

MILSON'S POINT

Redleaf Pool.

I remember, reflect on this as I'm sinking.

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From Drummoyne to Circular Quay. About half an hour. I'd hoped for delaying winds or engine trouble but today's sky is immaculate ultramarine against a backdrop of city that cannot resist its brilliance reflected in water.

Too early, sleepless. Almost deserted, the wharf. Voices, just fluttering nonsense, high-rises with their glazed faces almost surgically white looking down on the sea that gurgles, gently soothing. Voices begin now to ripple like waves, the ferry pulls in, the young girl with long black plaits timeless in her task of tossing the rope over the bollard and as always the ferry knocks officially against the wharf.

Sea tinged yellow through salt-crusted windows. Antique three-master at rest, sails furled, turning a dignified back on us. We move past the soldierly row of boats, always white, always steel-trimmed. Soft, lulling water sounds. On my way. I'd rather not be...

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...Frangipani, winking water.

Child-laughter flutters on the air between wafts of Savlon. Walk down the path under the tittering trees and hear the splash of child-waves. The sea here is tender, lapping

at kids' legs, quietly joyous with Sydney summer. Beach towels flare violets and reds and two sisters race, hilarious, up to the water's edge. And now slowly, clutching each other's hands and shivering, they splosh their way out to waist height, duck under and rise, screeching in that combination of fear and glee when the sea floor under them shifts with the determined rhythm of the waves.

'Keep hold of your sister's hand, Anne, or you'll hear from me!'

Well, at least it isn't Or by Christ you'll bloody hear from me. Our mother saves the extra vocabulary for when the door's shut at home. Even at six and four years old we girls know these things. Mum yells across from a beach towel, this one with big black feet patterned across it, a joke towel. Her sunglasses and her hair twisted up on her head into a small pigtail make her look like an embittered raccoon.

She and Dad don't argue; they fight. Brawl, really, would suit better, and even at age six, I sense that they need this; it's part of their marriage. But there's a truce today among the giggly plish-plosh, the toddlers tumbling in and out of the wavelets, the poot-put of spades firming up new sandcastles. And now here's Dad heaving across, water up to his thighs, (the height of his kids) ready to teach them to swim. Again. An ongoing, hopeless torture that both little girls always forget will be part of a day at Redleaf. Neither retains a clue about how to float and stroke simultaneously no matter how long he holds up either of them under their tums, getting the over-arm-kick-back-the-legs-motion going frantically, then gently taking away his hands so they sink instantly, thrashing back to the surface choking and bawling affectedly, adding their own salt to the water. And as always he does his block at his children's incompetence and cowardice...

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...The water at Milson's Point will, as I know it will, taste of a multitude of muck. Spilt ferry diesel, dropped seagull bread, seagull pooh, a decaying woody flavour off the pylons that hold up the wharf now tantalisingly close, now bobbing away as I flail about. The birds raucous overhead, looking down on all this flapping and gagging as I try to breaststroke, tangled in best clothes, trying to heave a sodden self above the waterline, the ferry backing away, bystanders on the wharf shrieking uselessly for something to be done.

Interestingly, I'm not too bothered by this potential for grubby drowning. I'm more concerned about that question. Why am I seeing that Redleaf day, why now, that pool so long past, those silky waves with the sun winking on them?

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...Redleaf Pool echoes with a stinging crack.

The obligatory smack for ineptitude in swimming. Dad heaves off in disgust. Snuffling in mortification, pitching for balance in the water, I examine the burning five-finger imprint on an upper arm. So I grab Jane's head and shove it under, pressing down hard so she writhes and struggles and her long brown curls swirl delicately on the sea surface. The water we're standing in is so clear I can see down to my feet. On the sand below two sets of toes scabble.

It's only a few seconds before horror overtakes fury and I let go and Jane rears up, snot and tear-covered, gagging and howling, so much so that half the crowd in the water are staring at us. At me.

A woman in tiger-skin patterned bathers comes wading over and takes hold of Jane's chin and starts to gently wipe away hair, tears, mucus, all the while soothing and declaring in what might be Maltese or Italian. What I know, right down to feet once more squirming for a foothold because the tide's coming in, is that I will deserve the belting that will come.

'Awoohh, awooh,' declares the little lady, patting Jane's cheek, smoothing soaked hair back over her ears, while the kid blushes the colour of sunburn at the sweetness.

'It's alright. She's alright,' I'm whimpering to the kind, shocked lady (who had to have seen the drowning experiment) and I take Jane's hand and we thwoomp and splash our way to shore.

Mum and Dad have been lying on their towels facing each other, intent on a clenched-teeth, hissed fight. (Brawl.) They haven't seen or heard a thing...

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...In the wet black, Milson's Point keeps trying to pull me down as I'm wondering where my handbag went. Someone on the wharf above throws me down a lifebuoy. Bad move; it's one of the old-school ones made of solid cork and it hits me in the face, hurting like hell. 'Aww...' a kindly voice sympathises from on high.

So why would I do that? Shove her head into the water? I'm questioning myself academically, as if life weren't in danger of being chewed up by the grinding propellers of the ferry, desperate to pull away so a rescue can occur. Objective about the whole experience, I wallow, sodden, filthy, smelling of flotsam that will doubtless be sticking to me when/if I'm hauled up finally onto dry land.

Because those two kids were branded. *Little* and *Big-enough-and-ugly-enough*.

Because Jane with the sapphire eyes and petal skin can banter, cajole, convince, win over. Skills that see me fume at their expertise. Because standing there in Redleaf Pool in the thrashing wake of paternal, huffing disgust, I can see it, never-ending, see my life. Our life. And unlike forever amiable, grudge-less Jane, I hate it.

And finally now in among the soggy bread-crusts and rainbow oil-puddles, I know that this is how *Little* protected herself...

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...Cockatoo Island. A slab of land like a piece of wet bread floating on sea, sun streaking off sandstone, the Bridge peeping over the horizon...

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Of course, siblings cannot travel the length of their childhoods in 24-hour combat, unlike their parents. In short time that day of playing-at-drowning is forgotten and we play with matches instead. Together discover the fun of biting, a pastime all the kids in the street take up. For a time no area of bare skin is safe.

One night, after a rare meal of roast chicken, we are allowed to break the wishbone. The parental roarings are gathering apace around the flat that overlooks Clovelly

Beach and tonight both adults are out, leaving us to watch Alfred Hitchcock on TV, the prospect of which is thrillingly terrifying.

I make my wish silently, Jane mouths hers, whispering wish that Mummy and Daddy will never part. Reading her lips and the half-embarrassed grin that goes along with that wish I smack her hard, will not tolerate mawkishness and fear. That inevitable cannot, must not, be contemplated.

Another night and hungry as hell, we attack leftover cold roast lamb, sawing at it with a butter knife, stuffing and gorging in the chill light of the open fridge door. Caught in mid-greasy-mouthful when the adults fling open the kitchen door. Compared to wild dogs. And as ever, promised boarding school in the morning. As ever.

And one afternoon, Mum again in Melbourne to escape her life and Dad out for an hour to catch up with a colleague (he said), we play hide-and-seek in the silent flat. And it is here that I discover the spectacular hiding place behind the stereo. Down here among the dust clots and plugs and cords I'm truly invisible, simply because noone would ever consider looking in here.

Squatting, shallow-breathing, I can see Jane's bare feet moving round the room, returning, leaving, moving back, moving round again. She's right up against me now even if she doesn't realise it; I can look up, seeing her standing at the window, staring out at Clovelly across the rooftops. And I know she will never find me and she is frightened. I've disappeared. But there's nothing to be gained in this debacle of success and so I rear up beside her.

'Hey!' I shout gleefully.

In one instant, the chubby face leaps from terror to relief to pleasure. And so we stand together looking out over the suburb to the sea, watching the trees judder in the soft summer northerly, the tiny yacht tacking across the crisp and glittering blue line of the horizon that is the ocean. The yacht disappears round a chimney (in the foreground) then reappears, sailing until it is hidden forever by the interceding bulk of a great church and the suburb turns lilac with short twilight and Dad still hasn't come home...

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...Balmain Wharf.

The water almost slurping, the old convict building that looks cut from blocks of gingerbread. The dread rises, plunges. Ditto the horror...

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...After the family bust-up, my misery will find solace in wrath and remoteness and books, Jane's in mesmerised bonding with the TV and in one long diahorrea crisis.

'Just clean her up, would you dear? And take her home?'

Miss Rowan of Grade Three is all gentle smiles, matching shades of milk-coffee wool and Pontius Pilate hand-washing.

And Jane, as I stand and view her, is a pongy mess, blubbering thickly, standing in the toilet, left no doubt exactly as the bloody teacher found her. This is her worst episode to date, necessitating the older sibling to be called out of class, away from the illustrated map of the West Indies, the class colouring in pictures in florid delight and

hearing all about Winifred Atwell, the big-toothed pianist who always wears polka dots onstage. 'I've met her', says Sister Cyril, preening while Grade Five goggle at her celebrity connections, 'one of the nicest people in the world.'

Legs smeared, hysterical with helplessness and shame, Jane has to be shoved back against the toilet bowl so I can get into the cubicle with her. Her howling is like a dog hit by a car. The noise and the stench bring on an instant and dizzying fury.

'Look, shut up, willya!' I roar desperately, trying to manoeuvre round her to wipe her clean enough to get her pants up so we can escape. Amazingly there is paper to perform the task, and in the permanent damp cold of these dunnies the child is wiped and scrubbed, with me despairing and raging as I flush and flush. Jane starts to sniffle and calm, picking her nose for comfort. There's a violent bashing on the door inches away from my head, bent down as I try to pull up her knickers.

'We've got to clean the toilets!' yells a loudly important voice outside the cubicle. (One of the boys, obviously, trying it on; the toilets, as everyone knows, are never cleaned.)

'Well, you're not going to do this one!' is the roar back, raspberry-faced with all this bending over. I start to straighten up just as the door is shoved open and cop the full brunt of it on my head, launching me backwards and nearly hurled down the dunny bowl.

'Godabuggery!'

My yell blares so loudly it makes my stunned skull thunder doubly and glittering spots spin in my eyes. Suddenly, silence. The would-be cleaners have pissed off, all that remains of them a faint skittering of shoes on concrete.

'OK, we're going,' I order, yanking Jane's arm, giving her school dress a final pull-down and we make our way out of the (mercifully) deserted playground.

Once back home, I fetch the old baby bath and fill it with warm water, plastic jug by jug while Jane makes for the toilet again, that kicked-dog keening seeping through the kitchen walls. 'Cut it out!' I yell at her through thin plasterboard, collecting towels, soap, deciding on pyjamas rather than clothes, she can climb into bed once she's bathed and snuffle herself to sleep until Mum comes home.

'I'm filling the tub for you, so just shut up for five minutes!'

The frowsy kitchen is swimming in my view now, I find I'm falling into the type of tears Mum sheds when I will not do as she orders, tears like those chooks in the fowlyard next door might shed when facing the chopping block - weak, dithering, low in salt. But in the slosh-sloosh of water, I lip-curl a sneer at this woman, at everyone in this dingy post-divorce world and that sees me suddenly declaring briskly through the kitchen wall, 'Come on now, buck up; no more tears, your bath's getting cold, Mum'll be back soon.'

Finally there is Jane, calf-deep in water while she is washed, no doubt unhygienically with the kitchen sponge, but the movement of the tepid water up and down her jellybean tummy has a regular rhythm and soon has both kids in better humour. She steps out onto a dry towel laid the way Mum's done it dozens of times and we both go at it, patting and wiping. Pyjama-ed, she is ordered to bed and actually for once

obeys, while I reverse the bath process jug by jug, pouring off water down the sink, again probably at maximum health risk.

'Just what are you up to?'

Ah, that squinted, damning glare, that need for something to be angry about. There's Mum, standing and hissing in the kitchen doorway as I try not to slop water onto the floor. Seething suspicion has me on the defense and out spills the whole stinking story, stinking job accomplished, concussion via dunny door and-ask-Jane-if-you-don't-believe-me. Silently, Mum reaches into her coat pocket and removes a bag of coloured jellies, hands them over after selecting one for herself.

'That's for being a real good girl,' she says distractedly, her mouth half full.

Amazed, grateful, I am silent. Chew devoutly. This is a surprise. It will be a rarity...

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...Balmain East Wharf. Nearly there. The arch of the Bridge, perfect Ken Done clouds, tall pines standing sentinel over the wharf...

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...And then of course, there are the mysteries in your sibling's life that burgeon as her height increases. And the putting up of walls, or at least high fences to avoid snooping. And the surprises you're treated to. Regularly.

*'I'm not going to uni,' she says at eighteen, as we sit eating Sunday breakfast.
'Getting a job instead.'*

'Doing what?'

*This is a family in which you do as you're told and if you leave home because you
won't and heaven knows I've tried, don't-bother-coming-back.*

*'Air-hostess-ing,' she declares, her face pinking up, waiting for shock or outrage from
me. I'm not the one to worry about, of course. The parental disdain glorified
waitresses/only stupid people take that up/only for little tarts/is what she needs to
prepare for.*

'Wait till you hear from Mum – '

'Stiff shit. I'm off on the tenth to start training – '

'Hang on. Haven't you got to be accepted or someth-'

*'Have been. Was. Got a letter from QANTAS yesterday.' By this stage she's on her
feet making more toast.*

'So you've been planning this.'

'You betcha. For ages. Saving up my supermarket holiday pay.'

I'm amazed. 'You never said you worked – '

'What did I just hear you say?'

Ah yes, the old hissing-at-the-door routine. The raccoon eyes narrowed, the anger always a-bubble in the hands on hips over the red dressing gown. And I'm waiting, with a kind of horrified glee, to see the reaction to the career move as it is briefly explained.

'Oh. Are you just?' The glare is on full beam.

'Yep. Have to pack now.' Jane carefully backs out of the kitchen. (The toast is quickly evolving into charcoal.) Mum stands stunned, then seats herself at the table heavily, huffing with outrage, impotent.

'Ungrateful little bitch,' she hisses anew, her hand shaking as she reaches for the teapot, 'she'll go to uni or I'll know the reason why not.'

'You do know the reason why –'

I'm cut off by one of those iconic lunges at her oldest, and which even at my age I jump back from reflexively. She pulls back, disgusted at the unfairness of not being able to hit a nineteen-year-old.

'Don't you bloody start. You're the one who puts ideas into her head.'

'I'm as surprised as you are.'

But what I am is jealous. Greenly sick with it. There was once a time when I confessed my desires, ones I hadn't carefully planned for like clever, enterprising Jane.

Thumped out of me one afternoon you can sing and dance and act and write when you've done what you're told to do lazy ungrateful little bitch. I woke up the next morning and found I couldn't be bothered anymore.

'Just wait till I get in touch with her father.' The teapot is picked up and then thumped down on the laminex.

'You said you were never going to speak to him again,' I offer, roused now, at least for a time with a little of the guts that Jane just showed as she took hold of her life. Another lunge.

'See ya.'

I'm up and out the door. Let her chase me. She'll look good racing up the street in that red dressing gown at eleven o'clock on a Sunday morning ...

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...Why remember this. The ferry bounces, spume riding on the wind.

Because you flew.

Away.

It hits me with a salty wash as I flounder, thrashing the waves that lollop up to the wharf, the gulls above circling, curious, chortling.

And saw everything. Everywhere.

And you made me do it. Finally.

You, waiting for the look on my face as we emerged out of The Tube on that London Saturday night and climbed up into Piccadilly Circus and met the statue of Anteros that kicked up his heels and caught the light from all the neon adverts in a prism that winked and flashed and said here-you-are-after-all-that-dreaming-and-wanting. And miming kiddy-stuff, we linked arms and skipped hysterically up to the London Pavilion, the tourist crowds puzzling and making way in case we were high on something. We were....

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...MacMahon's Point.

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'I love you too, Anne,' says Jane, when for a moment she can stop making that terrible, shocked moan. Bending over her, I keep kissing her sweaty forehead, stroking her arm and we weep in counterpoint. Until Mum pulls me away, dragging on my coat so she can get close. One more action I can store up in my cellar of fury at her and at the whole evil business. So I burn and seethe at the nong who diagnosed Bali Belly for Jane's ailments. And the moron who month after month told my sister that she was merely depressed and how a series of talks with him would fix everything. At all the other fuckers with their diagnoses - food intolerance/viruses/parasites/ allergies until of course it was too late and the malignant monster grew in the dark and fed on ignorance and racked up another win...

*

...Milson's Point.

Luna Park's entrance-face is leering, aware of the huge joke of it all, massive-toothed in the perfect Margaret Olley light. There is, of course, more than one problem with the flurry of memories that seep in on a day like today; you might just not watch where you're going. And that's how I walked off the metal plank that, to be fair, is weaving drunkenly forward and away on the swell of the current, just enough to help a distracted person take a dip betwixt plank and ferry. All very quick, very silent and very sousing.

But now as I thrash and struggle and remember, when I really ought to be focusing on getting out of this maelstrom of churning water and occasional screaming, I think instead of how utterly exhausting rage is to the *rager*. And how pointless. I should have recognised this; I lived with people who gorged on it. And there before me is a ladder, lowered down into the water and there I am at last swimming, well, plunging in its direction. It's a flashy one, alternate red and yellow rungs and the guy halfway down it and reaching out to me is also complementing that fashion statement in his bright yellow vest.

'Come forward, love, that's the shot, nearly there,' he chants as the crowd watching has shut up, intent on the drama and of course, applauds as I grip a rung, then a hand, and waterlogged and putrid with Harbour effluvia, I am coaxed to dry land.

There's little time to do anything but thank the yellow man and if I could I'd hug him and hang on and bawl, but the ambulance parked at the end of the wharf scoops me up and delivers me to hospital. Noone's listening as I insist I have to go to a funeral....

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...Finally, after sitting stinkily in a corridor I am admitted to a curtained cubicle and offered a hospital gown which I refuse to put on until I can clean myself. Shouting and tears seem to cut through to the harrassed nurse, who ushers me into a bathroom and dumps into my arms the gown, towels and a big black garbage bag.

Emerging and clad in hospital blue, redirected back to a cubicle and told to lie down, I finally do as I'm told. Neatly folded at the foot of the bed, a wardrobe of second-hand gear has been assembled for me, doubtless from a cache kept for victims of accidents who turn up at hospital badly dressed. New knickers, however. They look up out of a sealed Bond's pack. My soaked but now muck-free hair still bound up in a towel, I lie back and wait.

And now, as I doze for a minute, I see two sisters grinning, gripped in a phoney, nose-up stance, foxtrotting as the radio thumps to *The Codfish Ball*, the joists underfoot bouncing, the fact of one future denied for three minutes.

And see that hot, hot chocolate on the table in the café at Vaucluse House after one of your treatments. You're pale, but still pink, furious with Mum's tears, you insist she's a coward and *everything's all about her*. You're at war with your body and you're going to win. We're going shopping.

A sodden handbag is fetched up onto my bed. Cash and credit cards will be soggy but viable and although I will now look like a Ronald MacDonald doppelganger, I might just make it to that service. The reality of the day hits anew, a thump to the solar plexus as the doctor on duty works on me with his stethoscope.

'Are you scared of me?' he asks, grinning and handsome and cool.

‘No.’

‘Then why’s your heart racing?’ He’s chuckling, pats me on the arm. ‘You can toddle home when you feel like it,’ he beams.

‘I wish.’

He’s puzzled at this of course, but he’s off to the next cubicle. And with a bruise blooming like an opal on my jawline, I’m out the door in search of a taxi. The garbage bag dispatched to a bin, ditto the handbag, necessary innards deposited into the lolly-pink fleece jacket I now wear....

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Circular Quay, the sun as always bouncing coins of light on the water, the wake of ferries effervescing, the parental car just pulling in and the glare at my grab-bag of clothes I ignore. So the day moves forward, mutual disdain means silence as the car bolts up Macquarie Street and makes for Surrey Hills.

And as the engine croons and the shambles of streets is negotiated, I’m remembering anew that soggy realisation about rage and the wreckage it lays around us, so I venture a conversation to those who must be together today, like it or not.

‘I fell off the ferry.’

‘Jesus Christ. Are you alright?’

That’s Mum, horrified through the rear vision mirror.

‘Yes. Yes. Fine. Hence the stuff I’m wearing; from the hospital.’

‘Thank God you’re okay. You are, aren’t you?’

That’s Dad.

‘Sure.’

‘Good. Thank God.’

(That’s a surprise.)...

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...As is the funeral service.

It’s packed, it’s like a party. People stand round waiting for us to enter and the air chatters like a magpie convention. Someone called Ed comes up to me, clasps me almost in a chokehold and eyes brimming but still with a game grin, he hands me a little leather book.

‘You’ll want this,’ he says as he clasps it in my palm, ‘ it’s hers.’

Another guy with a vaguely Euro-accent tells us he’s called Boro and embraces all three of us and tells us she was too beautiful to forget.

It's like this all the way through the service as I begin to wake up to a fact. *You organised all this, you planned this out*, and just who the hell all these people are stumps me and the parents and I grip that little book while a succession of people stand up and tell their stories about you and there's laughing and nodding and tears.

Celebrating the life of.

A charming furphy, that. Probably invented by a culture shit-scared of death. But sitting now in the room that serves sandwiches and tea, it does help a little; so does the absence of the unbearable sight of your casket, you're in an annexe and topped with banksias, waratahs, gumnuts. Home flowers.

I look out the window at the bragging beauty of Sydney afternoon and see you there, standing on a diagonal corner, toggled up in your hostie's uniform that you loved so much, wheeled suitcase at your side, Bolle sunglasses shading your eyes. Waiting for the airport bus, my flyer, my flee-er. Lucky you, who never needed forgiveness, who only came home to die....

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...And so now that little leather books sets down lovers, alliances, ambiguous, risky joy, of a life secured intensely in adventure of your own making and building.

What really happened in the basement of the George Cinq? It's hinted, but that's all. And the proposal in the creepy Bone Church, the parties by the lake in Zurich, recipes you wrote down from Galway, the frightening bus crash in Moscow, *Aida* in front of

the Pyramids in the shivering desert night. Photos fall out of the tightly written pages, scenes of crowds and dinner tables, glasses and voices raised....

*

So long in the past, your little book warm in my hand today. Fewer and fewer the nights when sorrow rises in the dark on a sweaty pillow to flay with grief and despair. Instead, in the near-immortality that emanates from dreams and memory, you come down the hallway into my lounge room (park that little suitcase) sit down and we settle back and watch TV, today's news the commonplace maelstrom of abject horror and gorgeous dazzlement.

You missed 9/11, two nutjobs hurling jets into skyscrapers, the Russian sub that drowned all who sailed in her, Mum and Dad shuffling off, Princess Diana's car crash. Then again, you also missed out on The Wall coming down, the great Mandela released from jail, little Prince George, *Poldark*, online shopping.

And of course, cures for everything, cures for what ailed *you*. Wrong time, wrong place. Not like you at all.

In my hands now the two-inch square photo that rested inside that diary. That accidental photo. It's a *proof*. In all senses. There you are, you're five, peeping onto the edge of the picture. You actually have no idea you're in it and Dad's going to be typically incensed when the pictures come back from the chemist.

It's meant to be a photo of Mum, looking glamorous in that late 1940's way. In those days, Dad said she was often compared to Ava Gardner. In profile, she's in a sleeveless white blouse with a mandarin collar, she's seated on a park bench, the park overlooking Manly Beach.

Water.

Water.

Christ, hasn't it been in our lives forever, I ask Jane as I look into the scene. In my mind's eye she nods and shakes her head, absorbed in watching *The Project*.

Mum's wearing the corsage Dad gave her when they went to a New Year's Eve dance at Sydney Town Hall. She's in profile, an unhappy Ava, the corsage of gardenia and fern picked out sharply, delicately, against the white linen. Behind her, the black and white amphitheater of the Norfolk Island pines.

And there you are, bottom left-hand corner, just into shot, looking out at the day, the clinging January warmth, smells of fried fish and sun-cream, crisp chat of the pines as the sticky breeze flicks through them, proud blue of sky on the horizon and what it holds for you.

And what I see now is that curious-in-abstraction look you have, that preoccupation with the beyond, that you have no intention of telling anyone about.

Reading the vibe, looking out to sea, to the limitless, wondrous horizon....
