



RUNNER-UP IN
THE AUSTRALIAN/
VOGEL AWARD,
The Heaven I Swallowed
IS A COMPELLING AND
CONFRONTING TALE
OF THE STOLEN
GENERATIONS.

The Heaven I Swallowed

A novel

RACHEL
HENNESSY

Wakefield Press

The Heaven I Swallowed



Rachel Hennessy was born in Canberra, and has lived in Newcastle, Sydney, Brisbane, London and Adelaide. She resides now in Melbourne with her partner and two young daughters. In writing *The Heaven I Swallowed*, Rachel drew on the stories of her maternal grandmother, who was given up for adoption at a young age due to her Aboriginal ancestry, as well as the story of her paternal great-aunt, whose husband fought in World War II. She was motivated also by former Prime Minister John Howard's statement that Aboriginal children were taken away from their families 'for their own good'.

Rachel Hennessy's first novel *The Quakers* won the Adelaide Festival Award for an Unpublished Manuscript and was launched at Writers' Week in February 2008. The manuscript was also short-listed for the Varuna Writers' Centre Manuscript Development program and won the ArtsSA prize for Creative Writing. *The Heaven I Swallowed*, Rachel Hennessy's second novel, was runner-up in the *Australian/Vogel* Award.

Also by Rachel Hennessy

The Quakers

The Heaven I Swallowed

A novel

Rachel Hennessy



Wakefield
Press

Wakefield Press
1 The Parade West
Kent Town
South Australia 5067
www.wakefieldpress.com.au

First published 2013

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Edited by Julia Beaven, Wakefield Press
Cover designed by Stacey Zass
Typeset by Wakefield Press
Printed in Australia by Griffin Digital, Adelaide

National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication entry

Author: Hennessy, Rachel.
Title: The heaven I swallowed: a novel / Rachel Hennessy.
ISBN: 978 1 86254 948 7 (pbk.).
Dewey Number: A823.4



Publication of this book was assisted by the Commonwealth Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body.

For my father, Lance

PART I

‘... you must e’en take it as a gift of God, though it’s as dark almost as if it came from the devil.’

Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*

1

When I was twelve the Virgin Mary visited me. In the convent's small bed I lay between sleep and wakefulness creating visions of joy, of rescue. Too young to recognise the line between dream desire and the feelings awakening in my body, I conjured a boy to take my hand and lead me from the institution, into the darkness. It was then the Virgin appeared. She was not like the statues in the chapel, all pure of cheek and sweet-lipped; no painted beauty, but rather a shimmering, disturbing essence. And I was terrified.

The Loreto Sisters who gave me my home and education loved the Virgin Mary but I did not tell them about it. There were only two possible reactions to such a story: they would whip me for telling sacrilegious lies, or they would embrace me, turning Mary's appearance into a sign of my calling to the nun-hood. This, I felt, was as frightening as any lashing.

So I kept the visitation to myself. As time went on, I realised the Virgin had not come to scare me but to remind me of the need to ignore certain pleasures. How much closer to God I would be if I resisted those half-dreams of longing and escape, and remembered, instead, the ethereal Virgin. He would be watching and He would approve of my restraint, of all that I would hold back now and in the years to come.

My brush with the Virgin was the reason I gave such importance to the name Mary. I took it as my Confirmation name, running it alongside the Grace and Teresa my dead mother had given me. *Holy Mary, mother of God, the Lord is with thee, blessed art thou amongst women.* Grace Teresa Mary Johnston. I liked the thought of Mary being part of me, as much as I enjoyed Mass and the taste of the holy Eucharist slipping down my throat. These were signs of the goodness inside me, the heaven I swallowed.

I did not see the Virgin again throughout my childhood,

although I did try. I would flicker open my eyes in the darkness of the dormitory and wish Her back. But She never came. Even if I thought I had caught a glimpse of Mary I knew, in my heart, it was only my own weak will, creating phantoms for company.

†

On the day the real Mary was to arrive, twenty-eight years after the Virgin's visitation, I thought again of that night, of all I had given up. I was tightly wrapped, you might say, my strong hair, thinned by forty years of life, pulled back in a severe bun at the base of my neck. How proud the Loreto Sisters would have been to see the adept way I could now manipulate bobby pins to ensure not a stray wisp fell loose, nothing to ruin the composure of my face.

At the mirror of my dressing table I applied a thin layer of lipstick and dusted my cheeks with the faintest hint of pink, additions the nuns never would have approved of. But I enjoyed the moisture on my lips, liked to use the round, cream porcelain rouge-holder, painted with lilac bunches of grapes pouring down towards a bright-blue Kingfisher. Fred had sent this to me from Japan. It was part of a set – with a matching ring box – and hearing the gentle clink as the lid fitted back reminded me of perfect proportions, everything in its proper place.

The bevelled edges of the mirror doubled my shoulders and arms back at me, the navy cotton sleeves of my dress short enough for the heat, long enough for decency. This was not a dress I was fond of, bought more for its sombre colour than its style, and I tried to imagine how I would appear to the young girl travelling toward me.

Would her heart be pounding as mine was? Or would the insipidity of her race enable her to glide without concern to her destination, to my waiting, anxious arms?

I picked up my navy cotton gloves, cross-stitches running along the fingers, and walked down the entrance hallway. I wondered about wearing these gloves on the girl's arrival, it would be nice to look a little more casual, to embrace the whiff of freedom that had begun to take over the country since the end of the war. But I knew it was not appropriate. Who else would be accompanying the girl, aside from Father Benjamin? He, surely, had known me long enough for such formality to be unnecessary, but there was bound to be a stranger too, someone from the Home who would scrutinise and examine me, and it was necessary to pass that test.

Ten minutes after they were due to arrive I stood waiting on the driveway, clutching my gloves. My legs in their stockings were damp with sweat and I continued to ignore the man at number 22 clipping his box hedges into rectangles, his way of protecting himself from the eyes of the street. He, no doubt, was curious about my reason for being there, but I was in no mood to indulge him.

From my vantage point I could see the memorial park at the end of the road, the statue on the corner of a young soldier with a bandaged head and a recently damaged bayonet. The local paper reported a storm had broken the bayonet, but I had my doubts. Two streets back from the harbour, Wayville Street – my street since marriage had delivered me here – was seemingly quiet, its residents getting on with life after war. It was rarely touched by the growing number of cars. Quiet and unassuming, my neighbours were unwilling to leave their own four walls to comfort one another; I had learnt that the hard way. Occasionally, though, the veneer would crack, and one night, I felt sure, someone had snapped the thin piece of metal off the bronze statue and stolen it away. I had never liked the statue, too realistic by half, and had secretly hoped its mutilation might result in it being taken down altogether.

Twenty minutes passed before a large black Ford pulled into the driveway. I stepped back onto the grass, pulled my

gloves on, and folded my arms in an attempt to hold myself together, although it probably made me look stern and uninviting.

Father Benjamin turned off the engine of the car and pushed open his door. His thin face with ridiculous saucer-shaped ears, appeared, in contrast to my agitation, serene. I couldn't see the girl. A red-haired woman barked, 'Hurry up, get out of the car.'

Father Benjamin greeted me and I replied civilly, although my whole being was centred on the child as she pushed open her door and walked around the black metal to stand next to the front wheel.

Mary.

She looked to be about eight years of age, though I knew her to be twelve. Her hair was long and black and she held her arms in front of her, fingers knotted together. She wore scuffed brown leather Mary Janes much too big for her, and a frilled blue dress, pinching and stained, several sizes too small. It was a hand-me-down, used by one ward after another, sent out into the world and returned again when the inevitable happened. I knew such dresses.

The smallness of the dress showed off most of Mary's skin and I was shocked to see how dark it truly was. When I asked – and I had asked – Father Benjamin had assured me the only ones deemed suitable were those who could pass for a white. What kind of white? Their white obviously was not the same as mine. My white was the white of sheets in sunlight or crisp blank pieces of paper not yet marked with the scribbles of my students. My white brought light into a room, not the sullen expression this girl wore. Her eyes were lowered, her head turned slightly to the side, as if checking for someone standing behind her.

I had imagined someone completely different. As a widow I could not be fussy – the adoption of a white child would have been almost impossible – and here was Father Benjamin

handing me what I had longed for, with barely a piece of paper signed. Yet how could this be fulfilment?

‘She shouldn’t be a problem,’ Father Benjamin said, as if reading my hesitation. ‘It is wonderful to have someone like you involved in this.’

Ah, flattery. Father Benjamin knew where to catch at me. I tried to smile modestly but I was gratified. The red-haired woman now stood with her hands on her hips between Father Benjamin and the girl, turning the three of them into a grotesque family, and smiled back as if allowing me into a secret club. A little spark ran through me.

‘Shoulders back,’ the woman hissed into the girl’s ear and I saw Mary attempt to roll back her hunched self.

She was a mess. Stirrings of pity came to me, feelings I knew I would need to suppress. Soft mothering did no one any good. I had seen my fellow teachers taken down by girls who suspected weakness, and I could hear Sister Clare: *Little vipers children are, they nip at your soul until you bleed.*

‘Hello, Mary,’ I said, and unfolded my arms. ‘I’m Mrs Smith.’

She drew her head up.

‘Hello.’

It was the first time I saw her eyes. They seemed enormous, honey-brown rimmed with black, taking over her face. I had dreamt of those kinds of eyes, looking up at me from my arms, staring out from a bundle of soft, lamb’s wool blankets. Mary’s eyes made me forget the rest of her – the broad nose, the thin legs, the skin – and any thoughts of sending her back disappeared for the moment.

‘Get your things,’ I said and immediately she lowered her eyes again. Without her gaze, I had lost something. My voice turned hard. ‘Go inside.’

‘She doesn’t have any things, Mrs Smith.’ The woman, who Father Benjamin had failed to introduce, said this with a sneer and I could imagine a room full of confiscated

possessions, picked over when the mood took. No one, after all, has nothing.

‘Well ... off you go then,’ I repeated.

I watched as Mary walked up the driveway, struggling to keep her shoulders back, her feet sliding about in those cavernous shoes.

‘I will do my best with her,’ I said to Father Benjamin and he nodded. His companion already had the passenger door open, keen to get back to her other projects, more wards to distribute, more suitcases to plunder. Father Benjamin hovered in front of me, taking a covered hand in both of his in a gesture that reminded me of a blessing.

‘You are truly a good woman,’ he said, squeezing my fingers between his two palms. I could feel the hotness of his skin through the thin cotton of my glove and was relieved he was not touching my damp skin. ‘She ... well, she is lucky.’

Father Benjamin dropped my hand and slipped back into the driver’s seat. The sound of the engine faded as he drove away and I became aware, once again, of the clipping at number 22. Had it continued through Mary’s arrival? I had lost track of other sounds. My neighbour had, presumably, eavesdropped on the arrival and would spread the news.

I stood for a moment, thinking of how Father Benjamin could have been more effusive, could have called me more than just a good woman. *You are truly a saint*, he might have said. *You are truly blessed*. This would have had a clearer sound to it, a bell ringing out into the ticking street, the hot summer sky blasted by my act of goodness.

†

Two months before, in late November, I had been reading the *Sun Herald*. The afternoon had turned grey after a week of temperatures in the nineties and I sat drinking tea in the front room (the ‘sun’ room Fred used to call it though

I preferred 'front' because its position would never change, even if the weather did).

There had been no sun in the front room on that day, and the open window brought in a breeze, a south-westerly probably, although I have never been able to tell from where the wind is blowing. Fred would have declared this with assurance – 'Coming in from the east' perhaps, his voice breaking the silence.

I read the paper and there was no Fred to declare the provenance of the air, my newspaper simply rustling between my fingertips. Perhaps it was a wind from God because I happened to notice an article with the headline: 'Homes Are Sought For These Children'. Printed below the article was a photo of a group of young girls, each dressed in a lace-collared smock. The caption read: 'These octoroons and quadroons have been rescued from shameful circumstances and generously taken into the homes of Christian families.' The border of the photo cut off the tops of their heads and finished just below the hem of their garments so they looked incomplete. The one in the centre clutched a stuffed rabbit to her chest and the newsprint had washed out most of her blackness. She, and at least two of the other girls, looked as pale as me.

As I read on, my heart swelled with pride from the description of good work being done. My countrymen, the strong and the brave, having survived two major wars, were creating the ideal world. Here they were, far away now from European and Pacific death, helping those less fortunate to find their place in the new utopia. That such children existed, I had barely been aware. Yes, I knew of the displaced children; I heard them screeching in their foreign tongues at their impatient, foreign mothers who, I could only assume, wanted them home for supper. Thankfully not yet living in my street, they were close enough to see on my evening walk, to hear their high-pitched laughter. Once, I had encountered

a swarm of them down near the bay entrance, their black-haired heads lined up along the metal fence, spitting into the harbour – not a competition to see who could reach the furthest, they were simply spitting their contempt into the water below.

I had no time for such children and no thought of rescue until I read the newspaper article. What was I doing, after all, to help the country move towards its enlightenment? What contribution was I making? There had been Fred. Yes, that had been a certain kind of sacrifice. But otherwise?

In the past it had been my voice making announcements over the school Tannoy, the sound of my footsteps stopping the girls giggling, my ticks and crosses on their tests leading them from ignorance to knowledge. I had taught and cajoled for nineteen years, until the unpleasantness.

I picked up a slice of lemon sponge, sitting on a plate next to my favourite teacup, delicate four-leaf clovers painted on its cream surface. I put the sponge in my mouth, a bridge of mock cream helping to counteract the crumbling of the cake. It was dry, too dry, and I suddenly felt sure the baker had chosen this inferior sponge for me because I no longer held the position of English mistress. He knew, as did the butcher and the milkman, that I was making no contribution at all to the rebuilding and, without a husband by my side, I could be fed inferior cakes, mediocre lamb shanks and past-its-prime milk, without protest. I washed the crumbs down with tea, tired from my small sips and chilled by the wind coming in from who knew where. The newspaper lay across my knees, the article offering an entrance into a place I had once been. That place where my gestures had made a difference, where young eyes watched closely the tension of my muscles, the weather of my moods.

†

I found Mary in the front hall. She had only taken a couple of steps inside before stopping opposite the hallway stand where an oval mirror hung below hat hooks. The mirror was too high to give her a full reflection, but it could have provided a glimpse. The girl wasn't interested. Instead, she stared at my green plush carpet. I wondered at her lack of curiosity about herself.

'We'll have to get you better shoes,' I said.

Her hands twitched.

'Come into the kitchen.'

I walked past her, along the hall. I could not hear her moving behind me on the carpet, her clopping became evident only once we crossed onto the linoleum. I turned to see her standing just past the doorway, her arms hanging down by her sides as if too heavy for her, her gaze still fixed on the floor. I could think of nothing to say. Was a welcome too personal? Should I maintain formality? In the end, I focused on what she seemed so intent on.

'There isn't a scratch on my floor, do you see?' I pointed to the yellow linoleum, patterned to look like tiles. Fred had never seen this flooring, there were still wooden boards when he went away and, although I had written to tell him, I was sure he never pictured the change.

'I would like it to be kept scratch-less, do you understand? So you need to be careful with your chair.' I demonstrated by picking up one of the kitchen chairs and moving it out from the table by lifting it, rather than dragging. Twice I repeated the action.

'Do you understand, Mary?'

She gave a murmur. It reminded me of a mumble I had given the Sisters when they demanded proof of my obedience.

'In this house, Mary, we reply "yes" or "no" when asked a question.'

This was what the Sisters would have said.

‘Yes.’

‘And we say the person’s name.’

‘Yes, Mrs Smith.’

I stood looking at the girl. Should Mary really call me this? I could neither think of having the girl call me ‘mother’ nor give her licence to gather up my first name and use it at will. But ‘Mrs Smith’? It sounded too distant.

‘I think you should call me Auntie Grace.’

There had been one auntie in my childhood, a woman not related to my parents but who tried to provide a few good memories for me. It seemed the best compromise.

‘Yes, Auntie Grace,’ Mary replied.

Her tone was flat. The words had the same feeling of dull repetition of a response in Mass from the unfaithful. This did not bother me. I had spent so many years insisting on the fervent passion of ‘Amen’ to Fred, I had little doubt I would succeed in doing the same with Mary. She was just a young child and I had the entire world to give her.

†

The next morning we went to buy new shoes, catching the tram into the city because I was still reluctant to drive Fred’s father’s Holden. I kept it sheltered in the carport, away from envious, disapproving eyes. Although petrol rationing was over, it was still seen by many in Wayville Street as an extravagance.

I was uncomfortable, too, with the threads the car held of my father-in-law, a small-town wool classer. He had come to the city on the insistence of his wife, was given a house by his wife’s over-friendly uncle – the house I now live in – and promptly sunk into the Depression and unemployment. The car had contained samples of dirty grey wool, covering the rear window shelf and the dash. Fred had laughed about it when he inherited the vehicle but I had seen it as rather pathetic, a man clinging to the remnants of a job he could

no longer do. Yet neither of us had been willing to throw the wool away and so it stayed, giving the interior a greasy patina.

For once, I would have liked the cocoon of the car instead of the looks Mary and I received. The neighbourhood glances as we made our way to the tram had been bad enough, but walking down Elizabeth Street with her hand in mine it seemed the world was made of sideward glares, thin-lipped disapproval, openly hostile stares.

Mary wore the blue dress she had arrived in, the stains slightly less prominent from the sponging I had given it, but it still highlighted her dark limbs and there was no disguising her difference from the primly hatted children I saw following their mothers, all blonde curls and sweet eyes. How black Mary's hand was next to my skin. It implied a certain kind of dirtiness, even though I had washed her myself in the bath the night before, scrubbing hard with the pumice stone to ensure no layers of the Girls' Home remained. She had raised no objection, sitting with her arms wrapped around her knees, tipping her head back when told to, perhaps grateful for the chance to be truly clean. I would just have to keep her out of the sun, try to get her to fade a little.

As we walked, I worried we would run into someone I knew. Would Mr Roper materialise to add his look of disbelief to the strangers who marched past us? I kept my eyes down, mimicking Mary. I felt a burning in my cheeks. It had been a long time since I had received such attention.

I have never been the kind of woman who men look at, fall madly in love with, long for and cannot imagine living without. Not ugly, but not beautiful. Just a middling woman, sitting straight-backed in a chair on the edge of the dance floor while all the true beauties were escorted away by dashing, handsome men. At least I was not often left to last; some plump young man would eventually ask me, as clumsy with his words as he would prove to be in dancing. I offered an alternative to the fat

girls or ones with glasses. My face was described by one of the Sisters as 'angelic', but I knew from an early age that angels would have ensured themselves more striking cheekbones, less insipid eyes and a nose smaller and straighter.

Fred had not been one of the boys who asked me to dance, though we met for the first time at a local ball not long after I came to the city to begin teaching at Our Lady of Perpetual Hope High School. Fred did not recall meeting me when, seven years later, he returned to the neighbourhood after attending Oxford. I saw him at church. I would like to tell a romantic story of us moving, our very first time, to the centre of the dance floor and knowing we would twirl together for the rest of our lives. The harsher fact was he had failed university and returned a bundle of disappointment and desperation. Perhaps he would not have looked twice at me if he had become a successful don. But I was what he needed: an acolyte who confirmed his superiority to the rest of mankind. And at twenty-eight, I was staring down the barrel of spinsterhood and adored him enough to help him reclaim his confidence. We needed one another to survive.

I held my head up again. How silly to be walking with Mary like a meek sheep. This tiny thing beside me, gripping my hand in terror at losing hold, was the epitome of my goodness, the difference I was making to the bustling boulevard, an affirmation of all that could be done, even without beauty. How dare these other women judge me? I had always been separate from them and I would remain so now. Not only would I buy Mary new shoes, I would buy her a new dress and show off my benevolence in something pink, ostentatious and lacy.

Inside the department store Mary forgot her timidity and gazed in amazement at the glass counters glistening with perfume bottles, the rows of polished heads displaying fashionable hats, the suited man at the grand piano playing 'Greensleeves'. She stood uncertainly at the bottom of the

escalator and I had to pull her hand to ensure she got on the moving wooden step.

How miraculous this escalator had seemed to me at first, to move without moving, like floating upward towards God. Sacrilegious, really, to think of one's soul needing such man-made help but still, it appealed to me and I would have shared the thought with Mary except we were already at the top. I stepped confidently onto the solid floor and Mary jumped nervously off beside me, her hand breaking apart from mine. She did not attempt to regain my grip, following a short distance behind.

The shoe department smelt of leather, the vinyl floor dented with holes, the marks of heels strolling back and forth while customers tested comfort and size. Behind the counter a saleswoman with charcoal hair, pulled back in the same low-neck bun as mine, stared openly at Mary.

'Can I help you?' The woman's voice had little help in it.

'I need to buy my ...' How to describe what Mary was to me? 'I need to buy her new shoes. You can see these ones are too big.' I was trying to be friendly.

'What size is she?' the saleswoman asked, no longer looking at Mary.

'What size are you, Mary?' I asked.

'Don't know.'

'What was that, Mary?' I admonished.

'Don't know, Auntie Grace. Never had shoes bought for me.'

'How can she not know?' the saleswoman asked me, as if the girl was not there, as if she hadn't heard Mary's answer herself.

'You'll have to measure her,' I insisted and the saleswoman looked at me sharply, eyes narrowed. I held her gaze.

'Of course.' Her tone spoke of her opposite inclination. 'Mary-Janes?'

I nodded and she disappeared into a backroom without

having gone anywhere near Mary's feet. We waited. I felt hot and strangely conspicuous, as if our presence in the store was being reported via clandestine whispers. Mary moved over to stand near a large brown, box-shaped machine. Three long metal tubes stuck out of its top like tentacles.

'What's this, Auntie Grace?'

'I don't know, Mary.'

'That,' said the saleswoman, who had reappeared with two shoeboxes in her hand, 'is the latest thing.'

Her enthusiasm for her job had returned with the shift to this 'latest thing'. A fluoroscope, she explained, and all one had to do was place one's foot inside to see whether the shoe fitted. I had no idea what she was talking about.

'It takes an X-ray,' the saleswoman continued in a patronising tone. This did not help. 'Put on the shoes and place your foot in here.' She pointed to a hole in the bottom of the box, which appeared to have a metal plate with a rubber imprint of a foot glued onto it. Mary did not move.

'Do as she says,' I told her. I was aware of an elderly couple not too far from us, shoulders hunched together, watching closely. Mary slipped off her old shoes, easy enough given their misfit, and put on the brown leather pair the woman had brought her. She placed her foot inside the machine and the saleswoman bent over the left of the three tubes.

'Do you want to see?' she asked, pointing to the right tube. The centre one was, I assumed, for the customer. Mary did not lower her head to look.

I bent over and, for a minute, saw only blackness. I shifted the position of my face and suddenly stared at the illuminated lines of Mary's foot. Here were her bones, glowing a greenish white. I let out a soft 'oh'. To see all the way through the skin seemed almost obscene. I lifted my head without checking whether the shoes did or did not fit.

'Too small,' the saleswoman declared and bustled over to one of the other shoeboxes.

We tried numerous pairs of shoes using this method. I did not look into the machine again, leaving the saleswoman to make the decisions, the glow of Mary's foot imprinted on my mind's eye.

I decided the new dress I'd planned to buy would have to wait. The shoe department had almost done me in, with its fancy gadget and tiresome saleswoman. I wanted a cup of tea but could only imagine the looks Mary would get in the cafeteria. Even without the girl, I had only ever gone there surrounded by the confident War Widows' Group under the control and guidance of Marjorie Bishop, whose orders, sharp as a sergeant major's, tended to make the snobbish waitresses cower and ensured our receipt of the best chocolate éclairs. Alone, I had no such power. We walked, instead, to Hyde Park.

We sat on one of the benches opposite the Archibald fountain. The sun was out and Mary swung her feet in their new, snug-fitting shoes. It had taken some time to convince Mary they were really hers, and I had not seen gratitude on her face, only suspicion. Now the trickling of the fountain's water and the calls and laughter and cries of families having lunch were a relief after the struggles and muffled obsequiousness inside the store. Struck by the sweetness of the moment I dug into my purse to find a penny.

'Here, Mary, go and make a wish in the fountain.'

She held the penny in the palm of her hand and frowned.

'Make a wish, Auntie Grace?'

'Yes, you throw it into the water and make a wish.'

'Throw the money into the water, Auntie Grace?'

'Yes.'

'But why, Auntie Grace?'

The sweetness of the moment was leaking away.

'Because I said you could.'

'Wish for what, Auntie Grace?'

'Anything you want.'

‘Anything, Auntie Grace?’

I repressed my sigh of exasperation, reminding myself that she would, of course, be ignorant of such matters.

‘Give the penny back to me if you don’t want it.’

Her palm closed and she walked toward the fountain. She stood at the lip of the six-sided pond with a statue of Apollo in its centre, turtles spurting water up to his face. Two young boys were throwing rocks, trying to hit the water arcs. Mary watched them for a moment. What would she wish for?

The night before Fred left I wished on a shooting star. I should not have – such beliefs could be blasphemous – but I clung to every superstition after Fred and I were married, the year the war began. I insisted he throw salt over his shoulder and leave his boots outside the house.

We had courted for two years and been married for four before he was posted overseas. It was not one of the fly-by-night marriages happening all around us, couples thrown together by their fear of death. We knew one another well, had found the crook in each other’s arms perfect for being held in bed. I’d got used to his coughing at night and the strong, masculine tobacco smell that clung to his skin; he smoked a packet of *Country Life* a day. He called me Gracie.

On our last night together, he fell asleep in the living room after promising we would stay up and dance until dawn. I stood on the back step, the sky alive with stars, and saw a streak, a tiny line of light. ‘Please let him come home,’ I wished. I could make myself believe there was an element of God in that falling piece of fire and I had sealed a deal. Naïve, like a little girl.

‘Mary! Come away from there now,’ I called.

She still stood next to the fountain, in full sunlight and with no hat to protect her, rays bouncing off the water straight into her face; surely she had already gone a shade darker.

She turned and walked towards me. Her head was tilted

slightly to the left, her eyes averted. I followed her line of sight and saw, over on the grass, a group of drifters sitting cross-legged. Four of them, in grubby checked shirts and torn trousers, barefoot, grey blankets rolled into swags beside them. They were smoking, one with a pipe, and all were as black as the ace of spades.

‘Hurry up, Mary,’ I said, although she was already next to me. I gave her the box with her old pair of shoes inside. She held it against her chest, both arms wrapped around it. Her hands were wet.

‘What did you wish for?’

The words were out of my mouth before I knew it. I knew I shouldn’t ask, that she wouldn’t know not to tell me.

‘To stay with you, Auntie Grace,’ she replied.

We walked down the path towards the ANZAC memorial. The Hill’s figs along the avenue were not tall enough to block out the harsh midday sun and I pulled my hat down lower to protect myself from the light. I strode without acknowledging Mary beside me. I knew her reply about the wish was a lie, her inflection as false as the schoolgirls’ whispers about ‘female problems’ in order to escape morning callisthenics. ‘You understand don’t you, Mrs Smith?’ they had said, as if I wanted to share their monthly secrets.

We approached the granite cenotaph. I had come here often over the years, drawn to the memorial statue inside it. This bronze statue, depicting a fallen soldier lying on a shield held up by three women, had not a chance of being damaged. I would not take Mary to see him, though. The soldier was naked, and while I had grown used to the detailed flesh of the fallen youth, it was not suitable for a young girl, no matter what her upbringing might have been. Instead, I stopped outside the cenotaph at the corner of the rectangular memorial pool reflecting tree trunks and stone columns. No one had thrown coins into this water.

‘This is for the men who died in the war, Mary,’ I said.

She was staring at the steps leading up into the tomb, as if she knew there was something inside she should not see.

‘The poplar trees are grown from seeds brought all the way from France. To commemorate the soldiers who went off to fight. Men who died for their country.’

‘Died for their country’ had such force when spoken out loud. Was Mary able to feel the pride, the honour of their sacrifice? A six-year-old at the end of the war, how much could she really understand? I had taught older girls, knew how to inspire them.

‘The war awaits, as do I,’ I started to intone. ‘The fevered pitch, the savage cry, I stand upon the glorious brink, And try most vainly, not to think.’

The beginning of one of Fred’s poems. Out loud, the rhymes sounded clumsy and trite. Mary said nothing.

‘We should be heading home.’

The shoebox, wet from Mary’s hands, slipped through her arms and her old shoes fell with a loud thud onto the ground.

†

My dear Gracie,

I am finally able to send word, although I am not sure when this letter will get to you. The boat trip was, as expected, awful but I will not offend you with revolting details, my sweetness. I have arrived safely in Port Moresby, that is all you probably want to know and I cannot give you any particulars of the plans ahead. If I did, you would find your letter blackened with the censor’s pen. I am as well as I can be and I think of you often.

My time at Randwick has me used to all the waiting, the drills and the tedium of army life. I am not impatient to get to the real fighting. Some of the younger boys keep talking of the adventure ahead. I am not so

naïve as to see it like that. I remember Dad's tales of the Great War, they were enough to make me understand what battle will be really like and I am not sorry Dad passed away before this new threat, never hearing of the Japs on our doorstep. 'We'll show 'em' the boys keep saying and make me feel like an alien. They are so sure of their bravery.

Often, I feel guilty about the years I sat on home soil, still able to see you, when now I am reminded that men were dying for the Empire every one of those moments. (I talk of guilt and wonder what really made me transfer to active duty? Not love of Empire, or the chance to defend my homeland, but the simple fact that I would not be able to look the church congregation in the eye, for fear they would see my cowardice. Perhaps we cowards will go to any lengths to prove we are not.)

I pass the time writing poems again like I did in England. I never showed you them because I was afraid of their mediocrity. Maybe I will send you some in the days ahead. I am terrified, of course, of the other men finding out. Already I have erased my university days from my history and have demoted myself from Bank Manager to Clerk for the sake of much needed camaraderie. Thankfully, I am not the only religious man here, besides the Chaplain, and I have a few men with whom to discuss the moral dilemma of taking life. Many times Private L. has quoted a headline from the Catholic Weekly at me: 'Resistance to tyrants is obedience to God.' It has become somewhat of a personal mantra for him – to the point, I have to say, of driving me a little mad, but I suppose it gives him solace.

I have to believe the defence of my family is a Christian duty, though there are some here who would not agree with my leaving you in your condition. The boys tell stories of their brothers and uncles who have

stayed at home for the sake of their expecting wives. They do not seem to be resentful. Sometimes they even appear to be grateful they can give themselves up to the war with the reassurance there is someone at home to continue their line. It is a comfort to me, also, to know if I do not return, I will leave my trace upon the earth. Coming from no family tradition yourself, Gracie, you might not understand how knowing my home will continue in the hands of my son, or daughter, means so much.

I think of my mother, embarking for London, still in her widow's weeds with barely a word of farewell, and my brother not even telling me he had enlisted and now lost to me in the skies above France. (When I told the boys here that I have a brother in the air force they looked at me with new respect, although their admiration was followed, soon after, by suspicion as to why I had not been able to follow in his footsteps.) My immediate family have given me so little. You have become my family, Gracie, and, on my return, the three of us will make ourselves a haven.

When you think of me, then, do not imagine me in these foreign places. Remember me sitting in the shade of the jacaranda tree with you, talking of small things, like our plan to plant tubs of geraniums because they are strong and hardy and colourful. Remember a man who always arranged his books 'just so', with a pedantry that made you laugh. Remember a man who remains

Your Fred