

The Turning

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RAELENE COULDN'T STAND being in the caravan another bloody minute. After last night, the girls'd hardly look at her. They just sat out in the annexe on their beanbags watching 'Sesame Street' so loud it took the enamel off your teeth. She was crook as a dog and her face hurt. She gabbed a couple more Panadol and started bagging dirty clothes, half of which stank of craybait and bloke sweat and Christ-knows-what. Then she humped the whole lot over to the laundry block, wincing in the light.

The park was almost empty. There were a few tent sites with surfers on them, but apart from those and a few old farts with Winnebagos and pop-ups, it was just the permanents now, the skeleton crew.

Fresh-mown grass felt good beneath her feet and over the green smell of it you could almost taste the sea. It was actually a brilliant autumn day. Sunshine felt pure and silky on her skin; it took her mind off the chipped tooth and her throbbing lip.

In the laundry a woman she didn't know was pulling clothes from one of those skanky beat-up washers and Raelene sighed. She was sick of conversations with people passing through. Nothing you said to each other mattered a damn because you'd never see them again.

Raelene dumped her stuff on the bench and the other woman looked up. She had long tanned legs and her blonde hair was pulled back in a silver scrunchy. She was good-looking. No, bugger it, she was better than that, she was beautiful.

Boy, said the stranger brightly. That must have hurt. Raelene put a hand to her mouth. A twinge of shame went through her.

Took me weeks to work up the courage to have my ears done, said the woman, patting the flat brown of her belly. Isn't it worse there? Didn't it sting like blazes?

Raelene stared a moment before she understood. She touched the stud in her navel and smiled the best she could. She was suffused with gratitude, a warm rush of feeling that nearly made her bawl.

It was nothin, she murmured. Easier'n gettin a tat. You've got a tattoo as well? I'm such a coward.

Raelene turned around. The tat was in the small of her back, just up from her bumcrack.

Handle With Care, said the woman, reading.

Raelene felt stupid then. She knew what a fuckin irony it was. She blushed for shame.

By the look of her, the look that said leafy suburb, Country Road, briefcase hubby, this woman'd wrinkle her little nose for sure, but she didn't smirk, didn't turn a hair. My name's Sherry, she said.

Raelene could have hugged her. Sherry. She was no stuck-up bitch. She was a real surprise, out of the ordinary. The whole hour they stood there at the machines or pegging up clothes on the listing hoists outside, Sherry never once mentioned Raelene's face. Her laundry was all button-down shirts and silk boxers and delicate bras and cottons while Rae's looked bleached and butchered by comparison - tracky dacks, Yakka shirts, kids' pants with holes and paint stains. Rubbish. But Sherry didn't seem to notice. She asked how long they'd lived here and what they did in the off-season and how old the girls were, as if she gave a bugger. She asked about Max's boat and who his skipper was, and whether there was anywhere in White Point you could buy fresh asparagus. Then she talked about her husband Dan and his new job at the depot. He was the local manager of live export. He dealt with the laps, mostly. They'd bought a house here.

They had a good feeling. They were renting a van while they had the place painted. There was something squeaky clean about Sherry. She was all wrong for White Point and wrong for Raelene but you couldn't help but like her, love her even. She was too bloody good-looking, for one thing, too beautiful to be believed. But she had something special. She listened. She gave a fuck. There was kindness in her. Straightaway she was a friend.

That month, while Sherry and Dan rented the twenty-eight footer beside the windmill, Raelene saw her new friend almost every day and when she didn't she missed her. Some mornings they walked over the dune to play on the beach with the girls or lie with them in the warm shallows of the lagoon. Sherry told the kids stories or helped them build sandcastles. She wrote their names for them, did things Rae was often too slack to bother with. While Raelene worked on her tan out of the wind, Sherry plaited the girls' hair and read to them. Rae lay there listening, laughing, basking in the company as much as the sun. She hadn't had such a friend since school and even then her friends were backstabbing bitches.

Sherry changed the mood of the van park. You could feel the atmosphere shift around her and it wasn't just that every man within coo-ee wanted to get into her pants. It was something deep. Some extra life to her.

Sherry's bloke Dan worked office hours which is why he and Max never met that month. When Raelene finally met him his face lit up with recognition. Sherry, he said, never stopped talking about her. He had short, dark hair and a square jaw like a swarthy Ken doll. That was it. The two of them. They *were* a bit Barbie and Ken. He was very handsome but a bit too well-groomed for Rae's taste. Max was a slob but at least he didn't have girly-smooth hands. In fact they were a different species. Dan was funny but polite. He was attentive without staring at your tits the whole time. He was comfortable with himself. Maybe, thought Rae, being the boss does that to you.

Max got up at three or four or five to go fishing. He spent afternoons down the pub or over at the clump of vans everybody called the Cesspit. He'd heard of Dan because his boat fished for the company and he knew about Sherry because nobody could stop talking about her. But he never asked about either of them. He wanted to know where his thermos was and what was for dinner and when the fuck his luck would change.

He'd always been Raelene's kind of bloke, the sort of man her sisters always had, the kind their mother flirted with, blowing smoke and wisecracks from the side of her mouth. Rae didn't go men who dressed fancy or slapped on aftershave. She was a bit suss about TV men who talked about their feelings all the time and men who cried gave her the screaming creeps. Right from the start Max was a bloke who didn't muck around. He never pretended to be what he wasn't. The night they met, at a twenty-first, he stared at her like a hungry man, like she was food, and it made her feel powerful. All night she had tingles knowing he wanted her. During the speeches she led him behind the pool shed and with his cold belt buckle flapping against her thigh and his hands strong beneath her she knew she had what she wanted. She couldn't keep him a secret more than a few days. He was twenty and loaded with cash from fishing and he bought them both tickets to Bali where they got trashed for a week and screwed themselves silly. When she brought him home her mother made a fool of herself and her sisters were jealous. Raelene didn't hold it against them _ it was only natural.

But Max was getting a gut now. After years of slinging craypots his back was stuffed. There was no way he'd be able to hold her up against a pool shed anymore. His teeth weren't great and under his new beard his mouth was turning down at the sides like a man disappointed. Raelene couldn't pin down when it was that Max turned sour. Maybe when the girls came along. Or when he saw deckhands younger than him getting jobs as skippers. He said he wasn't the brownnosing sort, that you had to know the right people and there was some truth in that, but Rae knew that Max pissed people off. In the pub they called him Aggro Max. He often came home bloody and sore, especially after a live game on the big

screen. His brother Frank was a footballer and you'd think he'd be proud but he wasn't. Just the sight of Frank loping out onto the ground made him scowl and the slightest fumble turned Max into a maniac. At first people thought it was funny to hear him call his brother a fairy, a retard, a waste of skin, but Frank was a star, a local, and White Pointers loved him.

Raelene imagined that she still loved Max. When they made love the whole van rocked. Whatever kind of bastard he was, he still needed her. After all these years he had that hungry look, staring at her arse and thighs when she got dressed, and the feeling that gave her was something she couldn't explain, not even to Sherry.

Sherry wasn't the nosy type, yet she was a good listener and now and then, lulled by the sun and the lapping water, Rae let on a little about Max and her. There was something neat about Sherry, something prim, so she tried to shock her with talk about Max and her in bed. Sherry surprised her by laughing and countering with stories of her own, what Dan liked, what she let him do. Sex is a blessing, she said. She was unshockable. Even when Raelene told her about Max's temper Sherry seemed more thoughtful than disgusted. Rae held back a lot of details but Sherry'd seen her face. She knew.

Love conquers all, said Sherry.

I dunno, she said doubtfully. Sometimes I don't think so. You just need a little faith to see you through, Rae. You're a good wife, a good mother. Everything happens for a purpose, you know. You'll be alright, I just know it.

Talk like that heartened Raelene. She came away feeling good about herself and she stood in front of the narrow mirror and saw that she was still pretty. Smoking had left pucker lines around her mouth but her tummy was flat and her skin was clear and tanned. She was the same dress size she'd always been. She was no Sherry, though the boys from the Cesspit still paid her close attention whenever she walked by, and compared to some other women in town, like the girls in the Tuesday night darts team, she was a deadset trophy.

Raelene never did convince Sherry to come along to darts night and in a way she was glad because it meant that she didn't have to share her with the others. Rae didn't give a bugger about darts. Tuesdays were just a night out in a town where there was nothing else to do. Her teammates were rough old boilers in tracky dacks and stretchknit tops. They were good for a laugh once a week but they weren't really friends. They were proof that the further you let yourself go, the better you needed to be at darts. Rae was just making up the numbers. It was fun to imagine Sherry there, even if it was better that she didn't come.

When Sherry's place was ready and the removal truck had come and gone, Raelene spent three days helping her move in properly. The house was a big, brick joint, the sort that a middling kind of owner-skipper would build. Sherry and Dan had nice things - a glass table, white leather couches and a kingsize bed. While she and Sherry chatted and worked from room to room, the girls played in bubblewrap. They chased Sherry's cat and climbed in and out of boxes. They begged Sherry to tell them more of her stories, and she obliged them as she could. The girls always wanted David and Goliath or Jonah and the Whale. Sherry held them spellbound.

When Raelene got home from the third day the caravan was a mess and so was Max. He'd kicked the mirror out and there was blood all over the floor. The whole time she was washing and dressing his cut foot he pissed and moaned about coming back to an empty home and having to heat up his own lunch again and when Rae laughed at him for being so bloody stupid he clouted her in front of the kids. When he was gone, limping off toward the Cesspit, she settled the girls down, cooked them spaghetti on toast and bathed them in the sink before bed.

She was asleep when Max came home. She woke with his finger in her. He stank of beer and bait and sweat and, tired as she was, she opened up to him out of sadness. She could have shrugged

him off but she couldn't be bothered. At least he was gentle and with his hands on her breasts and his belly against hers there was no harm in it and even a shadow of original feeling, a faint and momentary comfort that didn't claim her attention long. She lapsed back towards sleep and in that softened, dreamy state she felt like a kid again, lying in the back of a station wagon on a night drive home, the roar of the surf from the other side of the dune like the roadnoise in the wheelarches, and the light flashing on Max's head as he rocked in her so like the blink of streetlights falling by. Raelene surrendered to the feeling. She floated warm and safe in something familiar, almost asleep again until she surfaced with a jolt and a cry and realized that she was coming despite herself and the sensation was like the mild shocks you sometimes get from the badly earthed taps in the shower block, and when the spasms passed and Max continued to labour away on his own behalf, there was such a wash of relief that she lay back immune, vaguely hearing but not taking in anything he said through his clenched teeth as sleep consumed her.

When she woke it was five o'clock and Max was gone. She stretched, luxuriating in the sudden spaciousness of the bed, and slept on until old man Harrison's mower came by at ten.

Sherry came by at noon and said nothing about the pancake foundation on her face. Rae knew she looked like a bad job from the panel beater. You could see it in the girls' faces. Sherry just hugged her and helped her pick up around the van before Max's boat got in.

In the afternoon, while Max ate his steak and eggs in weatherbeaten silence, still in his singlet and shorts and sea boots, Rae wondered about Sherry, what it was, apart from looks, that she had. It was a bit of a mystery.

On darts night Raelene left an hour early to drop by Sherry's on the way home. When Sherry came to the door she seemed alarmed. She held Rae by the shoulders and inspected her face, and it was only when she satisfied herself that there was nothing wrong that she relaxed and asked her in. Dan got up from the couch and offered her coffee, went and made it himself. For an hour or so Rae regaled them with tales of the darts girls. She stank of beer, she knew, and she smoked her Benson & Hedges and they gave her a saucer as an ashtray and were too decent to wave the smoke away. She wondered if it was money that made them different. But plenty of fishermen made loads more than Dan; it couldn't be that. She went home happy but puzzled.

Raelene made a habit of dropping by on darts night. Dan and Sherry were usually still up, watching TV. Some nights she was weaving a bit when she arrived but they didn't seem to mind. There were times when she knew she was pestering them, when she really was a pain in the arse, and once or twice, when she was completely pissed, she felt herself trying to provoke them like a bloody teenage daughter, but they remained unfailingly polite and courteous. Deep down Rae sensed that she wanted something from them. She just didn't know what it was.

One Tuesday she came by late. It was after eleven and the lights were out. When Dan came to the door he was only in his boxers. He looked startled, embarrassed. He said her name so loudly that Sherry appeared in the hall behind him with her lipstick awry and her hair all ruffled.

You've been at it! she yelled.

Would you like to come in, Rae? asked Dan. Don't think so, said Raelene. It wouldn't be fair.

Sherry began to laugh. She tossed her gorgeous hair and stood there in her lace teddy a second before clapping a hand on Dan's shoulder and drawing him back from the door, smiling all the while at Rae and wiggling her fingers goodbye. For Raelene there was nothing for it but to pull the door to and walk back out into the quiet street laughing. But by the time she got home she felt desolate. She wanted what they had, that special something, and when she looked down at the outline of Max snoring in her bed she bawled quietly and the effort to keep silent hurt worse than a beating.

When Sherry didn't come over for a couple of days Raelene felt frantic. The first real cold front of the season came through and rain drove in off the sea. The swell spewed mounds of stinking kelp and seagrass onto the beach and all the boats stayed in, shaking and lurching at their moorings like chained dogs. Max was around the whole time, scratching his beard, eating and farting and sulking, and the girls got on Rae's wick, whingeing about going outside and needing the toilet, while all day every day the rain pissed down.

Why can't we have a bloody house? she screamed over the TV and the wind and the squalling girls. With a toilet, for fucksake, so we don't have to walk a hundred yards to have a shit! I mean, how bloody hard is it?

Max didn't even answer.

She trudged across puddles with the girls and bowed before the rain. While each of them sat in a cubicle swinging their legs she tried to light a little joint she'd been saving but the bastard of a thing was too damp to catch so she ate it instead and five minutes later puked it back up.

Raelene couldn't stop thinking about Sherry and Dan. She was hooked now. Maybe even in love with them. The weird thing was that she felt no envy, not the hot green bilious envy you'd expect when you saw their stuff and their doll-like looks and what they had going between them. When she was with them they didn't make her feel low, they didn't rub her nose in the mess she was. They lifted her up somehow. They were kind of straight and maybe they wouldn't last long in White Point but she felt different with them.

There came a Tuesday when Raelene blew off darts night altogether and just went straight to Dan and Sherry's. When they let her in, surprised to see her so early but not at all reluctant to greet her, she saw that beside the empty plates and glasses on the dining table there were books open. Not just books—they were Bibles.

Raelene began to laugh. She heard herself, she sounded like a bloody madwoman and she wished she was drunk.

No darts tonight? asked Dan, putting the kettle on. His black hair was just too fuckin perfect.

Cancelled, she lied.

Feel like some gnocchi, Rae? asked Sherry. There's plenty left. No, said Raelene, unable to settle, to sit, to look them in the eye.

She knew things about them, what they did in bed, what labels they wore, the kind of towels they bought and the sort of fabric softener they used and even, having laid the paper in them herself, how their bloody bathroom drawers were set out, but she suddenly realized that she didn't know them at all. She blinked like an idiot and thought about it. All the stories Sherry told the girls. Rae'd thought of them, if she'd noticed them at all, as old-timey tales, adventure stories. But it was church stuff.

So it's this, she murmured.

This? said Sherry, sitting and crossing her lovely legs and raking her fingers through her hair.

This! said Rae. She slapped a hand down on one of the Bibles.

Oh. That! said Sherry with a laugh.

Raelene felt the ricepaper cling to her sweaty fingers. She had to shake the thing free and she left the pages badly crumpled. Shit, she mumbled. Sorry.

It's fine, said Dan, shrugging. I wondered what it was.

The Bible, said Sherry.

I know what the bloody thing is, she said, catching herself.

I mean, I wondered what made you different, what it was you had. It's religion, isn't it?

Well, faith, yeah, said Dan with a nervous smile. That and plenty of Vitamin C.

Dan, said Sherry in the mildest scolding tone.

Raelene began to cry; she couldn't help herself, she didn't know why she was doing it. Sherry led her to the couch and held her. She smelt of garlic and tomato and Givenchy and Rae felt her patting her hair and stroking her neck while she howled. She was aware of Dan still in the room, of Sherry's body firm and cool against hers. It was like a trap, as though they'd been expecting this, and now was the moment they'd fall on her and drag off her blouse and reef up her skirt and hold her down for each other, whispering weird shit at her like on the movies and the sick thing was that she was ready for it. She wanted them both, wanted to *be* them. For a moment she didn't care if they killed her, even, as long as it was over quickly.

But nothing happened. Nothing more than Dan bringing her a cup of tea and Sherry reaching for a box of Kleenex. In the end, out of a kind of dismay, she stopped blubbering.

You look so tired, said Sherry.

Tired of my fuckin life, said Raelene, chewing her lips. Well, what about Max? How about the girls?

I'm a shit mother, you know that.

You two wanna go for a walk? asked Dan. There's nowhere.

The beach? The dunes?

I'm bloody stuck. I'm fucked. The moon's out, said Dan.

I can take a hint, Dan. I'm goin, orright? Don't be silly, said Sherry.

But Rae was on her feet now and her blood was up. She shook Sherry off and waved her arms at whatever it was that Dan was saying and launched out into the yard and the street where there was no one, only a salty wind.

Because it was still early, and she'd been bawling till her eyes felt lumpy and swollen as balls of sago, she could hardly waltz into the pub or just give up and slink home with Max still awake. So she went to the beach anyway, walked out along the great white sandspit that bordered the lagoon. Dan was right, the moon was up. It washed everything ghostly-bright. The air had a real winter sting to it. She was way under-dressed. Breaking waves flashed on the reef, flickered like her thoughts.

She *was* tired, yet it wasn't ordinary fatigue. It was a deeper exhaustion. She was sick of herself, appalled at what she'd been thinking only minutes ago, ashamed of what she was, a mother who didn't much care. Maybe someone like her didn't deserve better than Max. She didn't love him at all. But she was too scared to leave him, and not just because she was afraid of what he'd do to her or the girls if she did. No, she was really more frightened of being alone. The girls'd never be enough for her. She needed a bloke, she hadn't been without one since she was thirteen years old and now it was just unthinkable. The only way she'd leave Max was in the protection of another man. She needed a rescuer. She couldn't go alone. And in a town like this the available men were fatguttled skippers whose wives had already left them or the adolescent deckies in the Cesspit across the van park. There was nobody. And now she'd have to endure it without even the comfort of friends.

When she got home, shivering and heartsick, Max was out to it and the girls needed extra blankets. She sat between their bunks and felt the contours of their bodies under her hands. She felt so low it almost hurt to breathe. She wondered if one day she'd ever work up the guts to top herself.

Late next morning Sherry dropped by but Rae saw her coming and retreated with the girls into the van. While the other woman knocked and called, Rae lay under the table with her hands over the girls' mouths. When Sherry was gone Rae went into a cleaning frenzy, scrubbing and scouring until her hands burned. The girls looked on bewildered. She roasted a chicken for Max's lunch and wore her sluttiest little dress, despite the weather.

The sun came out next day and Sherry found her making Play-Doh with the girls. She seemed uncomfortable, anxious, and several times tried to shift their stilted conversation away from the good weather or the comings and goings of people in the park but Rae cut her off. For half an hour or so they just played with the kids and said nothing at all.

Raelene watched Sherry closely, saw the attention she lavished on the girls, how she always had her hands on them. She wondered if Sherry and Dan were able to have kids. Maybe they couldn't. Maybe that's why she befriended her, to get hold of her girls. They weren't your ordinary people, that's for sure. Maybe they were from some kind of cult that preyed on people like her. But then she caught herself. Jesus, she was sounding nuts now. Only yesterday she was crawling around in her own caravan, lying on the floor, hiding from her own best friend.

Sherry didn't come by the next day, nor the days afterwards. Raelene felt herself sinking. Her recent efforts to please Max fell away. She bought a fifty-cent Bible at the junkshop next to the bakery and spent the rest of the week reading in fits and bursts that made her head ache and caused her to grind her teeth in frustration. She found a couple of stories the girls liked but they were buried under whole avalanches of stuff so boring, so impossible, you could scream. The whole business made her wild.

On Tuesday she gave darts the flick again and went over to Dan and Sherry's. They seemed surprised and relieved to see her and they'd barely let her in the doorway before she launched into them about religion, about how she didn't believe a word of it and how sick of bloody hypocrites she was. She gave it to them about the Pope and George W. Bush and the priests who abused children and it just didn't help matters that they kept nodding and agreeing. She ran out of puff. Dan put the kettle on.

You never have any booze in this house, said Raelene, laughing to mask her awful embarrassment.

That's ... there's a reason for that, said Sherry, smoothing down her skirt.

Because you're churchy, right?

Actually, said Dan, it's because I'm an alcoholic. Oh. Jesus. Sorry.

Dan smiled, folded his arms.

White Point's a kind of second chance for Dan, said Sherry. For us.

That's why you don't work, Sherry? Sherry shrugged.

And that's why the religious stuff?

Partly, said Dan. Booze leaves a pretty big hole. A higher power? That kinda thing?

More or less.

We're kind of finding our way, said Sherry. Shit. Raelene began to laugh again.

What?

I thought ... I thought you were gonna kidnap me. It's so stupid.

Well, said Sherry, we had considered it.

Raelene fell into fits and Dan made the tea. They talked until midnight and Rae left restless, ashamed, full of yearning.

Raelene kept up the charade of heading off to darts night but she never actually went. In addition to spending every other morning with Sherry she put in a whole evening with Dan and her on Tuesdays. It was something to look forward to because what they talked about - argued about, most of the time made her mind race. They prattled on about whether people were basically good or evil at heart. For a whole night they talked about souls and Dan confessed that he believed animals had them. Homosexuals were a troublesome topic. Raelene found herself arguing against their being consigned to Hell, even though she didn't much care for poofs, whereupon Sherry expressed doubts about Hell itself and Dan brought his Bible out and there they got bogged down.

Raelene warmed to the idea of Jesus and the business of forgiveness. The word *sacrifice* gave her goosebumps, reminding her of gory midday movies from childhood. She could see for herself what all this guff had done for Sherry and Dan; it was the thing that lit them up and she leaned toward it, even pined for it. If they'd been plain, homely people you'd have to dismiss everything they believed as weakness, as consolation, but they were beautiful. When someone as sexy as Sherry talked about becoming whole you had to take notice. Yet for all her yearning Raelene was not convinced of the details. She appreciated the sense of it - well, some of it - but she didn't *feel* anything.

Even so there was a time on one of those walks home along the stormy beach when there was no moon out and you could sense the heavy cloud but not see it racing inland and you only had the pale, vague strip of sand to navigate by. Rae found herself walking with her hands outstretched, overcome by the apprehension that she was about to stumble into something on the smooth, empty beach. She became breathless, panicky, and just as she'd started muttering aloud, talking herself down from this queer spin she was getting herself into, a patch of stars opened up low in the sky ahead of her and stopped her in her tracks. At first she thought of a shimmering bit of cloth, like a piece of the dress her mother once got from a bloke she almost married, but the image didn't last because she went on to thinking of candles and lamps and campfires and she felt woozy for a moment as if she was in the clouds herself and looking down through a gap to see the fires of a thousand desert camps. There were lights impossible to count and around them, in her mind's eye, people huddled, all of them searching like herself, afraid, wondering, looking into their fires, with the sky a blank over them. She didn't know why she thought of deserts and campfires except for the reading she'd been doing, all those name-strangled stories from the Old Testament that left her cold.

That night in bed, still rattled by the dizzy moment on the beach, while Max honked and farted beside her, she remembered a night from childhood. Other fires. A long, flat estuary and the shadows of trees and the smell of prawns cooking. Crabs on the boil. The smell of mud. Mosquitoes. The whole beach strung with lamps and campfires, so many families out there in the dark dragging nets through the water and laughing. A man singing. A high, lovely voice. So slowly around it, like the tide rising, the sound of others joining in, men's voices, children, women, the whole night singing. But still at the core of it, that high sweet voice, her father's, faceless forever in the dark.

The cray season wound down into the last lean days of May. It hadn't been much of a season to begin with but now, with four weeks left and the water cold and the swell up most days, Max came in shitty. He was on two-day pulls; he should have been mellow but Rae could see he'd be looking for work in the off-season and the prospect made him nasty. He snarled at her, turned his nose up at her cooking and pissed his pay away at the pub. In the first week of June his brother quit football, just walked. It was a scandal. Max put a bloke through the window of the pub. There

was talk of him pressing charges. He pushed Rae's face into the fridge door and her eye came up something awful.

While her shiner was still puffy Raelene drove Sherry to Perth with the girls for a day. The country was green again, the light soft and grey. The girls slept.

You know you should leave him, Rae, said Sherry. I have to say it. I couldn't live with myself if I didn't say it.

Raelene was shocked. She put a hand to her eye. She'd really bogged the make-up on but it hadn't fooled anybody. Having Sherry say this - it was like a betrayal. She'd never once judged Rae before.

I'm saying it as your friend, Rae. I mean it. We could get you somewhere today, someplace safe.

I've got no money. I'll give you money.

You're *paying* me to leave him? Rae.

What about love conquers all? Nobody has to put up with-
And commitment? And forgiveness? All that stuff you talk, it's just talk then?

No, Rae.

Raelene suddenly felt like shit. It was worse than being hit. But she refused to give in and howl. She looked out at the road. This was her day in town.

In the city they trolled through boutiques and sat in cafes and let the kids arse about on escalators in department stores. They were careful with each other, subdued, but Raelene enjoyed herself. She came upon a shop that sold only religious stuff, books and crosses and statues of Mary. Sherry was amused by its gaudy window display but surprisingly reluctant to go inside.

A shop full of holy hardware, Rae. It's not really me.

I don't get you, said Rae. C'mon, it'll be fun.

I'll buy the girls an icecream, said Sherry.

Annoyed and bewildered, Raelene agreed to meet outside in ten minutes. She went in and checked out the books on prayer and the beads and the photos of the Pope in his bubble car. There was a whole table of statues, mostly Mary and the baby Jesus, and some with Christ holding his heart half out of his chest. Lying flat were several crucifixes with a suffering body on them. Always the crown of thorns, dabs of blood, a big, tanned, manly chest, a loincloth. Beside all these were snowdomes, the kind of thing you shook to make snow. They featured nativity scenes, mostly, but one in particular caught her eye. It was Christ walking on water. She knew the story. Yet it wasn't the setting that captivated her, nor was it the fact that the blizzard you created when you shook the little dome was not snow but a descending; cloud of tiny white doves. She was seized by the look of him, his hair flying in the wind, the robe pulled back from his chest. He was all man.

She bought it and when she saw it Sherry gave a wry smile and just shook her head.

On the drive home they relaxed with one another again. Sherry talked about her old job as a legal secretary, told her how the drink had cost Dan the biggest job of his life, how humiliating it was, what it was like to see a man reduced to an incontinent, screaming mess.

And you didn't leave him, said Rae. No, Sherry conceded. I never left him.

They drove in silence for a bit, the girls exhausted and dozing, the paddocks falling by, rolling green beneath a haze of rain.

The born-again business, asked Raelene. What's it like?

Sherry sighed thoughtfully. Well, she said, it's about getting into-

I don't mean what it's about, Rae interrupted. I mean, what it *feels* like.

Sherry glanced at her, confused.

The moment you suddenly got it, when it clicked, said Rae. You know, the change. When you

turned, or whatever you call it.

Oh, murmured Sherry, that.

Yeah, said Raelene half laughing. That.

Well, it *was* a moment, actually.

Just curious how it felt.

Like a hot knife going into me, murmured Sherry sounding all foggy, a woman with her pillow voice on. Like . . . like I was butter and here was this knife opening me up. That's the best way I can describe it.

Raelene could only nod, saddened but somehow fortified in the knowledge, the confirmation this gave her, that she didn't believe. She'd come near, she was sure. From desperation, from outright need. Times when she and Sherry and Dan talked she felt tantalizingly close to some kind of breakthrough. True, she was often overwhelmed by emotion at their place, but that was, she now realized, just friendship, mere love. And once, walking home, there were the stars, that heady moment. That was the closest she felt. For a few days she'd thought she was only an arm's length, a breath away from copping something. But there was no piercing moment, no sudden unmistakable *feeling*.

You're happy, then? she asked. You and Dan?

Lucky, said Sherry. Grateful. Very happy.

Rae thought of them, doomed to drink orange juice and endless cups of tea with awful secrets and lost careers behind them, childless and peculiar, stuck in a shitty little joint like White Point after what they'd done and where they'd been. Still happy. Unless they were fakers. But she doubted it. She'd watched them too long, too closely. She was, finally and indisputably, jealous.

By the end of that week there was no heat left in the June sun. Raelene dug the warm clothes from the bottom of the closet, all the sexless shrouding gear she hated, the girls' nylon dressing gowns, their winceyette pyjamas, the whole lot stinking of mothballs bad enough to make your eyes water. The sea was up so often Max hardly went and when he did the catch was never enough to cover fuel and bait; they were losing money. He was around all the time and with the rain thrashing the roof and walls day after day, the caravan felt like a 44-gallon drum they were all crammed into.

The few days Max went surfing he came home sated, almost content, but the rest of the time he was just simmering. Rae was glad when he had ropework to do at his skipper's shed, even relieved when he drifted over to the Cesspit to get wasted all day with the single blokes.

After her trip to the city Raelene didn't see as much of Sherry and Dan. She knew they were puzzled but she felt a distance between her and them, something she couldn't bridge. Only rarely did she drop by on a Tuesday night. More often she rugged up in her moth bally coat and walked the beach alone. She looked at stars when they were out but never felt any dizzy moments again. She thought about her father once or twice, wondered where he was. He was just a hole in her life now, no more than a shape, something she wanted but couldn't really remember. By her bed she kept the little cheaparse snowdome of Jesus walking on the water. She liked the dinky birds and his rock star hair and how his chest looked, bared by the billowing robe. He had real pees and a six-pack. Like a bodybuilder. He was ripped. After a few Bundy-and-Cokes she liked to think of him in his little dome and her in her little aluminium box, both of them trapped.

She was painting her toenails one afternoon, half watching the girls arrange their smelly cuttle collection on the old car seat they used as a sofa, when through the open flap of the annexe Raelene saw Max striding purposefully across the grass. Her skin tingled with alarm. She'd thought he was at the pub.

She got up to meet him, went out into the dull day, but he seized her by the arms and bullocked her back into the annexe. She felt the van slam into her back and head and he pinned her there.

Who is it? he hissed, bug-eyed with fury.

Who's what? she asked breathlessly.

Darts night. For fuckin weeks.

It's not what you think, Max, she said, conscious of the girls cowering nearby even if she couldn't see them with her head jammed back as it was.

Darts night. No, it's not what we thought at all, is it? he growled. Max's breath was rank with beer and smoke and his eyeballs were mulled up red as blood. So who is he, then?

Rae's arms throbbed where he gripped her. She thought of telling him the truth but it sounded so weak, so bloody awkward, and the bastard didn't deserve the truth, wasn't worth one honest piece of her.

Who the fuck is he? said Max, slamming her head against the metal so hard she saw sparks rise between them, sparks and winged spots that floated and fell. She smiled at that. Thank Christ it's aluminium, she thought; be grateful there's a bit of give in it.

He roared then. He grabbed her hair and jabbed her back harder, once, twice, and the pain brought a sudden rage upon her.

He's bigger than you, Max, so be careful. You don't even know him but he owns you. He'll cut you to pieces, you fuckin coward. He'll come lookin, he'll suck the life out of you, he's every fuckin thing you aren't.

Max had both hands in her hair now. The girls were howling. She looked about for something to grab, to kill him with.

Tell me his name, you fuckin slut!

Raelene hit the van so hard it felt as though her eyeballs would spurt from their sockets. Her arms flailed above her as he slammed her back again and again. She felt the door edge, the hinge or something gouge her, couldn't get her hands to his stubbly face. She was powerless but for the smile that stung her mouth, sharp as a split lip. She had a name for him, her secret man. He was just the shape of a man but he was all man to her and any moment, when she got her breath back and her tongue steady, she'd spit that name in his face to see him explode. He'd go ballistic, do a complete fucking Rumpelstiltskin into the slab floor and she didn't care.

But the moment never came. Everything just stopped, like the power going off.

When she got back from the nursing post it was dark and the only sounds in the park were the spray of showers from the ablution block and the murmur of television from the sparse scattering of caravans. Raelene was glad she'd resisted old man Harrison's efforts to drive her home or anywhere else she wanted to go. She supposed she was grateful that he turned up when he did, put the girls in his car, carried her himself, got her seen to, but she grew weary of him threatening to go to the cops. All she could think of was the times she'd seen him fondling her undies as they hung on the line.

If Harrison kicked Max out now, evicted him from the park, she was homeless, the girls too. It was bad enough that the nurse was the sister of Max's boss. Raelene lied long and hard about the jagged gash and the great clumps of hair missing from the sides of her head. The older woman

wasn't buying it, told her she was a fool, that she should be in hospital, should get away, get out while she still could. When she talked like that Rae felt lower than shit; you could feel the contempt in the woman's voice.

She sent Harrison back with the girls and let herself be stitched up in silence. When it was done she asked that the rest of her head be shaved while they were at it. The clippers were right there and her hair was such a mess already that she might as well start again from scratch. The older woman grumbled about being a nurse, not a hairdresser, but when Rae glanced at her she saw that the nurse was teary.

With her head so bruised, so tender, the buzzcut hurt more than the sutures, more than the bashing itself. Her hair fell in her lap, on the white lino floor, and she wept.

The short walk home did her good. The cold air stung but it cleared her thoughts. The sky was jammed with stars. By the time she got to the van she had her nerve back. She could face him. She could do absolutely anything.

She stepped into the annexe where the girls lay watching TV. Their beanbags were speckled with potato chips. The air was warm from the fan heater Harrison must have set up for them. She went on into the van and, as she expected, Max was gone. She sat on the bed, took up her little snowdome from the sidetable and shook it. A blizzard of doves. The girls appeared. They hung back in the doorway, afraid of her.

Mummy's had a haircut, she said. Everything's fine now.

She boiled them each an egg and cut fingers of toast to dip in the yolks, but neither would eat, so she filled the sink and bathed the girls and laid them in her bed and told them the story of Jonah and the Whale. As she curled between them, calming them, reciting the details of Jonah's deliverance even when she knew they were asleep, she could smell the horsey stink of Max in the pillow and was not afraid.

When the story was finished Rae pulled the concertina door to and cleaned up quietly. She couldn't face the shower block tonight. So she boiled the kettle and stripped to wash herself with a sink of hot water. The bruises were up on her arms already. She dragged on a tracksuit and looked at herself in what was left of the mirror. She looked like Joan of Arc, like a bloody nun. She refused to cry. She bared her chipped teeth. She looked fierce as hell.

She made herself a rum-and-Coke and sat out in the annexe to wait for Max. She watched TV with the sound off, was amazed at how fuckin pointless people were without their voices. Max's ute was outside. He wouldn't be far away.

By ten o'clock she'd had enough drinks and more than enough waiting. She pulled on a coat and boots and went across to the Cesspit. There were several rusty Land Cruisers and one-tonners parked around that nest of caravans. The vans themselves were set in a defensive formation like a bunch of circled wagons from a cowboy flick, and God alone knew what these scum bags were protecting themselves from. Their mothers, maybe, thought Rae, winding through junked bikes and pots and roobars and guyropes to the flap of the biggest annexe where the light of a TV flickered.

She lifted the flap and stepped into the vegetable fug of dope smoke. On mattresses and beanbags lay half a dozen deckies, none of them much older than twenty. Except Max. His head was back, his mouth open. Like the others, he was totally out to it. On the video screen two men had a woman on a shiny table, all three of them writhing pink under hard lights. Come on, bitch, said the one with a fistful of her red hair. The other slapped her arse muttering, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Somebody stirred on a beanbag, a boy holding a bong in his lap like it was a part of his own body, and he gazed at her openmouthed, squinting and blinking until Raelene stepped back through the flap into the pure night air.

Walking back she felt bruised and weary but fierce now and invulnerable. Like she'd climbed from some flaming wreckage an unlikely survivor. Spared.

As she undressed for bed she thought of calling Sherry. She wanted to tell her about this feeling, but it was late and she didn't want to return to the details of the rest of the day; it could wait. She was tired.

Just then the phone rang. She snatched it up.

Sherry?

Bob James, Rae.

Oh. Hullo, Bob.

You orright?

Fine, she said.

You sure?

Yeah, Bob. I'm sure.

Max there?

No, she murmured. You boys fishing tomorrow?

Yeah, said Bob. But, urn, you better tell Max we don't need him.

A nurse isn't sposed to blab, said Rae.

Just tell him he's finished.

What about confidentiality?

Christ, girl, you got bigger things to worry about.

Why don't you mind your own fuckin business?

The boat is my business, Rae.

You're a bastard.

And you're a bigger bloody idiot than I thought you were, he said and hung up.

She put the girls into their own beds and thought about piling them into the ute and pissing off. But she was so tired. She lay on the bed to wait for Max. One look at her in the hard fluoro light, one clear glance at her now would strike him dead, she just knew it.

She tried to stay awake but the pillow drank her up.

She woke with him on top of her. He had her sore arms pinned and his pants were off. She struggled but the bruises made it hard. He grabbed her in the dark and slapped her. He shoved himself in her face, half smothered her until she got loose a moment and was halfway off the bed, her elbow snagged in the curtain, before he caught her and shoved her face down and hit the back of her head so hard she felt the gash open up. She didn't scream or cry out for fear of waking the girls; they'd seen enough already. She felt suddenly hot with love for them and said their names beneath her breath.

In the spill of light at the bedside she saw the little dome and her man upon the waves. She said his name, too, said it aloud with love enough to send a shudder through Max as he pushed her down. She knew she was safe from him now, not safe from tonight but gone from him altogether. He smelt of death already, of burning, of bile and acid. He was crying and she did not pity him. He was gone and it didn't matter when. Everything was new. In her dome it snowed birds as the van rocked, birds like stars. The moment Max speared into her and tore open her insides she was full of hot and certain feeling. She was free. She had already outlived him.

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