



*The  
Quakers*

'Compelling, unusual and refreshingly readable.' – John Dale

RACHEL HENNESSY



Wakefield Press

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Rachel Hennessy was born in Canberra in 1973. She has lived and worked in Newcastle, Brisbane, Sydney, London and Adelaide. *The Quakers* is her first novel.

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*For my mother, Gail*

And you are my friends if you do what I command you.

*John 15:14*

# Prologue

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I moved into this flat after the verdict came down. My parents didn't want me to leave home again; even a silent daughter is better than a daughter drifting alone. To compensate, I still go placidly to eat with them on Friday nights – my one solid meal of the week – on the condition that they never intrude into my place. This evening, after the funeral and my walk to the Lookout, they drove me back here. My father wanted to come in for a cup of tea but my mother has accepted such an act isn't part of the truce we have established.

The funeral was only this afternoon but already it feels like a long time ago. It's three hours now until midnight, my twenty-eighth birthday. I've set candles burning and the shadows they create on the walls jump off the windows. My face in the black glass looks strange to me. When did I get that hollow-eyed expression? And what was I thinking that night, when the table was laid and the cork popped from the bottle of champagne like a muted gunshot?

Conjectures have been made, events sewn together with needles of ignorance. Wrapped in their blanket of gossip, there are those who think they know the story, but I'm the only one left who really knows.

I





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On the day it begins my mother drives our old Datsun to a two-storey suburban mansion. Four marble pillars topped with a dome mark the entrance to the front door. My mother gasps while I try to look unimpressed.

'Who is this girl, Lucy?' she asks, her tone is the struggle between being envious and thinking it all rather vulgar.

'Just a girl,' I answer.

The car door screeches as I push it open. The bumper bar, held on with a piece of wire, rattles away.

I have no memory of walking through that arched entrance. In my mind, I am immediately in the rumpus room, leaning against a sliding glass door that opens onto a cement patio shaded by a wooden deck above. Further on, there is an in-ground swimming pool, a transplanted kidney stitched into a field of shaved grass.

Inside the room, two boys from my school play snooker on a shiny green table. All the colours, the green of the snooker velvet, the blue of the chlorinated water outside, seem high-pitched, as if in technicolour. In contrast, the people are drab. Over in the corner, a clutch of girls ignore me. I know I should try to see them as individuals—after all, they are here at Narinda's house,

they must mean something. But I can't make out any distinguishing features. All four are blonde, turned blonder by peroxide, and have necks dripping with silver chains only just held down by hollow trinkets. They are the Golden Girls, moving as one, a floating blur of hot self-love and spray-on deodorant. Rifling through cassette tapes, they try to decide what to play on the state-of-the-art stereo towering up the wall.

'I love these guys!' one yells, brandishing a tape like a victory torch.

'Really? I can't stand them,' another answers and immediately the first girl begins to waver in her love.

'I liked their early stuff anyway,' she murmurs, and the other has to concede their early stuff was 'okay'.

One of the boys playing snooker misses the white ball completely and his cue digs into the surface of the table. Nothing rips, but he turns pink and glances over to see if the girls are watching. They aren't. There's only me.

What am I doing with my hands? I hate to think they're in the fig-leaf position but it's absurd to imagine I have a martini glass in my hand, standing like a movie star caught in her party pose. I might have my hands behind my back like an umpire inspecting the game. Or, more likely, I have my hands over my mouth, shaving the nail of my right thumb between my teeth. I still do that when I'm nervous.

Narinda has deposited me here, in a suitable spot, before disappearing to look after the bags of cossies, towels, and 'after-swim outfits'. I hear one of the girls talk about her ensemble once the argument over what kind of music to play is finished. I don't have an after-swim outfit and decide I'm not going to swim that day. Instead I sit and sweat in stirrup pants and a T-shirt too big for me, watching the rest of the girls in bikinis dolphin under one another's legs.

I see Narinda much later, after the stereo has settled into a mixed-hits groove and the cue sticks lie abandoned. In my naivety I think her parents really are hidden somewhere in the depths of the house and ask her to thank her mother on my behalf. She laughs in that way she has, swinging back her long black hair.

'There's no way I'm letting you leave yet,' she says, dragging me to the patio and shoving me into a hard plastic chair. She puts a drink in my hand and for a minute I *am* a movie star, swigging down my vodka and orange, only just ruining the effect by crashing the ice into my front teeth.

I'm in a circle of five chairs: the two boys who've retired from snooker, Narinda, her boyfriend Daniel and me. The diving girls are still hard at play but best mates James and Paddy don't even blink at the 'accidental' loss of one of the girls' bikini tops; they are already caught up in Narinda.

There are girls who possess some magical power over boys. Without this power, and dressed like a bag of potatoes, I don't stand much of a chance against Narinda whose dark skin dances through the neck of a crisp linen shirt and the gap in her wrap-around strawberry patterned sarong.

She already has Daniel. At our school, even the vaguely attractive come under close scrutiny of the Pack, the rag-tag group around whose edges I am forced to hover. Jeanette, the leader of the Pack, has tits to get lost in and would've happily let Daniel grope his way around them. Of course, I'm trying to pretend I don't watch him myself, don't notice the shape of his hands or the tiny lines that shoot from the sides of his blue eyes when he smiles. In the diary in my bag, I have put his initials in a love-heart with an arrow punctured through it, a large overblown heart shaded to look three-dimensional. For me, he is the epitome of what a boy should be: handsome, tall, funny when he speaks but not too willing to talk, proving that he has as many thoughts as I do

whirling around inside his head. He is the beginning of love for me, a sweetness you can only taste once for the first time.

I fidget in the moulded form of the chair and watch beautiful Narinda sit so still and serene. There is beauty in the dipping of her eyelids and her occasional light touching of the boys' arms. She does not say anything particularly enlightening, yet we all listen.

The day sinks into a slumber rhythmized by whirling lawn mowers. Magpies in the gums squawk at one another, riled, perhaps, by the clash of beer bottles as one of the girls stumbles her way to the downstairs loo. Her retching mixes with the sniggering consolation of her friends as the vomit stink finds its way to our circle of five, setting off stories of drunken throwing-up. Now, the boys do the talking.

I switch off. I've never been drunk and I feel stupid. I have the impulse to sneak away and ring my mother, have her take me back to my bedroom. Get as far away as possible from this scary place where I hover on the border, not able to cross into safe territory, into a world where I know as much as those around me.

Is it that thought passing through my head when the earthquake strikes? I'm not sure the idea of knowing what you are thinking at the time of a disaster you don't know is happening, technically works. It's like finding out someone has died at a particular time and trying to remember exactly what you were doing. There are people who'll tell you they were thinking something significant or poignant and others who'll admit it's just as likely they were picking their nose as thinking of the dearly departed.

The cement underneath us wobbles and the decking above us sways. That I do know. I feel the earth take me back and forward, my stomach moves ahead of me, my vision jumps. In the jelly of the air, I grab Narinda's hand, pull her to the grass, away from the possible doom of the deck. The three boys are already there, staring in anticipation at the house. I do the same. I can hear the

Golden Girls screaming and wonder if they'll have time to get out before the place falls apart. I expect a huge crumbling.

Narinda says something about the gas system exploding. We stand on the grass, the Golden Girls keep screaming but the magpies don't squawk in reply.



I shouldn't have been at the Earthquake Party, as we came to call it. Narinda had invited me in a rush of embarrassment.

She'd been punished for talking too much and was moved next to me in our Religious Education class. For the first two weeks, she didn't speak to me, spending the time turning her head to smile at Daniel or whisper across the row to Paddy, the boy she'd been separated from in the first place.

I started dreading those classes in the old wing where the light was blotted out by aluminium shutters so even in summer I shivered at my laminex-covered desk. Not only did Narinda ignore me but I felt as if I was making no impression on anyone or anything. The only two ways to seal your presence in a plastic desk was with a permanent marker or the end of an oversized safety pin. I did not have a knife. Most of the time, the surface of the desks went untouched and I floated from classroom to classroom, subject to subject, unaware of who'd gone before me and who'd come behind. Occasionally, there'd be the remnant of a piece of poetry or an algebraic formula on the whiteboard so, at the very least, I could guess what my predecessors might have learnt, or chosen to ignore.

Religious Education was regarded by everyone, including most of the teachers, as a joke. I had the misfortune of being put into a class taught by one of the few who took it seriously, Mr Kent. His bald head was a moon of coloured patches, white skin that seemed polished through to the bone against raised craters of red flesh, bubbled and almost leprous. Perhaps his faith in God rose with his skin infections because he was zealous and, unlike the other teachers, made us work instead of using the period to revise for our real subjects. There were no RE end-of-year exams but still Mr Kent made us note down the significant beliefs of the major faiths. I actually jumped when Narinda leant over to look at my list.

'Are you Catholic then?' she asked, her eyes scanning the detail I'd included in that column. It seemed a strange question. I'd assumed we were all Catholic here. I just nodded my head.

'Can't you speak?'

The confidence in her voice scared me even then and I squeaked out my next words.

'Aren't you Catholic?'

She snorted in reply. One of the boys, hearing her, started making piggy noises which spread until half the class had turned into swine. Mr Kent shouted that the next person to make a sound would be on their way to detention.

In the silence that followed, Mr Kent stood opening and closing the lid of a whiteboard marker, letting out the nostril-stinging acetone smell. Outside there was a shout of 'Hey!' and feet going down the stairs, dropping away in thumping echoes. In our classroom: shuffling feet as ankles swapped from front to behind, the click-click of a ballpoint pen going in and out, in and out, the clearing of a throat. All noises to challenge the quiet, to test the limits of Mr Kent's tolerance. I loved the ones who pushed.

Paddy, a short boy, began a coughing fit that swallowed his whole body, his blond fringe swishing over his hooked nose like

tangled fishing wire. Someone else started coughing. Just as they'd all become pigs, now the brave ones joined the chorus of hacking.

Mr Kent failed to notice for longer than he should have. He was lost in the noises outside the room, buses pulling up in diesel-stained rows to take us home in less than five minutes.

'That's enough!' he yelled finally and the flashing of his multi-coloured skin made me laugh. He swivelled with such force towards me that the lid of the permanent marker went flying. It hit the wall just before the final bell sounded, its clack and rebound heard before the silence was broken by an eruption of bags thrown from the floor onto desks, books slammed together with more joy than their spines could handle, bodies jostling for space to get out the door.

For a moment I thought Mr Kent was going to stop us, call a halt to our escape as he had the power to do. His eyes landed on me but I dropped my gaze and looked sincerely mournful. This show of remorse saved us, it seemed, for he let us go. I saw him bend to retrieve the lid near the skirting board, a slight wobble in his arm as he strained the top of his thighs.

I waited for my bus on the fence of treated pine logs that ran up the hill. In the dry heat they were cracking open and I stuck my fingers in the open mouths, risking a splinter for the rough rub of the wood, head down to stop the sun digging into my eyes.

Without warning, I found myself in shadow. I looked up for clouds, only to discover a different kind of heavenly body. Narinda stood at the end of my outstretched legs.

'I'm Hindu, in case you wanted to know,' she said, as if I'd insulted her by not bothering to talk to her after class. The blue and grey tartan of her pleated school skirt was hitched high up her waist and she'd rolled back the sleeves of her blazer rather than take it off. The buttons on her pale-blue shirt were opened one lower than in class.



What did I say? I was so surprised she was talking to me. I was the mousy new girl who'd come to the school halfway through the last term with no socks on. I still cringe when I remember the haphazard way I packed my clothes for the across-town move and my mother's blank expression when I begged her to find me the light-grey socks I'd lost somewhere along the way. Sunday closing had the shops staring at us without hope. In the end, I'd opted for wearing no socks at all and ensured that I was 'the poor girl' from day one. Other labels had followed. I was ordinary to look at and walked with a pigeon-toe when I was nervous. I thought more than I should, failing to speak for long periods of time, so the insecure called me a snob and the confident thought I was stupid.

'Oh, right,' were my exact words to Narinda.

Rather than turn away in disgust, she kept going with the conversation.

'You worked Mr Kent really well,' she said.

'What do you mean?'

'"I'm so sorry, Mr Kent, I'm not really laughing at you"' she did a mock imitation of my lowered eyes and repentant face. 'It's the best way to get your own way,' she continued, dark eyes widening to engulf me.

I laughed awkwardly and nodded, unsure of what I was agreeing to, but wanting her to stay.

'Who do you hang out with?' she asked.

I could have answered 'no one'; this was the closest to the truth. Already, though, I knew perception was more important than anything else.

'Jeanette and the Pack,' I replied, trying to be confident.

Narinda moved to sit next to me, the sun hitting us both again. I couldn't tell if it was this that was making me over-heated or Narinda's closeness to me. I wanted to tell her how unhappy I

was with the Pack, how much I needed to be rescued. I did not say anything. Silence threatened.

'Do you think . . . um . . . do you want . . .' Narinda started.

It was incredible. She was actually stumbling over her words. I had never heard that glitch in her voice before, and I *had* been listening, whether she knew it or not.

'Do you want to come to my party?' she asked, her face red.

We were fourteen years old.



Life is lived in seven-year cycles, they say. By fourteen I would've lost an entire layer of skin cells and the very fibre of my hair would have re-grown itself twice over. I don't think it was much more than physical growth, all those flakes and follicles, scabs and clippings. When I look back, I don't think I fit into the neat seven-year cycles. Instead, I reckon I've been four different people in my life, and the second one began to emerge on the day of Narinda's invitation. From the moment of saying 'yes' to Narinda, I wasn't just letting things fall off me, wasn't just letting nature takes its course. I had decided to re-make myself.