inclusive of the people around the narrator and has often been referred to as “relational”. Smith and Watson (2010) wrote that the “routing of a self known through its relational others undermines the understanding of life narrative as a bounded story of the unique, individuated narrating subject….no “I” speaks except as and through its others” (88). Nevertheless, despite the presence of others in life writing, there are few memoirs in which the relationship is the focus and in these the other person is almost always an intimate such as a parent (Gaita *Romulus My Father*, 1998; Modjeska *Poppy*, 1990), child (Deveson *Tell Me I’m Here*, 1991), or partner (Deveson *Resilience*, 2003); a famous or infamous person (Hill, *Mrs Kennedy and Me*, 2012); mentor (Albom *Tuesdays with Morrie*, 1997); or pet (Grogan *Marley and Me*, 2005). I have been able to locate few memoirs which describe a relationship between two ‘ordinary’ people who are not related or in which the narrator of someone else’s story becomes intrinsic to the story itself. Some examples of these are Janet Malcolm’s *The Silent Woman* (1994), Rachel Lichtenstein and Iain Sinclair’s *Rodinsky’s Room* (1999), James Hamilton-Patterson’s *Loving Monsters* (2001), and Jane Oehr’s film, *Tea with Madame Clos* (2010). In each of these the author sets out to write someone else’s story, an unrelated person who is initially a stranger. In the process of producing the biography they become, themselves, more and more implicated in the story.

I was able to locate only one example of life writing in which a social worker set out to recount stories told to her by an older woman. In *Rosa; the Life of an Italian Immigrant* (1970), Marie Hall Ets recorded the colourful stories told to her by Rosa, whom she met and befriended when she was a young social worker in the Chicago Commons Settlement House in 1918. Despite their differences in language, class and cultural traditions, not to mention more than
twenty years’ difference in age, Ets remained friendly with Rosa long after she left social work and the settlement house. She continued to write down Cassettari’s stories until 1931 (160). Barbara Cicarelli (2001) argued that “Rosa is significant in that it conveys the story of a woman whose experience was not previously found worthy of documentation” and that “Rosa must also be recognized as the story of the relationship between Marie Hall Ets and Rosa Cassettari, a story that contests the notion of the autonomous subject” (169). According to Cicarelli, Ets’ intention, as was mine originally, was to record Rosa’s stories. In the resulting book, not published until 1970, Ets appears only in an introductory chapter, describing how she met Rosa and came to hear her stories. Rosa is testament to how my story of Pat was originally intended, with myself simply as the recorder of her stories.

Point of view—the narrator

In his essay reflecting on his experience of teaching students of creative non-fiction, Lopate was puzzled by how his learner writers were reluctant to “…allow their current, mature reflections to percolate through accounts of past experiences (2005 143). With some embarrassment, I could see myself in Lopate’s students—clingling to a notion of the memoir writer as an innocent whose growth would be gradually revealed as the story proceeded. The writer as a “naïve artist”, an idea Lopate argued is impossible, was a description I had given of myself as a novice writer. Lopate was intrigued by his students’ inability to value their adult and mature reflections as being of any interest to a reader. These reflections, he proposed, are the essence of good memoirs. He advocated the necessity for a “double perspective …that will allow the reader to participate vicariously in the experience as it was lived ….while conveying the sophisticated wisdom of one’s current self” (2005 143).

Lopate went on to explore possible reasons for his students’ aversion to appearing as the “intelligent narrator” from the beginning of their story. Some of the possibilities he canvassed were: their attachment to a victim role; unwillingness to let go of their anger; a valuing of emotion over intellect; equating reflection and analysis with judgement; and a refusal “to believe, fundamentally, that anyone really wants to know what they think” (156). This mixture of avoidance of responsibility by remaining in the role of an angry victim, with a lack of self esteem in not believing that anyone would be interested in one’s reflections and interpretations, was painfully familiar to the position that I had reached early in writing the story of Pat as memoir. Injunctions about the techniques of writing such as ‘show, don’t tell’ and ‘let the story emerge gradually’ had also ensured that there was no chance of my appearing as an ‘intelligent narrator’. I returned to my drafts with renewed vigour, armed with Lopate’s advice to “come up with the deepest and most unexpected insights, without censoring. You must surprise yourself and when you do, it will make you elated and your prose elevated (156). However, being a
reflective narrator without seguing into a diagnostic and moralistic social work voice would be like walking a tightrope. One of the criticisms a reader made of my work was that at times I became “testimonial”, as if I was making a retirement speech. It was difficult for me to distinguish this voice from what I thought were my reflections.

Malcolm has written much about the treachery of those who write the lives of others (Amazon Editorial Review, accessed 20-9-10). Whether they are interviewers, journalists or biographers, she argued, they are in an extraordinary position of power and their interpretation of the truth of the person’s life is an extremely subjective one. In *The Silent Woman: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes*, she explored how ‘ownership’ of Plath’s life had been claimed and controlled by Ted and his sister on one hand, and various other friends, critics and biographers on the other. She acknowledged finding herself sympathetic to Ted’s perception of Sylvia and challenged the notion that the writer can remain impartial or accurately portray a person’s life. Malcolm appears as the protagonist in the biography, almost as Lopate suggests, as she struggles to ‘see’ Sylvia Plath through the eyes of so many of those who knew her. She ultimately feels that she has made the journey without reaching a point of ‘truth’ or objectivity.

Her process reminded me of Carlyle’s little ‘light gleams’ (Lee, 2005) and Varda’s collage approach (2000, 2010)—glimpses of a life which allow and give insight to the impression of a whole. From these perspectives, the reader has as much to do with deciding the reality of a life story as the author.

In writing this story, I was constantly challenged by the inner voice that told me that no-one would be interested in our experiences, and that, even if they were, I would not be able to write skilfully enough to make the story ‘a good read’. Would my professional and academic backgrounds ‘deaden’ the writing? Mary Louise Pratt, in her essay about writing ethnography (1986), noted how ethnographies, in leaving out the self and the process of developing self-awareness, often end up being very boring to read. “How, one asks constantly, could such interesting people doing such interesting things produce such dull books? What did they have to do to themselves?” (33). Memoir, on the other hand, offers a genre in which plot and story are important, demanding more than just a detailed description of what took place. The writer becomes an insider, their role as a protagonist is overt, they are not the disciplined observer of the ethnography. In opening the story, I was guided by Pratt’s description of the role of personal narrative in setting the scene for an ethnography: “opening narratives commonly recount the writer’s arrival at the field site, for instance, the initial reception by the inhabitants, the slow, agonizing process of learning the language and overcoming rejection, the anguish and loss at leaving” (Pratt, 1986 31). I set out to introduce the reader to Pat’s world, with all the astonishment that I encountered it.
Malcolm’s account of visiting the house of Trevor Thomas, reputedly the last person to see Sylvia Plath alive, was like the first encounter with a ‘field site’, as exotic as any unfamiliar culture:

… I was not prepared for what I saw when I entered the house: a depository of bizarre clutter and disorder. We entered a narrow passageway, made almost impassable by sagging cardboard cartons stacked to the ceiling….. Along the walls and on the floor and on every surface hundreds, perhaps thousands, of objects were piled, as if the place were a second-hand shop into which the contents of ten other second-hand shops had been hurriedly crammed, and over everything there was a film of dust: not ordinary transient dust, but dust that itself was overlaid with dust—dust that through the years had acquired almost a kind of objecthood, a sort of immanence (1994 202).

This image was evocative of a number of my home visiting experiences as a social worker—the kinds of stories that would be told at work again and again. My first visit to Pat’s house was one of these stories. This ‘ethnographic’ encounter, the setting up of the ‘field site’ would become the opening chapter of my story.

Many writers have noted that the challenge with memoir and autobiography is not to seek more material to fill in spaces and to verify what is already known but how to select from innumerable memories and anecdotes. Malcolm imagines her encounter with Thomas’s house as a metaphor for memoir writing:

Each person who sits down to write faces not a blank page but his own vastly overfilled mind. The problem is to clear out most of what is in it, to fill huge plastic garbage bags with the confused jumble of things that have accreted there over the days, months, years of being alive and taking things in through the eyes and ears and heart. The goal is to make a space where a few ideas and images and feelings may be so arranged that a reader will want to linger a while among them, rather than to flee, as I had wanted to flee from Thomas's house. But this task of housecleaning (of narrating) is not merely arduous; it is dangerous. There is the danger of throwing the wrong things out and keeping the wrong things in; there is the danger of throwing too much out and being left with too bare a house; there is the danger of throwing everything out (1994 204-205).

This state of having an “overfilled mind”, “a confused jumble of things” was familiar to me as I began this project. I needed to make decisions: where to start; what to include; how to use the stories to develop a plot? I looked again at Varda’s memoir films The Gleaners and I (2000), and The Beaches of Agnes (2010), hoping for inspiration. Instead of a methodical narration in chronological order, could I attempt a collage, a pastiche to better represent what Malcolm referred to as “the disorderly actuality that is a life” (1994 205)? I recognised that the creative
exercise, the artistic pursuit, would require a soaring of imagination, or, in the words of one of my readers “there’s a transcendent version of this hovering above the page”!

Ultimately, the main challenge for me was to avoid being constrained and inhibited by the advice, rules and declarations about memoir and life writing and to free myself sufficiently from my critical self to get first drafts onto paper. Even the 2009 Man Booker prize-winner, Hilary Mantel, when beginning her memoir noted the difficulty of writing about oneself: “I hardly know how to write about myself. Any style you pick seems to unpick itself before a paragraph is done. I will just go for it, I think to myself, I’ll hold out my hands and say, c’est moi, get used to it” (2003 4).

Voice
Danielewicz (2012) wrote that “[v]oice signifies presence” and “[a]gency is enabled by voice in the text” (277). Like a singer, a writer has a unique “tone, an emotional involvement, an attitude, a quality of …being in their voice which appeals” to the reader (Miller, 2001 90). In life writing the narrator builds a relationship with the reader through seeming to talk to them with a voice “distinctive in its emphasis and tone, its rhythms and syntax, its lexicon and affect” (Smith and Watson, 2010 79). Danielewicz (2012) argued that “more than any other feature, voice is the one rhetorical choice that determines how an autobiography will be read” (272). However, as Smith and Watson suggested, the “narrating ‘I’ is neither unified nor stable”, and they use Bakhtin’s term “heteroglossia” for the “multiple voices through which the narrator speaks in the text” (74). As the narrator of this story I have spoken from different points in my history (child, young adult, older woman) as well as from different relational positions (social worker, friend, child, partner), all of these voices mediated through memory and cultural conditioning.

Danielewicz (2012) examined two memoirists who wrote in “double voices”. James McBride in The Color of Water (1996) and John Edgar Wideman in Brothers and Keepers (1984) chose to represent the other in their story (McBride’s mother and Wideman’s brother) by relating their stories from the first person creating a second voice. Although I have not done this in my story, it has been important to me that Pat’s voice should come through strongly. McBride reconstructed his mother’s voice “out of their kitchen-table conversations” (Danielewicz, 2012 273). Although Pat’s and my conversations were more often in the pub, I also used this dialogue to tell our relationship ‘slant’ and to use Pat’s distinctive idioms to convey her uniqueness. In our story too, our contrasting voices “mimic [our] different life circumstances (Danielewicz, 2012 273). In two parts of the narrative I did go directly to Pat’s voice, although I wrote in the third rather than first person—in the story of being put in the
orphanage Chapter Five and of the heady days of prostitution when the US forces were in
Sydney in World War II in Chapter Seven.

Carolyn G. Heilbrun (1989) discussed the role of anger in women’s autobiography
arguing that women’s anger is prohibited socially and this prohibition extends to their
autobiographies. Jane Marcus asserted that “anger and righteous indignation are the two
emotions that provoke the most hostility from the powerful when expressed by the powerless”
(1988 122). Lopate (2005) and Zinsser (1998), both white middle class men, labelled anger in
life writing as whinging or taking the stance of a victim, either of which, they argued, alienate
the reader. That they single out anger as an emotion that is off-putting to the reader, that of all
possible voices anger is considered taboo, seems to support the argument that those from
dominant groups have a range of ways to silence any challenge to their power, to dictate what is
acceptable. In memoirs written by people from marginalised or oppressed groups, a contesting
of their subordination would seem to be a necessary part, and it is difficult to genuinely contest
without anger.

Julia Lesage (1988) wrote that "women's anger is pervasive, as pervasive as our
oppression, but it frequently lurks underground. If we added up all of woman's depression; all
her compulsive smiling, ego-tending, and sacrifice; all her psychosomatic illness, and all her
passivity, we could gauge our rage's unarticulated, negative force” (420). If this voice is
excluded or diluted in women’s stories then sexism in our culture goes unchallenged and there
is a shadow of inauthenticity about the writing. Lesage went on to argue that “angry contestation
may take us the extra step needed to overcome our own colonized behaviour” and that this
contestation “cannot be conducted in the mode of nice girls, of managing the egos of and
patiently teaching those who oppress” (427). Rephrasing Frantz Fanon from his essay
Concerning Violence (1963) she proposed that for individuals, anger can be a cleansing force
freeing a woman from “her inferiority complex and from despair and inaction; it makes her
fearless and restores her self-respect” (Lesage, 1988 427). Virginia Woolf famously suggested
that the only option for women writers was to “kill the angel”, that internalised colonising voice
that sits in your mind and wants only the nice and socially acceptable woman to emerge on the
page (1931).

Heilbrun (1989) suggested “if one is not permitted to express anger or even to recognize
it within oneself, one is, by simple extension, refused both power and control” (15). Jean Baker
Miller (1975) pointed out that people from subordinate groups in society resort to “disguised
and indirect ways of acting and reacting. While these actions are designed to accommodate and
please the dominant group, they often, in fact contain hidden defiance and ‘put ons’ (10). Pat
and I were women of two different generations but both thoroughly socialised into the role of
meeting the needs of men, of being angels in the house. We were well trained in feminine wiles,
in focussing on serving others, biting back any sense of injustice we may have felt. Designed to be angels, we both, in our own ways, struggled with this life sentence, scarcely aware of it, but doing the best we could to carve out some kind of rebellious existence.

During the time I knew Pat and through most of the time I have been writing our story I have been adept at silencing my angry voice. I set out to write the amusing and interesting story of Pat’s life, of her resilience and pride. As the story explored more and more parallels between her story and mine, I could not avoid being aware of the social conventions that limited our options, of the angry defiance beneath the surface of our niceness, and the determination underlying the intention to write the story: to resist being nobodies, to kill the angel. At the same time it has been a very uncomfortable experience for me to reflect on just how timid I was in my rebellion and how difficult I found it to accept Pat’s sexuality—I am inclined towards judgment of myself. I turn to Didion’s words, “I think we are well advised to keep on nodding terms with the people we used to be, whether we find them attractive company or not” (139).

Identity and agency

Autobiography has been described as an expression of identity or “performance of self” (Butler, 1990). However there is much debate in the critical literature over the degree to which the individual has agency or control over their identity or whether it has been so shaped by and filtered through culture that “the idea that we have chosen our pathway [is] an illusion” (Eakin, 2008 88). Woolf (1931) referred to this as the phantom, a controlling force we cannot see and cannot quite fathom.

Psychology has long debated whether nature or nurture has determined personality. In my opinion identity is formed by a complex mix of the two, unique in each individual: nature and nurture, agency and cultural conditioning. In writing about self, Patricia Foster (2005) suggested creating “a melody of your contradictions” (172)—accepting and celebrating the interplay of agency and conditioning. Smith and Watson (2010) referring to the work of Ortner, argued that it is “the individual’s wit and intelligence that influence his or her potential for pressuring the rules of the games” (57).

In the 1980s, during the time I knew Pat, I was introduced to a new approach to counselling being developed by a South Australian social worker and family therapist, Michael White, and a New Zealand social scientist who was embracing postmodernism, David Epston. These two men were part of an international group who created a narrative approach to counselling, who talked about engaging people in deconstructing their life stories, uncovering alternative stories, and restorying their lives. For them the task of the counsellor and the client in constructing a story was to ‘exoticise the domestic’, to stand outside the norms and beliefs of everyday life, to ‘interrogate’ their stories and in so doing to reconstruct meaning. Their idea of
a life story as fluid and changeable, perceived differently from alternative standpoints, as a
journey that can be framed by strengths rather than problems, is something that resonates with
writing memoir.

In narrative work the counsellor gathers information, finds patterns, makes connections
and works with the client to discover multiple narrative possibilities. In doing this, the
counsellor and client work together to imaginatively recreate a life story. Smith and Watson
(2010) wrote that “Getting a life means getting a narrative, and vice versa” (102). My
familiarity with the narrative approach to counselling freed me from the confines of a discourse
within which arguments about ‘truth’ and ‘accuracy’ prevailed. Malcolm proposed that “the
pose of fairmindedness, the charade of evenhandedness, the striking of an attitude of
detachment can never be more than rhetorical ruses: if they were genuine, if the writer actually
didn’t care one way or the other how things came out, he would not bestir himself to represent
them” (1994 176). The storyteller gains agency—I could do no more than tell the story from my
point of view, with self-honesty and respect for the participants, making no claims for ‘truth’.

The historical moment—Autobiographical context

Autobiographies can be mapped in terms of time and place. Several aspects of Pat’s story
required historical research to add authenticity to my writing. These concerned her childhood in
the St Joseph’s Orphanage for Girls at Goulburn; pub culture in Sydney in the 1930s and 40s;
the presence of US servicemen in Sydney during WWII; the enactment of prostitution laws from
the 1930s to the mid-1950s; and the implementation of the NSW Inebriates Act (1911) through
the criminal justice and mental health authorities during this time.

Since Pat’s death, the consequences of abusive practices common in many of the
religious orphanages and children’s homes up to the 1970s have been brought to public attention
and were the subject of a Senate enquiry and report in 2003-4 (Senate, 2004). CLAN (Care
Leavers Australia Network) was established in 2000 by Joanna Penglase and Leonie Sheedy
who had both been brought up in care. In a PhD research study, Penglase interviewed 90
Australians about their experiences of growing up institutional care (published in 2005 as
Orphans of the Living–Growing Up in ‘Care’ in Twentieth-century Australia). In a strange
coincidence, Penglase was the script writer for the television series When We Were at War for
which Pat was interviewed in 1990. As a result of lobbying by CLAN, the Prime Minister and
Leader of the Opposition, then Kevin Rudd and Malcolm Turnbull, delivered a public apology
to “the forgotten Australians and child migrants” at Parliament House on 16 November, 2009. I
wonder what Pat would have made of this. I know that she would have received the apology as
a personal tribute. She probably would have cut the piece out of the paper for me and might
have chuckled about Kevin and Malcolm and how she would have flirted with them given half the chance. But would she also have begun to think about her childhood in a different way? Pat’s life certainly followed a typical trajectory for girls leaving care in the 1930s—the move to the city; temporary accommodation with a series of relatives; low paid work in laundries or clothing factories; susceptibility to the attentions of older men offering gifts and affection in return for sex; the common deterioration of those relationships into violence; and the enticement of better paid and more glamorous work in prostitution (Rolph, 1955; Perkins, 1991; 1994). Yet it has been important for me not to lose sight of Pat’s narration of her story as an adventure, without the slightest intimation of self-pity.

To establish the pub context of the 1930s and 40s, I was assisted by the book *Caddie, A Sydney Barmaid: An Autobiography* published anonymously in 1953 and later made into an award-winning Australian film. The Hotel Sydney, which was Pat’s drinking location, has long gone but its façade is still part of the building on the corner of Pitt and Hay streets and there are photos of the old hotel that I was able to copy from the State Library file. Photos of the Hasty Tasty, one of the first and best-known American-style takeaways in Darlinghurst Road, are also on file. Other locations, such as the art-deco building in Orwell Street, Potts Point that housed the Roosevelt Club are still there and I took myself to dinner in the posh restaurant that occupied the building, an experience marred when the maître de tried to overcharge me. It has recently changed hands again and is an upmarket cocktail bar called “The Roosevelt”.

I was able to locate the St Joseph’s Girls’ orphanage in Goulburn, now eerily deserted, and found that it is just next door to the Kenmore Hospital where Pat was sentenced for a year in 1953 for alcohol offences. In 1922, about the year Pat and her sisters went to St Joseph’s, a nurse was murdered next door at Kenmore by a deranged ex-patient who was looking to kill the medical superintendent. There is a memorial to the nurse in the orphanage chapel although she was never a resident of the home. I wondered if the girls in the orphanage told this story to scare each other, and how this might have affected the five-year-old Pat when she arrived there.

I began my training as a social worker in child welfare at a time when the old orphanages were being closed and the new policy of small group homes was being established for children in care. During my social work degree at the beginning of the 1970s, grief and loss theory was just making its way into the curriculum. Without research demonstrating the impact of grief and loss on people, there had been fewer opportunities to challenge the authority of separating children from parents “for their own good”. Similarly, attachment theory was just becoming mainstream, and the importance of babies and children being cuddled and hugged by caregivers had been irrevocably supported by observational research with monkeys and humans. There was nothing in our curriculum at the beginning of the 1970s about family or sexual violence, and it was only in the 1990s and after Pat’s death that I would complete a PhD.
researching the service needs of women who had been sexually assaulted in childhood. This would give me a different perspective on Pat’s experience and one I would have liked to discuss with her. Yet to be true to Pat’s story I needed to hold fast to her refusal to see herself as a victim and to honour her often-stated credo that she had “no regrets”.

Sydney, with other cities in Australia, hosted hundreds of thousands of US troops from December, 1941 when the Japanese invaded the Philippines and General Douglas MacArthur retreated to set up US headquarters in Australia. Although the troops were gone by 1944, their impact on the culture of the cities generally, and some of the women in particular, was considerable (Frances, 2007; Lake, 1992; Sturma, 1989). The Sydney experience was the subject of Dymphna Cusack and Florence James’ novel *Come in Spinner* (1951) and Xavier Herbert’s *Soldiers’ Women* (1961). The historical aspects of Pat’s story are seductively interesting and it has been tempting to spend a lot of time searching on-line newspaper archives and other historical sources for confirmation of some of her anecdotes. However, this is where memoir and biography diverge and where my task as a creative writer is different from that of a biographer. I needed enough information to set the scene and to establish authenticity but not so much that facts bogged the story down.

Immersing myself in the transcripts of Pat’s story and in historical and literary accounts of life in Sydney during the 1930s and 40s, I recognised the difficulty of representing her experience. In 1930 I had not yet been born and could only imagine life in that time through others’ accounts. I did not know her in her younger years and had no access to people who did. I had her stories but no photographs of her earlier life. Whitelaw (2004) examined the genre of biographical fiction in trying to piece together a story of her great aunt. Like Whitelaw, I was often unable to verify Pat’s stories. Whitelaw recalled that “the fragmentary nature of the material I had collected, the splintered stories and jagged memories demanded an approach that would allow me to arrange my notes in a comprehensive narrative, at the same time as acknowledging the narrative’s intrinsic unreliability and instability” (9).

For example I could find no evidence in newspaper archives that a woman called Enid had jumped from the harbour bridge in 1932 and was saved by the ballooning of her taffeta skirt, yet such an event would surely have been recorded. Nor were there any accounts of an elderly woman’s death in Tempe (Pat’s grandmother), thought initially to be due to a lightning strike but later discovered to be as a result of a hit and run collision with a police motor-cyclist who was charged and gaoled for the offence. Surely this would have made the papers! I was confident of finding a report of the racing death of her jockey customer, Jack Pratt—a loss that Pat had mentioned many times. Yet no such record could be found. Whitelaw’s response to this dilemma was to write her story as biographical fiction. Other writers such as Malcolm accept that there are few concrete realities where peoples’ lives are concerned.
In September 2010 the museum at the Kenmore Hospital was open for history week and I joined a tour of its facilities, now empty and recently sold. The wards sit there large and abandoned. The guide reels off their old titles: ‘Violent and Noisy’; ‘Quiet and Industrious’; ‘Medical’; ‘Convalescent’; ‘Epileptic’. She tells us that at the peak of overcrowding, in the 1970s, there were 1400 patients at Kenmore, in a hospital built to house 800. Those admitted under the Inebriates Act, like Pat, were used to staff the gardens, kitchens, farms, workshops and domestic services. The gardens were a particular showpiece: large orchards, fields of daffodils and extensive rose gardens. Much of this has been cleared—it is the land that now has to be kept under control.

Everything about the site smacks of the thinly-veiled brutality of institutional life. During WW2 the hospital was taken over by the army as a military hospital. One of the wards was used for ‘enemy aliens’, Japanese prisoners of war, who had to be protected from the Australian soldiers who would have torn them apart if they could have got their hands on them. The old morgue and autopsy room reminds me that this was all too often a place of death, the end of the road for the people who came here. The old ‘Violent and Noisy’ ward has a ‘wet end’—a concrete area with large rooms where patients were hosed down. I remember Pat’s stories and her hatred of the cruelty of the nurses. As I drive away from the hospital, I am overwhelmed with a sense of bleakness.

I had worked in psychiatric institutions in the 1970s and had some understanding of how the mental health system worked to give context to Pat’s years of incarceration in Bloomfield and Kenmore Hospitals in the 1950s. I both respected and was at times appalled by the attitudes of the older psychiatric nurses I worked with at that time, nurses who had trained and ‘served their time’ in the 50s and 60s in the big old state institutions, and who had many stories to tell to shock a green young social worker.

Even now, I cannot account for the fact that in-patient services for people with mental illness are as insensitive and brutal as they are. There is no distinguishing between the person who is deeply depressed because of a terrible tragedy—a broken marriage, loss of a child, bankruptcy, or being the witness to a traumatic event—and the person who is admitted in a florid psychotic state, screaming blue murder, seeing demons or Martians coming to destroy them, ripping off their clothes and clawing at the faces of the staff. How terrifying a full-blown psychosis must be to the person who is merely depressed! There they are, sad and grieving and wondering if life is worth living, and they are sharing a ward with people behaving in a way they have never experienced before, talking about knives and poison and people coming to get them. Who can imagine what impact this has on the person admitted with an anxiety disorder?

My knowledge of sociology, particularly in relation to class and gender, and of social policy history in NSW, gave me a reference point, anchoring Pat’s and my stories in their time.
and place. Anne Summer’s Damned Whores and God’s Police (1975) was a powerful starting point, positioning Pat and me in relation to each other. This book, a feminist classic of the 1970s, argued that Australian women had been ‘colonised’ by men and trapped in one of two roles. The first role, emerging from the transportation of women to provide sexual partners for the male convicts and soldiers, is that of whore, damned to be subordinate, socially and interpersonally. In reaction to this, the second role is the respectable wife and mother, or the social reformer, the social worker, who became the moral police, God’s police, to restore order to the colony. Summers’ thesis in 1975 was that Australian women have not been able to escape the constraints of these roles and are still classified as one or the other. In the second edition in 1994, Summers wrote “the stereotypes are still there, submerged in the national consciousness, [but] they are not as coercive as they once were” (51). I mused over whether Pat’s and my friendship was defined by this duality or whether it ultimately triumphed over the stereotypes, and we emerged as two women with much in common as well as much that was different. Whatever our differences, I began to see how both our lives had been shaped and constrained by forces beyond our control. As Summers argued, “women in Australia are forced to eke out a precarious psychic and physical existence within a society which has denied them cultural potency and economic independence and hence has prevented women from being able to construct their own identities or from having more than a very restricted choice about what they can do with their lives” (20).

Indeed, I went through a stage of seeing both Pat and me as victims of a sexist society, a world view that a reading of Summers encouraged. Not only did this not fit with Pat’s judgement of her own life, relayed confidently in 1991 to the television interviewer as ‘pride’, but writers about memoir advised that such an approach would not engage readers: “there’s no self pity, no whining, no hunger for revenge…… We are not victims” (Zinsser, 1998 5). To write about Pat honestly, I needed to avoid making her a victim, although much of the literature on prostitution and on feminism encouraged me to construct her as one. Naomi Wolf (1998) wrote of the urge to stereotype women into “false dualisms of good and evil, villains and saints” (2). Pat challenged my stereotypes of her, and her story must reflect this.

Nevertheless I began to think about the ways in which social work and prostitution are similar, in which they both represent in some way the Victorian archetype of the angel in the house. Miller (1975), in her examination of women as a subordinate group in society, noted that subordinates are often assigned less valued tasks “often involving bodily needs or comfort” (22): cleaning, washing, nursing, feeding and the provision of sex for pleasure; as well as a focus on the needs of the more powerful group. Social work (cleaning up society, caring for others) and prostitution (catering for men’s sexual appetites) can both be seen as representations
of the angel although outside of her traditional sphere of home and family. To some extent Pat and I had both been colonised and socialised into subordinate female roles.

Both social work and prostitution can be seen as emotional labour as defined by Arlie Russell Hochschild (1983) who, in her research on flight attendants examined the commodification of emotion in certain kinds of work, often women’s work. Women’s emotional labour requires us to focus on the clients’ needs using empathy and listening skills. Both social workers and prostitutes call themselves ‘professionals’ and the subjects of their attentions are called ‘clients’. Our work is typically, but not always, women’s work—“serving others,” wrote Miller “is a basic principle around which women’s lives are organized” (1975 60).

To continue to do these kinds of work successfully boundaries are important—boundaries between one’s personal and one’s working lives. At the end of their working day (or night), prostitutes and social workers have to be able to put aside their work with all kinds of troubled people and go home to their partners and families. Becoming over-involved, or losing control of one’s working conditions, may lead both a prostitute and a social worker to a condition we both refer to as ‘burnout’. As Wendy Chapkis (1997) noted, a lot of the negatives about prostitution relate to the conditions of the employment rather than the work itself. She wrote that “[w]hen control over the conditions of labour pass from worker to employer, workers in all trades are subject to speed ups, increased duties (with no necessary increase in pay), and supervision intended to reinforce their position as ever compliant servants” resulting in feeling “over-used, underappreciated, and susceptible to damage” (81). As one of the prostitutes in Roberta Perkins’ (1991) study said: “The only thing I dislike at the moment is management; that’s the only distasteful part of my present working conditions. Everything else about my work I really enjoy. I feel really excited about going to work apart from the occasional conflicts with management” (14). Many social workers would identify with this statement.

Although we had both been subjected to intensive training as angels, both Pat and I attempted to defy our conditioning, to carve out lives that felt like they were of our own choosing, to reject conventions of marriage and family. A feminist analysis renders our efforts only partially successful, yet Pat felt great pride in her life and I feel happy enough with mine, with still more time for creative development.

**Reading prostitution**

In preparing this exegesis I reviewed literature about prostitution from three perspectives: I read twelve first-hand accounts by prostitutes—prostitute memoirs, autobiographies, letters or interviews (Wilson, 1825; Letter, 1858; Adler, 1954; Cousins, 1954; Millett, 1971; Cordelier, 1978; Van Raay, 2004, 2008; Holden, 2005; De Jour, 2005; Lou, 2006; Annandale, 2008); I examined two reviews which analysed how prostitutes have been represented in literature.
(Seymour-Smith, 1969; Horn and Pringle, 1984); and I sought analyses of the feminist sex wars, to inform a theoretical appraisal of writings by and about prostitutes (Millett, 1971; Perkins, 1991; Chapkis, 1997; Nagle, 1997; O’Neill, 2001).

A literature search located a number of books, letters, interviews and essays representing themselves as first hand accounts of their lives by prostitutes (Wilson, 1825; Letter, 1858; Adler, 1954; Cousins, 1954; Millett, 1971; Cordelier, 1978; Van Raay, 2004, 2008; Holden, 2005; De Jour, 2005; Lou, 2006; Annandale, 2008). There were some differences in experiences prior to 1980 when AIDs, the widespread use of intravenous drugs and international trafficking of women altered the social context for prostitutes. However, all accounts reflected the research finding that the primary reason for women taking up prostitution has always been economic.

One of my early reactions was suspicion—the stories were well written despite the women’s descriptions of their childhoods of poverty and disrupted education. Yet if they were fiction, they indicated an intimate knowledge of the day-to-day existence of a prostitute that could not be achieved without experience. I was forced to confront the fact that I was still harbouring an assumption that prostitutes were inferior, uneducated, and incapable of being writers in a literary sense. These judgments had been challenged in my relationship with Pat, but continued to lurk about in my beliefs. Clive James noted a similar tendency in his weekly column for the BBC magazine. Discussing the outing of the identity of Belle de Jour, author of the blog *Diary of a London Callgirl*, James (2009) wrote that journalists had been speculating that Belle de Jour might be a male journalist “because of her unusual literary skills” (1). As it turned out, Belle was Dr Brooke Magnanti, a graduate of informatics, forensic science and epidemiology.

Kate Millett’s *Prostitution Papers* (1971) was an attempt to position prostitution in relation to feminism and included two transcripts of interviews with prostitutes. Millett described an initial conference about prostitution in New York in 1970 at which prostitutes came to blows with feminists. The prostitutes saw the feminists as casting them in the role of victims. Millett’s preconceptions were challenged by the prostitutes’ stories. She wrote in her introduction:

Everything I’ve read on prostitution, even the way it is discussed, pisses me off: the statistical approach of sociological texts, the cheerful rationalizations of popular accounts, the romanticized versions of literature. One is slowly forced to realize that for centuries a tremendous moral and sociological confusion has surrounded the entire issue, a phenomenon one can account for only by considering the monumental sexual repression within our culture, and its steady inability, after having created both the prostitute and her plight, to recognize her as human in any meaningful sense at all (xx).
Millett argued that the repression of sex in our culture has produced confused attitudes towards prostitution and difficulty in allowing the possibility of a sexually expressive person for whom ‘the life’ is an attractive option for earning a living, preferable to being exploited in a boring, badly paid job or the enslavement of marriage. Certainly, in my story, my own confusion and conditioning in a sexually repressed culture was the foundation of my misreading of Pat’s fall.

In reading these narratives, I found myself becoming impatient whenever the writer depicted herself as a victim. Even though the women defended their decision to work as prostitutes, the ‘pride’ and embracing of the life that Pat expressed was missing. Wolf (1998) would perhaps see the stories of these women as constrained by the culture that would prefer to see them as victims or confused, rather than as sexual marauders. Recently there have been indications of a gradual change in attitudes to allow for the possibility of prostitution as an acceptable choice for some women. A British television documentary series (Jesper and Mofidi, 2010) was based on the theme that prostitution has become a more common career path for young women seeking to finance their education or lifestyle. Prostitution in this context is usually referred to as “high end” or “high class” and prostitutes renamed “hookers” or “escorts”. The program was hosted by Alex Bedford, a young woman taking an “investigative” approach to the industry, presenting the positive outcomes for the women involved. It contrasted with programs which focus on prostitution as oppression, in particular the international trafficking of women for sex and the exploitation of children. Another British documentary The WI Guide to Brothels (Simpson, 2008) recounted the work of three older women from the conservative Women’s Institute who took up the cause to make prostitution safer for women, travelling to Amsterdam, Las Vegas and New Zealand to examine three different local government approaches to legalised prostitution and presenting prostitution in a positive light. However, in reading the first-hand accounts of prostitutes or watching the documentaries, I could not stop myself oozing anger and disapproval, just as I had with Pat, whenever the women subordinated their own needs to those of men, or continued to be loyal to men who mistreated them—a theme common to all their accounts, whether the man was their pimp or their lover or both.

In addition to reading first hand accounts, I also consulted a sociological study conducted by a social worker, Rosalind Wilkinson, in London in 1955. I was first alerted to this study in Martin Seymour-Smith’s Fallen Women: A Sceptical Enquiry into the Treatment of Prostitutes, Their Clients and Their Pimps in Literature (1969). When I set out to locate the original report of the study I found an interesting thing had happened. Rosalind Wilkinson’s name had been completely removed from the publication, which is edited and authored by the male president of the organisation who requisitioned the research (Rolph, 1955). C. H. Rolph’s introduction apologised for the poor quality of the research and belittled the researcher, referring to her “feminine subjectiveness” and “deviations from the lines originally contemplated” (xiii).
He wrote that the study fell “far short of what was planned” in that only 69 rather than 100 women were included as subjects. Yet 69 seemed a very creditable number to me, given the difficulty that the researcher described in persuading any of the women to be part of her study. I got the impression that Rosalind Wilkinson had not pleased the organisation by becoming much more accepting of, and respectful towards, the prostitutes than the British Social Biology Council thought morally appropriate.

I admit that I identified with Rosalind Wilkinson and was angry on her behalf. When the results of my own PhD research—an examination of the inadequacy of support services for women who had been sexually abused in childhood—were complete, the sponsoring body, the NSW Health Department, refused to allow them to be published claiming that the research was of poor quality. An insider told me that my document ended up in a room full of research studies the findings of which had never been published or used to change service delivery. The department could be seen to be “looking into things” by requisitioning research but never actually doing anything. Such was my low level of confidence at the time, I believed that I had been an incompetent researcher, but, to the department’s outrage, I printed summarised versions of the findings and distributed them to all the individuals and agencies who had supported the study. I thought I owed them that.

I cannot avoid the fact that there are themes in the first-hand accounts and the secondary data that mirror Pat’s experience: interrupted childhoods; being brought up in institutions; betrayals by their carers including mothers; attachments to men who did not treat them well; corrupt networks of police and the alcohol and gaming industry; and health issues, particularly the risk of sexually transmitted diseases and access to safe abortions. In most accounts, women wrote of mothers who died while they were young or who were more caught up with partying and men than with their children. The girls either grew up in chaotic households where they were often introduced to sex early, or grew up in a relative’s home or an institution. As children they experienced little warmth or protection.

Pat’s mother left the family when the three girls were little, and, after they had lived a short time with an aunt, their father put them in a Catholic orphanage in Goulburn. Pat may have survived the orphanage better than some, because her two older sisters were there with her and her parents did visit. However, she spoke of being hungry all of the time, of the harsh punishment meted out by the nuns and of being molested by a priest when she brought him his meals. Pat told me her father was killed in a railway accident when she was nine. She believed that her mother attempted to get the three girls out of the orphanage when she had set herself up in Sydney, but they were not allowed to leave until they were fifteen. Pat remembered that her mother had rescued her older sister Nellie from a domestic position she had been placed in by the orphanage in which she was possibly sexually abused. When she was fifteen, Pat went to her
grandmother and various aunts in Sydney, working in a laundry and a clothing factory. But she
admired her mother, who worked in the high class Empress Room of the Wentworth Hotel. That
glamorous life, rather than low paid drudgery, was something that Pat was drawn to.

The prostitutes’ stories I read dwelt heavily on their attachments to men who shared in
the proceeds of the prostitution. The men all seemed to be spivvy dressers with a liking for
expensive cars, drinking and gambling. They were proud of their women but possessive of
them; the women were, after all, their means to a comfortable life. They were as dependent as
the women on prostitution to maintain their lifestyles. The men tended to make themselves
scarce when they were most needed by the women: for protection from violent customers or for
help when they were ill. Their loyalty was only to themselves. Yet when this was demonstrated
over and over again, the women stuck with them. Influential men—big gamblers or those in the
force—sometimes helped with the women’s fines. When their pimps were charged, the women
went to great lengths to pay their fines and to comfort them (with new cars or clothes) on their
release. In arguing that women’s lives in literature have been, more often than not, written from
a traditional or patriarchal perspective, Heilbrun asked: “what does it mean to be unambiguously
a woman? It means to put a man at the center of one’s life and to allow to occur only what
honors his prime position…one’s own desires and quests are always secondary” (20).

This offered me a new perspective on Pat’s early relationship with Keith, who picked
her up in his “flash” car on George Street when she was about sixteen, plying the streets and
trying to keep one step ahead of the vice squad. From Pat’s account, Keith, who was in his
thirties at the time, loved cars and clothes, ran a restaurant bar, and hung out with a crowd of
men who drank and gambled. He would give Pat expensive gifts—clothes and perfume—and
then beat her up when he was drunk. He appeared to both condone Pat’s prostitution and
become violently jealous and possessive, just as many of the writers described.

Most of the prostitute narratives recounted the trials and tribulations of avoiding the
notice of the police or the vice squad. The prostitutes were continually being moved on and the
places they frequented were regularly raided. The stories took place in Britain, France and
Australia, yet the experiences and the legal environments were similar. The women watched out
for each other: warning of a raid, sitting in the cells together, getting messages to their pimps to
come and bail them out. The closeness of the women, their friendships, the “sisterhood” was
described but was almost always secondary to their loyalty to their men.

Health issues—sexually transmitted diseases and abortions—were included in all of the
narratives. Authors of the earlier works (Adler, 1954; Cousins, 1954; Millett, 1971; Cordelier,
1978) had friends or knew of women who died of botched abortions. Indeed, the number of
abortions each woman experienced was confronting—given that the procedure was expensive,
illegal, often rough, and barely competent. The abortionists treated their patients like scum and
the women often helped each other out to make up the exorbitant fees. They supported each other in locating places to go and in getting each other to hospital when things went wrong. Sometimes their men came good with the money, but that was usually the only role they played.

The stories described other players. There always seemed to be taxi drivers (Pat’s Eddie), who drove the women to and from jobs, watched out for them, and often took their cut with sexual favours. The women cultivated their regular drivers, and saw them in the role of protectors. The women who have written prostitution memoirs usually spent most of their career working independently but they often had stints, especially in their early days, of working for madams who they usually portrayed as hard women, who had been prostitutes themselves, and had worked their way up to managing their own businesses. The madams’ priorities were control and income, and they were often feared and hated by their ‘girls’. However in some accounts (Adler, 1954; Annandale, 2008), the prostitute becomes a madam and by her own account she is always a caring and concerned manager who is protective and supportive of her staff. Finally there are the hotels and rooming houses where the women took the men, in the older accounts, always at considerable risk of being arrested. In recent documentaries about high class hookers the venues are shown as five star hotels and luxury apartments. This contrasts to the dingy rooms in the cheap hotels of the books, where staff were willing to turn a blind eye, and the best that the prostitute could hope for was a sink with hot and cold water.

Although the prostitutes’ memoirs I read resonated with Pat’s story in many ways, there were some significant differences. Many of the women had left prostitution behind and regarded those years with a degree of regret and shame. They certainly did not remember it as the highest point of their life as Pat did. And they were not yet old—many of them had used the money they saved from prostitution to establish security for themselves and their children. Publishing a book about their experiences would be another source of income. Their stories were explanatory, justifying their motivations, appealing for understanding. Pat felt no need to confess or to seek absolution; her wish, if she had one at all, was to share her refusal to conform, to get on record that despite everything she had enjoyed herself; regrets, repentance, shame or guilt were simply not part of her story.

Seymour-Smith (1969) conducted what he called a “sceptical enquiry” into the representations of prostitutes, their clients and pimps in over seventy works of literature. Of these only four pieces were written by women: three first hand accounts (Wilson, c.1830; Letter, 1858; Cousins, 1954) and one sociological study (Rolph, 1955). Reading this work over forty years later, I found Seymour-Smith’s work sexist and misogynist. Even his acknowledgements name several men for advising, publishing, and editing, while his daughters and wife receive mentions for typing and photocopying. A female librarian’s help is not specified but presumably she played a
significant role in locating the seventy works on which the enquiry is based. Before I got to the end of the introduction I disliked this man intensely! His aim seemed to be to shock in his liberal use of words like ‘tart’, ‘fuck’, ‘cunt’ (eg he calls a pimp a ‘cunt pensioner’) and he exhibited a degree of prurience in his lengthy quoting of salacious excerpts from books such as *Fanny Hill* (1748) and *My Secret Life* (1888).

He makes dubious statements such as “no woman I have heard of who experiences both types of orgasm ‘prefers’ the clitoral” (191), and “prostitution in Greece is well, if not always precisely enough for our liking, documented” (15). I tried to remember that 1969 was the midst of the sexual revolution and everyone was trying to divest themselves of their inhibitions. With all its questionable attitudes and assumptions, Seymour-Smith’s work was a thorough attempt to document the appearance of prostitutes in literature from as far back as the New Testament. Pierre L. Horn and Mary Beth Pringle (1984), examined representations of prostitutes in 118 works of literature from thirteen cultures, and proposed that there are eight alternative archetypes:

- “Bitch-witch”—cruel seductresses who lead men to ruin.
- “Weak-but-wonderful”—whore with the heart-of-gold, loving, innocent, romantic.
- “Saved”—redeemed by a man who risks his reputation to save her.
- “Sinner-but-survivor”—struggling for economic survival or a wealthy lifestyle.
- “Seduced-and-abandoned prostitute”—loss of virginity with resultant scandal.
- “Hapless harlot”—victim is trapped without the possibility of escape or redemption.
- “Proud pro”—“one of the less popular archetypes”; mostly a madam who is not involved directly in the sexual interactions.
- “Cast of thousands”—side characters in literature, often assisting a young man’s rite of passage into adulthood. (3-5)

Of the 118 pieces of literature included in their analysis, only ten were works by female authors. One of the reasons they proposed for this was that women rarely came into contact with prostitutes, unless they themselves were prostitutes. Horn and Pringle noted, as I have in my reading, that there were differences in male and female writers’ representations of prostitutes. They suggested that “the few women who have written about prostitutes tend to humanize them and treat them empathetically” (6). I was interested to read their comment that the “proud pro”, certainly the best description of Pat, was “one of the less popular archetypes” (5). It could be that this has changed since Horn and Pringle’s research in the early 1980s, and that there are now more stories of “proud pros”.

Entangled in the writing about prostitutes are social attitudes about women’s sexual desire. Wolf explored this in *Promiscuities: A Secret History of Female Desire* (1998) in which she challenged social constructions of “good” and “bad” girls. She argued that uncertainty and
secretiveness about the acceptability of their sexual desires keeps girls and women in a less powerful social position. Stories of women as “sexual marauders and adventurers, seducers and betayers, cultural analysts and subversives, fantasists and Sapphists, egoists and conquistadors” are less “speakable” than stories of “submissive personal confusion” or “victimization” (4).

Maggie O’Neill (2001) noted that Jill Nagle’s book of essays and personal narratives by sex workers Whores and Other Feminists (1997) suggested the possibility of a positive image of sex work with a number of contributors proposing that “sex workers can help to educate men about women’s sexuality and sexual needs in order to address sexual inequalities…to transgress restrictive boundaries and rebel against rigid limitations created by our own fear of sex” (20). O’Neill noted that sex worker feminists have been marginalised by other feminists who cannot accept that, in the context of patriarchy, some prostitutes are genuinely making a free choice.

In her examination of women’s sexuality, power and identity, Emily Maguire (2008) imagines a world in which women’s sexual desire would be regarded as normal and acceptable, would no longer be so threatening that it has to be discredited:

Imagine if we taught girls that sex is supposed to be pleasurable. Imagine if we taught boys that girls were as interested in sex as they are. Imagine if we taught that sex is something men and woman do because they want to. Imagine if we gave young people the knowledge and tools and confidence to have the kind of sex they enjoy with people they like when they feel like it. The power of the slut insult disappears. She’s done it with loads of guys! Wow, she must be good at it. She can’t get enough! Well, who can? (30).

As Maguire implies, there has always been great difficulty in writing about prostitutes without morality and beliefs about women’s sexuality getting in the way. Prostitutes as victims, as fallen angels, as needing to be rescued on the one hand, or as evil-doers on the other, have been the dominant constructions in literature over centuries. My challenge was to write about Pat without judgment because it was my morality and assumptions which caused me to construct the false image of her when she had fallen in her unit, and which so nearly led to her death.

During the 1970s as second wave feminism and the sexual revolution gathered strength, feminists polarised on the subject of prostitution in a clash of opinion that was so hostile it was referred to as the feminist sex wars. On the one hand many feminists believed that prostitution was evidence of women’s oppression and objectification; that women were exploited by men who managed and benefitted from the sex industry. On the other side of the debate, some feminists joined prostitutes themselves in arguing that their form of work was usually freely chosen, that as workers they deserved the same rights and protections as other workers, and that women’s condemnation of them was morally driven, “anti sex”, and supportive of the patriarchy.
in which women were either sanctified or demonised. Sheila Jeffreys (1997) argued vehemently that the concept of “choice” in prostitution is an illusion that serves the needs of men. She suggests that in future years prostitution will be regarded with the same abhorrence as slavery; that like perceptions of slavery in the early nineteenth century, many of us are blind to the human rights abuse inherent in all prostitution.

Almost two decades after the height of the sex wars, Chapkis (1997) challenged feminists with the view that sex work, as “erotic labour” could actually be a “liberatory terrain for women” (1). During this time prostitute activists had become vocal in lobbying for legalised working conditions which would enable them to be free of fear, exploitation and violence in the course of their work. Chapkis cautioned against having one “overriding narrative” on prostitution, writing that “the truth about sex, including commercial sex, is necessarily more complex than any one position can express” (1997 7).

O’Neill (2001) suggested that feminist perceptions of prostitution have been polarised into a binary: “‘stop feminism’ (stop the sex industry/ stop sexual pleasure), and pro-sex feminism (the sex industry allows space for empowering/ transforming gender stereotypes, sexual pleasure, and helps to change masculinities in creative ways)” (21). She also argued that “narrative accounts from women who ‘chose’ to work in the sex industry do provide us with complex pictures of sexuality, identities and the lived experiences of women traversing the spaces between good-girls and bad-girls, between gender conformity and sexual identity” (21). As in all conflict, there are arguments for both sides. Certainly many women are exploited in prostitution, forced into it by traffickers or by economic need. On the other hand women’s freedom must include the freedom to choose prostitution—to use sexual labour as a powerful commodity to make a good income, to provide economic security and independence. The moral stance that sex only has a place within romantic love has been rejected in many contexts—some examples being the wider acceptance of sexual experimentation among adolescents and young adults; of having “friends with benefits” (friends who engage in occasional sexual behaviour); of sexual surrogacy.

In writing about Pat I am not intending to support either army in the sex wars. Indeed I am hoping that both of us come across with our strengths and our flaws, as far as we can get from angels in the house, and not defined by the stereotypes conjured up by the labels ‘prostitute’ and ‘social worker’.

**Conclusion**

In this exegesis I began with a critical appraisal of the genre of memoir or life writing, contending that a postmodern perspective has broadened traditional concepts of autobiography which construed it as the domain for dominant people in society: in particular white upper class
males. I have gone on to examine what are considered to be the criteria for ‘good’ memoir and then looked at three stages in the development of life writing from traditional autobiography, to transgressive narratives, to postmodern approaches. Acknowledging women’s marginalised and subordinate position in our society, I have explored issues related to their memoirs using the critical dimensions of point of view, voice, identity and agency. The critical literature has argued that relationships are more intrinsic to women’s writing, yet I have noted that relationship memoirs, in which more than one person is central to the narrative, are not common.

The exegesis has gone on to review writing by and about prostitutes: their memoirs, autobiographies, letters and interviews; as well as their representations in literature, noting that they have mostly been written about by men. Finally I use the theoretical framework underlying what is termed “the feminist sex wars” to consider how this informs a critical analysis of the prostitution literature and gives a perspective on killing the angel in the house, the task of laying to rest good-girl/bad-girl dualities.

At the beginning of this project, I set out to write Pat’s story and to support this by reading about prostitution and about Sydney during World War II. The US soldiers, I discovered, were in Sydney for scarcely more than two years—yet these two years Pat saw as the highlight of her life. The story of those two years began to contract as other parts of the story emerged onto the page, partly of Pat’s childhood and later years in institutions, and mostly of Pat in the fifteen years that I knew her, and of the friendship we formed. I have been writing this story more than fifteen years after Pat died, at the point of my retirement after 35 years in social work, a time of critical reflection. In these last fifteen years I have come to a more critical and questioning approach to social work, a profession that I had chosen so strongly as a vocation that it had been almost a religion; I completed a PhD in social work researching the needs of women who were sexually abused in childhood—a category to which Pat belonged; and I have unearthed Pat’s audiotapes, video interview, writing and my notes to write the story I had always told her I would write.

This has given me much cause to reflect on what drew me to Pat and what sustained our relationship over all those years. I think we both shared a life journey intent on Virginia Woolf’s mission of killing the angel in the house—with mixed results. Without a conscious game plan, we resisted the roles of wives and mothers, rejected notions of romantic love, made an effort to be sexually wild, and enjoyed being seen as unconventional. Yet we were not entirely free agents, the phantoms of our training to meet the needs of others in general, and men in particular, could not quite be driven out. In spite of a life that could have been experienced as a torment and a struggle, Pat transcended humility and abjection. ‘Pride’ was the word she used to
describe her life and ‘irrepressible’ is the word I would use to describe Pat. It was her
determination to embrace the joy of life that I found irresistible.

As a social worker I brought to this research a respect for the uniqueness of each
person’s story and a sense of responsibility to pass on the story authentically; an appreciation
for resilience as opposed to victimhood; experience in the construction of narratives, and of the
possibility of alternative stories; and awareness of the role of a critical review of literature in the
research process. If I hadn’t been a social worker I would never have met Pat.

At the conclusion of this work I understand that women’s and nobodies’ memoirs are in
a precarious position in a literary world still dominated by white men who can write such things
as “invested her with more importance than she deserves” (Palathingal, 2010). Although
Virginia Woolf spoke about the need for women writers to kill the angel in the house more than
eighty years ago, there are many women’s memoirs which still focus on the search for the right
man or on family life. I had to struggle constantly with my inner voice which rendered my
writing of no consequence: in Elaine Showalter’s words “women internalize literary values as
well as other kinds, and their own vision often strikes them as dull and small” (1992 214). The
feminist sex wars have continued unabated, with conferences which position prostitution as a
problem and women engaging in it as victims still attracting protests from sex workers who
argue that there is an acceptable place for women who choose sexual labour and that they have
the same legal rights as any worker to establish safe working conditions. All of these
perspectives have provided me with new positions from which to tell the story of Pat and me,
and have ensured that the story I have ended up with is far distant from the one I set out to write.
I hope that our story can contribute in some way to Virginia Woolf’s injunction:

Ah, but what is “herself”? I mean, what is a woman? I assure you, I do not know. I do
not believe that you know. I do not believe that anybody can know until she has
expressed herself in all the arts and professions open to human skill (1931).

Bibliography


