It is 1979 and a teenage girl is charmed by a man she meets in a disco. Before long, like Alice through the looking glass, she tumbles into a world of strange and frightening characters. Desperate to escape, she takes us into the darkness and out again, delivering her tale with wit, warmth and furious zest.

*Memoirs of a Suburban Girl* is the cautionary tale of an everyday girl who makes a wrong turn.

'Deb Kandelaars takes the reader safely into a place where she herself was never safe. Ever since I first saw material from this book I knew it was something astonishing. Its wholehearted, witty and vividly accomplished account of the fascinating and terrible reality of a violent relationship offers us an understanding that we'll all wonder how we've lived without – this is a very big achievement.'

PETER BISHOP, VARUNA, THE WRITERS’ HOUSE
Memoirs of a Suburban Girl

Deb Kandelaars was born in the Riverland, South Australia, and grew up in Adelaide’s north-eastern suburbs. She graduated from the University of Adelaide with a Masters in Creative Writing. Memoirs of a Suburban Girl is her first novel. It won her a Longlines residential fellowship at Varuna, The Writers’ House in 2009, and was short-listed for the Adelaide Festival Awards for an Unpublished Manuscript in 2010.
By the same author

Postcards (Wakefield Press 2001)
MEMOIRS OF A SUBURBAN GIRL

a novel
DEB KANDELAARS
Thank you for the things you bought me, thank you for the card
Thank you for the things you taught me, when you hit me hard
That love between two people must be based on understanding,
Until that’s true, you’ll find your things all stacked out on the landing
Surprise, surprise. Valentine’s Day is over.

from 'Valentine's Day is Over' – Billy Bragg
1979

The week before you meet him, you race into the disco full of excitement, ‘Born to be Alive’ pumping out on the dance floor, darkness punctuated by strobe lighting and punters packed in like sardines. You’ve straightened your hair with the Kambrook curling wand, but your flick-back gutters don’t even vaguely resemble Farrah Fawcett’s hair which seems, with a toss of her cute little head, to flick back so nicely, and gleam and move in the sunshine.

You and your best friend are underage, like half the people in there, but as long as you pay your entry fee, which includes a chicken-in-a-basket supper by law, they’ll let virtually anyone in, especially girls. You tingle with excitement, hook arms and giggle, and off you go squeezing through the crowd, slapping away the odd loose hand, the music so loud you can’t hear what anyone is saying without leaning in close, and you are drinking jelly beans and looking for Mr Goodbar. And you see the Italian boy, the one that all the girls like, leaning against the top of the stairs in his white suit and his long, coiffed hair, and you get a hello and think that’s amazing, and you can’t wait to tell your friend but she is already staring into the eyes of a bouncer who you think is sleazy but she thinks is so spunky.

Later she tells you she did it with him in the car park, and it was over and done with really quickly because he was on a cigarette break and he had to get back to work, and her new dress had a mark on it, and she had to try and clean it up in
the ladies. And, sensitive you, despite her obvious pain, you just have to report the exciting news that the Italian boy said hello to you and, funnily enough, she is too upset to care less because her bouncer friend is now ignoring her, and he isn’t going to be the love of her life after all, and now she has to live with the idea that she has been deflowered in the car park by someone who, in her words, has turned out to be a complete bastard.

A week to the day after this unfortunate incident you are getting ready to go to the same disco with your best friend, and you put your arm around her and tell her that she can put all that stuff behind her because tonight is going to be lots of fun. Your dress is black with pink and purple flowers, and you love that dress, and it goes really well with your cork platform heels with the thin black leather straps. You wobble on them a bit to begin with but they make you at least two inches taller and wearing them makes you feel pretty and invincible. Your friend is wearing her black halter-neck dress and matching high heels and her blonde wavy hair is tied up in a bun with wispy bits hanging down each side of her face. You’ve both carefully put on your foundation, blush, blue liquid eye shadow, mascara and lip gloss so you think you look just like the picture in Cleo, and you’ve shaved and polished your legs until they’re gleaming and hairless. You burst into the disco full of confidence, chatting away – there is no doubt about it, you know you are looking good – and you make your way to the other bar: not the one where you know who is doing his crowd control bit, you’re not going down that end again in a hurry according to your friend. And you find this slightly annoying because the bar you’re avoiding because of the bouncer boy is the better bar with a bigger crowd, and it’s really close to the dance floor and the dark corner where people go to get their supper and pash in the dark.

Anyway, as fate has it, you’re walking over to the not-so-
good bar to keep your best friend happy, when a guy taps you on the shoulder and says hello. You think he’s cute, and you are sucked in by his smile and his smoothness and his air of experience, and these are all the things that should set off warning bells but you are too young and inexperienced to know what sets off warning bells, or what to look out for, so you fall for his charms easily. His mate seems to like your friend although she’s not too sure, but she goes along with it because she is still getting over the bouncer and what better way to get over someone than to get together with another one? And, also, she does it for you because you’d do it for her.

Before you know it, you have an arm around your waist and a tall, brown-eyed man is saying hi gorgeous and you are smiling back at his Cheshire cat grin, and he is pulling you in close, and you are gone right there and then, which seems absolutely ridiculous, but there’s no denying that at the actual moment his arm slips around your waist, it’s the best you’ve ever felt around a boy – ever.

Your last boyfriend had a greasy fringe and a red Datsun, and he cheated on you with your friend in her bedroom while you were in the next room at her party. God, you were shitty with him and with her for that matter. One, because he wasn’t even that good and now you had to be the poor cheated-on girlfriend and, two, he had driven you to the party which meant he had to take you home and, actually, three, now you didn’t have a boyfriend and there was a time when having a greasy fringed boyfriend who drove a bomb and tried to force himself on you on the couch after a family wedding was much better than not having a boyfriend. Before him there was the boy next door who was kind of sweet but you were never going to be his girlfriend, just someone to muck around with, and you liked the boy two doors down better but you didn’t want to kiss him, you just wanted to talk to him about everything, so it was confusing, but it’s always confusing.
Anyway, back to the night in the disco when you meet this man and you have a strong arm around you, and there is a low talking voice saying sweet and sexy things, and you feel grown up and sophisticated, and you want to get away from boys who don’t know what they’re doing. You want a man, although you have no idea what you’re in for, and a year or so later as a strong hand grips your hair and smashes your head against a car window, you wish more than anything you hadn’t fallen for that man in that disco that night when you were only seventeen.
A couple of weeks after you meet, you’re sitting in a wine bar and they don’t sell beer or spirits, so you order a hock, lime and lemon and it’s really sweet, which is just what you want. A photographer comes to your table and asks your new boyfriend (you’ve nicknamed him SB in your mind, short for spunky boy) if he’d like to have his photo taken with his lovely lady, and you look across and smile at your best friend as the photographer gets the go ahead, and your friend has a look on her face that you can’t quite read but she’s not that happy and, before you know it, the photographer is taking a snap of you and a man you hardly know as a couple in a wine bar. In the black and white picture, your mascara is thick and black like spiders legs, and you are wearing a silky shirt and dangly earrings and, just beneath your closed smile, the camera flash has caught the sparkle of your braces, which you are so sick of now because the dentist promised he’d take them off a month ago, and you think they make you look really young.

Next an old Italian man comes around with a basket of roses in clear plastic tubes and SB buys one for you and says a rose for a rose. Even you don’t fall for this completely, but you think he’s pretty cute for buying you a flower and paying for a photograph, and your heart is on fire tonight because you are being spoilt and you feel like a grown up.

Another day, you are walking along a sandy beach with him and the sea is sparkling, and he picks you up and pretends to throw you in, and you are aware of his burly arms and, as much as you try to struggle and giggle and wriggle
your way out of it, his brute strength has a grip on you, and you realise quickly that you are only going to be put down when he wants to release you. When he places you gently on the sand to steady you, puts his arms around your waist and kisses you on the forehead, all you can see is the sun shining across the waves into your eyes, and the silhouette of a tall man looking down at you, and he’s pulling you closer to him and you’re under his spell. And you don’t tell him, because it’s too embarrassing, but you’re thinking of the Bay City Rollers song ‘Give a Little Love’, because when you were twelve, Les used to sing about how it was a teenage dream to be seventeen and to find yourself all wrapped up in love. But Les wasn’t your favourite anyway: you always liked Alan, the guitarist, the older one.

You and SB walk back up the cliff stairs together and down the path of a cute white cottage he shares with some friends you will never meet. He puts a record on the Marantz stereo, and takes hold of your hands and spins you around the lounge room to Bob Marley’s ‘Easy Skanking’ and you’ve died and gone to paradise. Everything is dreamy and soft and in slow motion, and you can’t believe you are actually here.

Another day, after SB picks you up in town, you’re driving around with him in his yellow Ford, and he reckons you should come back to his place for the afternoon. You say yes, dreaming of another romantic day, a walk on the beach, a dance around the lounge room, maybe even something else, you’re not sure. But SB is not driving towards the sea, and he confesses he had to move out of that house because it cost too much, he had to find something cheaper, plus those people he shared with were jerks, it’s temporary, so don’t expect too much, it’s a bit of a hole, he says.

He pulls up at a less than ordinary house which he shares with a cleaner, her boyfriend and their hairy dog. The house is dirty and you soon find out that it pays not to wear black
because your bum gets covered with white dog hair when you sit on the couch. This is not exactly what you hoped for when you said yes, let’s go back to your place, but now it’s too late. SB tells you the cleaner and her boyfriend are on again, off again and pretty dull, and when you meet them, you think, God, they must be at least thirty.

Anyway, you can only sit in the lounge room for so long with the cleaner and her boyfriend and the hairy dog, and the Bee Gees singing ‘Run to Me’ on the record player, before you both need a bit of privacy and the only place to go is the bedroom, and the only place to sit in the bedroom is on the bed, and one thing leads to another. And, as you dress yourself after this supposedly monumental moment in time, he asks you if you’ve put on weight. You feel deflated and you kind of wish you hadn’t done it at all because it hurt and it wasn’t fun, and he wasn’t very warm or loving but you think to yourself, now it’s done, it’s over, it’s crossed off the list.

You are numb and quiet and you throw him a sideways glance. You’re not sure why but he obviously feels the need to put you in your place (as if you’re not already there with his fatty boom bah comments) and out of nowhere comes this wallop, this brain-shaking whack, and you are flying across the dark, dingy bedroom, over the bed and onto the floor next to the dirty cream Queen Anne dressing table with peeling gold handles. The afternoon sun sends a drab light through the ripped curtains and, as you look up from your landing spot on the floor, little tweety birds dancing around your throbbing head, you make out shapes of racing cars and aeroplanes and trucks on the curtains and you briefly wonder what little kid used to sleep in this room. It’s hard to think because the inside of your head feels like it has been smashed into a million pieces, all dancing and spinning inside you like marbles in a washing machine, round and round, knocking and spinning. You are full of disbelief because no one has
ever done this to you before, let alone someone who says he loves you, but instinctively you have a very strong feeling this won’t be the last time it happens, and now you dread the thought of staying with him, but you have no idea how to leave.

When you look up at him and start to cry, he tells you to shut the fuck up or he’ll do it again, and you tell him to get away from you, and you try to get up but he’s too fast and his hand is gripping your arm and pulling you over to the bed where he pins you down while your skin stings pink as he slaps your face hard, and he spits out the words, stupid fat bitch. You are sobbing, sucking in air through your nose, snivelling, but you manage to say get off me, and you struggle against the force of his hands but this only makes it worse and his hand is gripped around your throat and he tells you that if you ever leave him, he’ll kill you. Then he storms out of the bedroom as if you’ve really gone and done it this time and leaves you lying there on the bed, stunned and alone, and you have one pathetic thought: SB stands for shitty boyfriend.

And so begins the journey of just trying to stay on his right side, as if every day you are treading carefully around shards of glass, waiting for that tingling sting and the overwhelming pain when the glass pierces. But some days he doesn’t do anything, and there is no rhyme or reason to it, and some days he does and, equally, you don’t know why. You have a funny feeling in your tummy a lot of the time, and he makes you feel like everything’s your fault and, because of this, it doesn’t take long for you to convince yourself that everything is your fault.
One night you invite SB over to meet your parents and you have lied to them about his age because you know he is too old for you, and between this lie and the hard-to-believe crap SB feeds them about his sports car and all the money he makes, you know they smell a rat. Despite this, your mum serves up a delicious three-course meal, and your dad offers you both a smoke after dinner, and SB has a glass of port, and everyone tries hard to make the best of the situation. Your dad asks SB about himself, and you know that SB is bullshitting, and this makes things worse in your mind, and now you feel the air is thick with doubt although SB doesn’t seem to notice, he just keeps raving on, and you can’t believe the rubbish that comes out of his mouth. You try to fill in the conversation with work gossip and something you read in the paper to avoid any more questions, and you hope this dinner will be over real fast, and then the wall phone rings and it’s a work call and your dad says sorry, it’s important, I have to take it, and you stand up and say thanks but we better get going or we’ll be late for the movies and you’re both out the front door in a flash.

Another night you borrow your mum’s Holden and drive over to SB’s place and, while you’re inside, some moron steals the car from out the front and the police find it a few streets away but you are completely unaware this has happened because you have fallen asleep. The cops call your parents to let them know they’ve found your mum’s car, and your mum and dad freak out because they don’t know where you are,
and you could be dead on the street for all they know. They don’t know exactly where SB lives, so they direct the police to the house via a few clues they have gathered from the snippets of information you’ve occasionally let slip.

There’s a loud knock on SB’s front door, and a policeman and a policewoman are standing there telling you they’ve found your mum’s car, and you’re thinking on your feet, shit I didn’t even know it was missing, and how do they know it’s mum’s car? Your parents are worried, you should call them and let them know you’re okay, the policewoman says seriously. Your stomach turns, and you and SB leave the house and walk in the dark to where the car has been parked in a real hurry, half up on the gutter, wheels turned in, and the glove box is open and there are papers on the floor, and SB says he doesn’t want to come with you to your mum and dad’s place, and it’s a long drive home by yourself to face the music.

Your parents are furious because they were so worried about you, and are you sure you locked the car, and where is SB, and they have to wonder what kind of area he lives in if cars are stolen off the street there. He should have come with you to talk to us, they say, and you make up a ton of excuses for him, but you are actually relieved that he left you in the lurch and made you go home by yourself, because he is a nightmare around your parents and it means you can keep his bullshit and his nastiness away from them for now.

No car for a month, they say – you can’t really argue with that, the whole car being stolen and the cops arriving scenario is a bit embarrassing – so you take your punishment, and catch the bus instead of driving, which gives you plenty of time to stew on the mess going on inside your head.

A few weeks later, SB decides he wants you nearby, and you want to keep him happy because things are easier that way, so you tell your mum and dad you want to move into a share flat you found in the paper. It will be good, says SB,