

TRACY CRISP

**SURROGATE**



Wakefield  
Press

# RACHAEL

MAY 1998

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Blood. Shining as it fell, a streaming satin ribbon the deepest shade of red. The puddle it left on the floor was dull. Diluted by the dust and grime left behind by the greying mops the cleaners dragged across the floor from time to time. Rachael always thought that mops did nothing more than drag bacteria from here to there, spread flakes of skin from the beds to the door, dampen the dust and leave it in growing piles in the corners. Bacteria, dust and flakes of skin, an invisible film on the floor. And the blood. Blood that had lost its shine.

*Bloody hell.*

The thought came without effort. An old joke that never disappeared. Bloody hell.

‘It’s all right.’ Rachael spoke softly, calmly because she had to, didn’t she? ‘Blood makes things look more dramatic than they really are.’

It was her job to reassure the frail patient and her fragile husband. It was up to her to convince them that everything would be okay. The blood was spilled, but there was no need to be alarmed.

The student, wearing the blue culottes they gave to student nurses on their first rotation, stared down at the blood that she’d spilled. She was as pale as the patient and Rachael hoped she wasn’t a fainter.

'I'm sorry.' The student's voice was shaking. 'I don't know what happened.'

'It's all right.' Rachael repeated herself. She had no idea what could have happened either. That was probably half the problem, wasn't it? Rachael had been too busy with thoughts of Mick, deciding whether or not she should go and see him tonight after work or give him a few more days.

Rachael looked at the patient. She had closed her eyes, closed herself in and shut the world out. That's what sleep was in hospitals, a way to escape the disasters and fears that punctuated the days. The patient slept, but her husband sat, looking at Rachael, his washed-out eyes asking: *What comes next?*

Rachael could feel the tension. Of the student nurse who would go home to her parents, burst into tears and say, 'I can't go back.' Of the patient's husband, Mr Markos, who would go home tonight, eat the soup his daughter-in-law had left in the fridge, then try to sleep, his body tensed for the sound of the phone and the call he was dreading.

The railings of the curtain rattled. It was the orderly Rachael had called, and one step behind him a doctor. *Oh, great*, she thought. *A doctor. Just what I need.*

Rachael saw her day getting longer. They should have finished in this ward and be in the next, but now there would have to be an incident report and a debriefing with the student. *It's all right*, she told herself. *It's all right, you'll have plenty of time to get to Mick.*

'Hello, Mrs Markos.' The doctor used a friendly, matter-of-fact tone. She wasn't new to the hospital, but newish, and Rachael had to think before she remembered her name. O'Reilly. Dr O'Reilly. And her first name? Not Caro, but something like that. Elegant but with edge. Something that matched her glossy black hair and tall, thin frame. Cate. That was it. Cate with a C. Dr Cate O'Reilly.

Rachael watched as the scene registered with the doctor. The blood on the floor, the pale-faced student, the sleeping patient. She took it all in, but her demeanour didn't change and only Rachael would have seen the quick look the doctor threw her, the silent question: *Everything okay?*

Rachael nodded. The orderly worked without speaking to them. His sighs and the thump of his bucket told them how he felt about this latest change to his job description.

'Mrs Markos? Sorry to wake you. I'm Dr O'Reilly. Do you remember me?' The doctor spoke gently. The tension didn't disappear, but it faded. Mrs Markos opened her eyes slowly and turned her head to the doctor.

'This is Dr O'Reilly, love. You remember Dr O'Reilly, don't you?'

'Oh, yes.'

She probably did remember, Rachael thought. If you were going to remember anyone in the hospital you would remember this doctor. You might not remember her shirt, most of it hidden under her white doctor's coat, but perhaps the scoop of its neck showing the line of her clavicle ('clavicle', an ugly word for something so elegant), that blue perfect against her skin. You might not remember her long fingers and her perfectly shaped but unpolished nails. You might not remember those details, but you would remember her poise, her calm. You would remember the way she made you feel.

The doctor went through the usual questions. Are you feeling better now that we've adjusted your medication? And how would you rate your pain, Mrs Markos?

'All right. Now, we do need to go on with these blood tests. Make sure I can keep an eye on things.' Rachael saw the doctor's eyes flick quickly as she looked to Rachael's lanyard, checking her name. 'You don't mind if Rachael takes some blood, do you?'

'Blood?' Mrs Markos's voice was almost as thin as the air around her. 'Oh, I don't know.' Her eyes closed then opened, more quickly than they had before but more slowly than they should. 'I suppose it's okay, dear. If that's what you think I should do.'

'Yes, I really do. So I'll leave you in Rachael's capable hands, shall I?' The doctor was looking at Mrs Markos with a smile, as if nothing out of the ordinary were going on. As if the bed and the floor did not look like an emerging crime scene. 'You'll take good care of Mrs Markos, won't you, Rachael?'

'Of course.'

'And we'll go back to the desk, shall we?' The doctor looked at the student, raised her eyebrows in a question. The student looked from the doctor to Rachael. Rachael gave her a small nod letting the student know, *You'll be all right with her.*

Rachael did not watch the doctor and student leave. She followed the protocols automatically, taking the sheet of labels and checking with Mrs Markos her name and date of birth, making sure the name and tube were right before she rolled the stickers around each of the plastic tubes and smoothed them out with the pad of her thumb. She snapped on a new pair of rubber gloves, felt them tightening as they gripped her skin, and picked up the sterile packet that held the syringe. The packet crinkled between her fingers. She still hadn't got used to the sound of this new packaging or its feel. It was thinner but harder to open and all week she had been resisting the urge to use her teeth, forcing herself to reach for the scissors when the rip didn't work. She wrapped the tourniquet lightly around Mrs Markos's arm, pulled the cord once through the plastic buckle, then back again. 'Can you make your hand into a fist for me, Mrs Markos? There'll be a small prick ...'

Rachael watched as the blood filled the syringe, its colour deep,

its texture thin. All these years she had been drawing blood and still its thinness surprised her. *Blood should be less like water*, Rachael thought. *Blood should be less like water and more like full-cream milk.*

Rachael was waiting for the elevator to get to her floor. She had changed out of her uniform and dressed in the spare clothes she kept in her locker. Jeans with buttons instead of a zip and a thick, red jumper with a polo neck. The only problem was her shoes. There were no spare boots or shoes in her locker. She must have forgotten to bring them in last time. Which meant she was still wearing her work shoes. The colour of her shoes was a problem she couldn't fix. The navy looked okay against her jeans, but her coat and beret were black and Rachael had never liked navy and black together. She hated the way they almost but didn't quite clash, and the way they almost but didn't quite match. As well as the colour, the shoes were flat, making her look like she was dressing down instead of up. Not that she wanted to look dressed up in front of Mick, but boots added something to jeans. They slimmed her legs, Rachael thought, and the sound of the clip on the ground as she walked made her feel ... not confident exactly, but competent. Like she was in control.

'Hi, Rachael.'

It was the doctor. Her shoes were lovely of course. Rachael hadn't noticed them earlier, but she did now. Leather boots, ankle-high, small heel, pointed toes. The colour reminded Rachael of the sauce her mother made for the prawn cocktails on Christmas Day.

Doctors didn't know how lucky they were that they didn't have to wear uniforms to work. Their coats were shapeless but still elegant. And they never had this problem at the end of the day, cobbling together mismatched clothes.

'Hi.'

‘Did you get everything sorted with Mrs Markos?’

‘Yes, no problems.’

‘And the student was all right when she got back to you?’

Rachael nodded. ‘I made her take the next three bloods.’

‘I’m impressed. She seemed pretty shaken.’

‘I reminded her that if you work in haematology you never have to clean a bedpan.’

‘Cunning!’ The doctor laughed.

The lift stopped at the floor with a thud and the doors opened slowly. There was only one person inside, a man dressed in a loose yellow sweater and sagging tracksuit pants. Looped over his broad shoulder was a small sports bag. It held a toothbrush, Rachael guessed, and a razor and a pair of pyjamas he had to buy the day before he came in.

Rachael waited for the doctor to go first then stepped in. The man inside smelled of a two-night hospital stay, stale but not ingrained. The doors jerked closed and the elevator began the slow trip down. It was a small grey box, its walls lined with A4 posters advertising for research participants, the next fundraising ball and cars for sale. The elevator creaked and groaned as it travelled down from the wards to the foyer, threatening jammed doors, broken cables or a sudden stop between floors.

‘My kidney stones,’ the man said, holding up a specimen jar.

There had been a time when Rachael wondered why people wanted to keep their specimen jars. What use could they have for a kidney stone, a piece of bone, a lump of fat or tissue? But watching people look at their specimen jars, seeing them hold the jars to the light and squint their eyes as they twisted the jars from side to side, Rachael had come to understand. People called them souvenirs, but they were more than that. They were more than memories or

trophies. They were mysteries. *How did I grow this thing? Why did it choose me?* Answer those questions and everything else would make sense.

'I reckon this one's as big as that rock you've got on your finger,' the man said, pointing from his specimen jar to her engagement ring. Across the elevator, the doctor smiled a conspiratorial smile at Rachael then dropped her gaze to the floor.

*Says more about the size of my engagement ring than it does about your kidney stones,* Rachael thought. She twisted the ring, grabbing hold of the stone with her thumb then pushing it around her finger.

She should have taken it off this morning when she was thinking about it. After her shower she had stood, looking in the bathroom mirror, wearing just the ring and her glasses. With her wet hair pulled back from her forehead and no mascara, her eyes had looked even smaller than usual. She had never plucked or waxed her eyebrows, afraid of the pain, afraid that if she started she would never be able to get them to match. Her skin was puffy and blotched because she had had the shower too hot. After she had catalogued the flaws she saw in her face, she had moved to her small, uneven breasts, her bloated stomach, her thighs pressed together and finally, the hand with her engagement ring.

She had lifted her hand then, holding it in front of her, twisting it so she could see the ring reflecting the light above the mirror. She should take it off before she went to see Mick, she knew that, but taking it off seemed so melodramatic. And what would she do with it then? Leave it on the bathroom sink? Take it to her dressing table? Look for the velvet box it had come in?

Maybe this stranger had given her the answer: a specimen jar. From time to time she could hold it up to the light and look at it, this thing that was neither trophy nor souvenir.



‘What happened to the top of your finger?’ The man was talking again. ‘Jam it in the car door or something?’

Working in the hospital she had got used to the question, but she never liked it when people drew attention to it. Not that she was embarrassed, more that it didn’t seem right for a nurse to be broken. Nurses should be better at fixing things than breaking them.

‘Something like that,’ she said.

She was glad to feel the lift jolt to a stop and hear the slow mechanical sound of the doors opening.

The atrium’s light made Rachael blink. It always did. Not that the ward was dark. But the light was different down here and the shadows of sickness and the cloying smell of disease were barely traces.

‘I’ll see you later,’ the doctor said, smiling at Rachael again before she walked towards the admin corridor.

‘Yeah. See you later.’

Over at the public telephone a pierced young man stood leaning against the wall, the receiver in one hand, an unlit cigarette in the other. His chin was tucked into his chest and his foot scraped back and forth along the ground. Further along, a grey-haired woman sat on the cushioned seat of her walker. Next to her was another woman, younger but with the same round face, the same tilt of the head, staring fixedly at the door. A Lavender Lady straightened magazines at the kiosk. A doctor strode through the entrance and across to the lift, his white coat flaring at the knees.

Rachael passed them all and as the hospital doors opened, the last lingering smell of disease was lost in the mix of traffic fumes and rain. She reached for the bottom edges of her jacket, and fastened the zip to the knot of her scarf. She pulled her beret down over her ears, put her umbrella up. The wind, blowing in gusts, was as cold

as it had been that year. The coldest Adelaide May on record, and the wettest too. She pulled up the collar of her jacket and gripped the umbrella with both hands, her shoulders round, her eyes down.

Counting the rhythm of her steps she walked towards Mick's shop – one-two, one-two, one-two – watching her feet make small splashes on the street and wishing again she had her boots. She arrived at the entrance to the lane and paused, looking around as if she might not go down there. But she had come this far and she knew that she wouldn't turn back.

Nothing changed down this lane. The cafe lattes and vintage communist trinkets that filled other streets had passed this one by. Here, graffiti tags still covered the walls. Shadows of stains showed where piss and vomit had pooled on the ground and splashed the gutters in drunken combinations. The windows of the shop next door to Mick's were shuttered with sheets of concertina steel and a cracked sign read *FOR RENT*. The shutters of the shop on the other side were open, but the shop was dark and a large cardboard sign taped to the door warned *Appointment Only*.

Those shops made Mick's look more run-down than it really was. He needed to make an effort, Rachael thought. He needed to scrape off the chipped and faded paint and repaint the sign. *Adelaide Fishing Haven*. Keep it simple. Focus on the fishing gear, get rid of all of the other promises: *Knives sharpened! Wartime memorabilia bought and sold!* It was too much, Rachael thought. He needed to be more focused. She could help him with that. Help him think about his mission and values and his core business. She went to all the workshops at the hospital. Seminars and brown-bag lunches, she always put her name down for them, always took more notes than anyone. If Mick let her, she could use all of that and transform his business.

Rachael pushed at the heavy metal door, letting it bang closed behind her.

The shop's fluorescent lights were harsh and nothing was left in shadow: racks of knives locked behind glass doors, medals in the cabinet labelled *Regalia*, the odd collection of old toys and military papers in the *Memorabilia* cabinet.

Rachael might have preferred it without the lights. Without the light she might be able to ignore the knives. When she was young, she had been fascinated by the perpetual shine of the smooth, sharp blades. But that was before she knew that knives were not just for the butchers and grocers and chefs she had imagined. Before she understood that the dramas she read about in the paper and saw on the television didn't happen to just anyone at any time. There was always a reason. There was always something you didn't know.

Mick came through the door from the back of the shop, looked at her and stood without speaking. His head was shaved to the point that it shone, and he had let his beard grow back. She couldn't see the shape of his chest or biceps under the layers of winter clothes, but now Simon was gone she could let herself think of them again. Their bulk and tightness, their strength.

Rachael looked at Mick, catching his eye and not letting go. He was the one who had taught her how to do it, how to hold someone's look so they couldn't let go until you smiled or blinked or started to speak.

'Has Simon been?' she asked.

'Yeah. He was here.'

'Was he ...?'

'He was what you'd expect.'

The memory of Simon finding out played itself over in her mind. Coming into the kitchen and seeing him, the photograph in his

hand. The only photograph she had of her and Mick, taken by a stranger in front of the *Ethel* shipwreck on Yorke Peninsula. One weekend away, one photograph. And Simon had found it.

‘He worked it out about you and me. I didn’t tell him. He guessed. And when he guessed I told him ... I told him you and me were finished. Finished before ....’

Behind him she could see the sign Mick had taped to the workroom door: *STRICTLY NO ADMITTANCE!!* That sign was faded too and tattered around the edges. It had always looked ridiculous to Rachael, but even more so now. As if anyone he couldn’t stop at the counter would be stopped by a handwritten sign. Even if the sign was in capitals and had an extra exclamation mark.

‘Nothing’s changed, love. With you and me I mean. Nothing’s changed between us.’

Rachael hated Mick’s patronising ‘love’. It was the word he used for her mother, the word he had used for Rachael when she was a child. She knew he was using it now to keep that distance between them. But she wasn’t a child anymore.

‘Nothing’s changed.’

She heard him repeat the words, but she knew he didn’t mean them.

‘You know I tried,’ she said. ‘I did what you asked. I tried to forget about you. I tried to make it work with Simon.’

And she had tried, hadn’t she? She had let herself fall in love with Simon. She had got engaged, made plans to go to London. And he was the one who broke it off in the end. What more could Rachael do?

She moved towards Mick, pushing the gate on the counter to let herself through.

‘Stop!’ He pushed at the gate from his side, the force of it

knocking her back. 'Let it go, love. It's time for both of us to let it go.'

She heard the bell of the door behind her and someone coming in. Mick, his strength and energy shifting away from her, said, 'How can I help you, mate?'

*It's all right, she told herself. Give him time. He'll work it out.*

On the train, a tall, grey-haired woman came and sat across from Rachael, smiling as she settled herself into her seat. She held her back straight, her feet flat on the ground, and her bag on her lap. In her hand a large black umbrella, grounded, as if it were a walking stick.

'Nice day for ducks,' the woman said.

'Yes.' Rachael gave the smallest smile she could give without being rude.

'I had to get out of the house. Couldn't take another day cooped up inside with his lordship. I've been at the casino. It's Tuesday. They do free toasted sandwiches on Tuesdays. I had toasted sandwiches for lunch and stayed for the afternoon.' She smiled. 'And a little bit of the evening.'

Rachael nodded, hoping that would be enough to end the conversation. She knew all she needed to know about the casino. Free toasted sandwiches the texture of leather, lukewarm bottomless coffee and over-brewed tea. The casino was a dive any time of the day, but the afternoons were the worst. No windows, no clocks. Roulette tables empty. Blue-rinsed women who had long ago stopped going out at night and middle-aged men in open-necked shirts drinking pints of beer. Men like her father who believed in lucky machines and winning streaks and never believed it when people told them that the house always wins.

‘His lordship won’t be happy. He’ll be wondering where his dinner is.’ The grey-haired stranger was talking again. She had a ring on every wrinkled finger. The bands were gold, and the stones were silver, red and green. Rachael had no idea if they were real. She nodded, without a smile.

‘But just between you, me and the fishes, it’s been worth it.’ The woman patted her handbag and winked at Rachael. ‘So what have you been doing today?’

‘I’ve been at work.’

‘What do you do?’

‘I’m a nurse.’

The woman frowned, looked at her watch then looked at Rachael.

‘Funny time to be finishing. What shift have you been doing?’

‘I don’t work shifts. I’m just the normal nine to five.’

‘All nurses work shifts.’

‘Most of them do.’

‘You work at the Royal Adelaide?’

Rachael nodded.

‘I’ve got a friend, she doesn’t work there anymore, but she did. Worked there for forty years. Do you know her? Kath. Kath Bains?’

Rachael shook her head.

‘She worked shifts.’

The man who had been sitting quietly, his head down in a book, looked up. He was wearing a suit and tie and had a briefcase at his feet. He caught Rachael’s eye and winked. He looked familiar. Not someone she knew, but someone she recognised. That’s what happened working at the hospital. Everyone in the city looked familiar.

‘All right, well, this is my stop. Wish me luck with his lordship.’

‘Yes,’ Rachael said. ‘Good luck.’

The woman stepped off the train without looking back.

When Rachael stepped onto the platform at her station she could hear the sea and smell the brine. It was always there when she stepped off the train, reminding her she had left the city centre behind and was nearly home. It took fifteen minutes to walk from the station to the flat above her parents’ butcher’s shop. The bus stopped just outside the shop, but Rachael always caught the train. She liked its soothing roll, the smell of the steel, the industrial noise as it left the station.

It was already dark and stars had started to appear. Winter had settled in and each day was shorter than the last. The quickest way to get home from the station was along the lane lined with corrugated fences and marked with muddy holes. The lights the council had installed last year were soft round globes which made more shadows than light. The streets were still, the air was cold and each breath she exhaled hung in the air, a small cloud which quickly disappeared behind her. She walked with her hands pushed into the pockets of her coat.

A dog barked, a cat jumped on a fence with a quiet thud and the leaves of the vines rustled. Rats, cats, possums. Rachael wasn’t scared. She had known this lane all her life. All of its sounds and smells. The jasmine vines damp in winter, heavy with perfume in spring. The oil of the fish and chip shop thick in the air even after the shop had closed for the night. And as she got closer to home, the smells of her parents’ butcher’s shop. Chickens, lambs and calves. If a smell could be a colour, the smell of the butcher’s shop was a rainbow mixed in a pot so the colours were no longer luminous, just a dank and lifeless brown.

She knew she should stop in at her parents' house across the lane, but she didn't feel like facing them yet. She didn't have the energy for their silences and their unasked questions about Simon. She headed to her home in the flat above the shop.

The shop was not the same at night. Lit by the green glow of exit signs, and the dappled shades of silver and grey made by the lights from the street, it was a gentler place at night than it was during the day. The meat was cleared from the window display, the aprons were on hooks, and the till drawer was left open to prove the truth of the sign her father had stuck to the door. *No cash kept on premises overnight.*

Rachael hung up her coat then punched in the code for the alarm that monitored the shop at night and on weekends. At its warning beep, she jumped onto the first step to avoid the sensors. It was something she always did. Not for any reason. She had plenty of time. The alarm gave her an entire minute before it was set. The jump was just something else to keep life interesting.

She could hear the fridge as soon as she opened the door at the top of the stairs, a great lumbering thing that shuddered in and out of life all day and into the night. A hand-me-down to Simon from Mick. Simon, Mick and her father had carried it up the day Simon moved in. When they'd finished with the fridge and the few boxes of things, Rachael had heard Mick's quiet goodbye to Simon on the landing. 'You'll be all right here, mate. Things'll be good for you here.'

Hearing their whispered conversation had filled Rachael with a sudden and unexpected sense of tenderness and she had looked at Simon differently when he came in. Not as someone to help her stay close to Mick, but someone she could care for and protect. Simon cooked them a meal that night. Fish he'd caught from the jetty with chips cut thick and still in their skins. He raised his beer when they



sat at the table to eat and said, 'To Uncle Mick,' and she smiled and clinked her wine against his beer.

Now, the muscles at the back of her neck started to grip. Soon they would be pulling along her scalp and down the back of her eye. She pressed the pads of her thumbs against her temples but the throbbing didn't stop. Leaving the lights switched off, she walked to the French doors and pressed her forehead against the glass and cupped her hands at the side of her head. The glass was cool against her skin and a small circle below her nose fogged then cleared as she breathed.

She unlocked the doors, standing on her toes to pull at the bolt on the top. She took a sharp breath in as the cold air hit her, her skin first, the back of her throat, her lungs. She leaned on the waist-high railing, the rusting iron cold under her hands. Across the road, the shops had been the same since Rachael was a child – fruit and veg, fish and chips, seaside gifts – but now their ground-floor doors and windows were shuttered, their upstairs windows dark. Rachael shut her eyes, let the air close around her. She breathed it in, the thick smell of the winter sea. How could something ground you in a place so completely, while at the same time promising that there was so much more to see, to do and feel? She opened her eyes. The lights changed from green to red but they stopped no traffic, let none through. Someone – a man in a beanie and a jacket that came to his knees – emerged from a lane and walked down towards the jetty, a bucket and a fishing rod in one hand, a folded stool in the other. He stopped and turned, looking around as if he knew he was being watched. She pushed herself back into the shadows and watched as he turned again to his path, down to the jetty, down to the sea.

# MARY

1966

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The day Mary knew she would marry Jimmy, they were in the sand dunes, Mary and Jimmy and Barb. Mary and Barb were lying on their towels, knees bent, smelling of coconut oil, while Jimmy was leaning back against the dunes in a sandy throne that he had spent ten minutes moulding to fit his wide shoulders. He waved a crumpled box of cigarettes.

‘Who wants one?’

‘Are they Dad’s? You didn’t take them from Dad, did you?’ Barb spoke quickly, each word a bullet. Barb’s father was not like Mary’s. Mary’s father crossed the lane from the butcher’s shop back to their house every evening at half-past five; Barb’s father came and went. Sometimes he was at home, sometimes not. He came and went several times a year, sending postcards sometimes but more often than not leaving nothing but silence.

Mary had never heard Barb or Jimmy talk about their father’s absences, but she always knew when he was away again. In the days after he left, Barb’s shoulders lost their curve and her voice found its smile. When her father was away, Barb sometimes laughed. When his father was away, Jimmy was less anxious to get home at the end of the day, less likely to ask Mary’s father for an advance on his pay at the butcher’s shop.

‘You think he’s gonna notice these have gone?’ Jimmy laughed. ‘You think he’s gonna notice anything after the blinder he’s been on?’

Barb and Jimmy used words that Mary didn't understand and talked about things Mary had never seen. Blinders, benders, shiners. Jimmy lit a cigarette. Mary heard the crinkling of the paper and Jimmy's breath as he took the smoke in and blew it out again. The sulphur smell of the match quickly disappeared, but the tobacco lingered.

'That's better,' Jimmy said.

Mary pulled herself up slowly to sit. She stretched her legs and leaned back on the heels of her hands. Looking down her body, her skin smooth under the glistening oil, she was not displeased. The curves of her chest were as round and full as those of any of the girls in her year. She was almost the shade of tan she had spent the summer working towards, and the blue of her bikini top was perfect.

Mary's heart was racing, but she turned her head, held out her hand, fingers apart.

'Can I try one?'

Jimmy smiled, but it was a smile into the distance and not at her, and Mary didn't understand what it meant or where it was meant to go. She was filled with a longing for the smile she hadn't been given. It started in her chest and rolled its way through her body, like waves at the change of tide, each one a little higher than the one before. When Jimmy passed her the cigarette – pinched between his thumb and finger, the filter end towards her – she brushed the tip of her thumb against his finger. There was a fluttering between her legs and her nipples tingled. She looked at the cigarette, long and thin between her fingers, surprised to see her hand was steady.

'Put it in your mouth, suck, but don't breathe in too hard. Not yet.' She had never noticed the softness in his voice before.

She breathed it in. The smoke, the heat from the sun, the scratch of Jimmy's fingers against her skin. All of it real, but all of it a yearning for something she had not known existed. He smiled again and this time, she was sure, his smile was meant for her.

Mary had hardly known there was a war in Vietnam until Jimmy's birthday was pulled out in the lottery. She cried when he got the letter but he put his arm around her shoulders and said, 'Hey, I'll be okay. We're in there with the Yanks, aren't we?'

And now he was coming home from his training and taking his embarkation leave and she would try to remember that he was the one going away. He was the one who should be pampered and spoiled before he set off for war.

Mary went early to meet the train. The first one there, she passed the time walking slowly up to the end of the platform and back, trying not to look at the large clock, determined that she would not count each passing minute. Each time she reached the end of the platform she stood looking out along the tracks, the curve to the right heading north and the curve to the left south and east. That was the one that had taken Jimmy from Adelaide to Sydney, further away than anyone she knew had ever been.

The crowd started to grow as the train's arrival time grew near, and when the train pulled in her heart thumped and she could not swallow. When finally he was standing in front of her she could do nothing but stare at him, trying to understand the changes she could see. His face was thinner, his shoulders broader, and he had a tan no one else in Adelaide had this far into autumn. His khaki uniform, stiff and buttoned, had seemed too big for him when they stood on the platform and said goodbye, but now it was a perfect fit.

She could smell the night he had spent on the train. The

cigarettes, the broken sleep, the brandy he had sipped from his hipflask. Sydney. A place so far away it might be a different world. She tried again to imagine the things he had told her about in his letters: the dampness in the air and the smell of car fumes, the train to Katoomba and the sound of the currawongs. Around her the crowd pushed, shoved, jostled, laughed, but they faded as he reached out and took her hand, pulling her closer. She was so close to him that she could hear him breathe. His hand was on the back of her neck and he whispered that he knew a place they could go.

Had she been expecting this? Yes. No. Hoping? Yes. No. Yes. She wasn't certain what it was he wanted. In the weeks between now and his embarkation, what was she supposed to give him? Was it everything he might never have or was it something to come back to, something incomplete to fill his dreams?

It was a short walk to a small street that ran off Hindley Street, just across from Miller Anderson. She watched him sign their names in the register – Mr and Mrs Banks – and push the crumpled notes across the counter. The man behind the counter handed Jimmy an iron key attached to a piece of wood. 'Up the stairs, turn left and second on your right.'

She walked one step behind, words repeating themselves in her mind. *Virgin Mary*. She thought the words without even trying and they grew a rhythm, one syllable per step: vir gin ma ry vir gin ma ry vir gin ma ry vir gin.

The door squeaked on its hinges and opened up to a bed, wardrobe, desk and chair. The carpet was green and worn and she thought of how gritty and rough it would feel under her feet if she weren't wearing shoes. The thought of it made her clench her teeth.

Jimmy slid his bag off his shoulder and down his arm and joked as it hit the floor with a thud: 'Home sweet home.'

She stood at the window. Nothing she could see was familiar. The building next door was so close that she could have thrown a rope out the window and walked over to it. He reached around her to close the curtain. The room was darker, but still not dark.

She knew what was coming next, but of the details she had no idea. She was not afraid of Jimmy, but she was scared. She wanted to pray but didn't know what to ask. She sat next to him on the bed and let him put his arm around her shoulders. The shape of him had changed, she thought again, and everything she touched felt tight. She wanted to tell him no, she wanted to tell him yes.

She let Jimmy decide.

When it was over he slept.

Outside the room, the day went on, the light behind the curtains grew brighter, and footsteps on the stairs were heavy. She prayed. She asked herself, *If God forgives a war, can he also forgive me?*

He woke and she felt his fingers on her thigh and his hand on her breast. She did not understand what she was feeling, the lightness inside that came from places she had not known existed. She could not look at him until he lifted her chin with his finger and kissed her lips and this time he was soft and gentle and she wondered where it had gone, the rough and the thrust of before.

His arm was around her shoulders when he whispered, 'I will take this night with me,' and later with his hand on the back of her neck and his lips pulling at her ear he said, 'You'll wait for me.' She heard no question mark.

The seagull was waiting for Mary at the end of the platform, right where it always was, balanced on one leg, the other tucked so far up into its body that it was invisible. People were shapes and shadows around her that quickly dispersed. The train pulled out of the