

Rebecca's Law

sojourn of a stolen father

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Dedication

To my ever-patient wife and our two children
who daily endure.

To Punk and Punkette
for being the story.

And of course to the triangle —
the estimated two-million Australians affected
by this plague.

*Six things the Lord hates,
Seven things He detests,
A proud eye,
A lying tongue,
Hands that shed innocent blood,
A heart that devises wicked schemes,
Feet that run swiftly to evil,
A false witness telling a pack of lies,
And one who stirs up discord among family.*

Proverbs 6:16

Part 1

A sword to cut through flowers

1

“Punk, what’s the time?” Ellen asked lazily as they cuddled in the front seat of Mitchell’s 1967 Premier. It was good to be with her again. They’d hardly seen each other since July, what with her trial exams, his Intervarsity Squash Titles in Adelaide and then her Higher School Certificate.

But yesterday the Class of ’79 had walked through the Stella Maris school gate for the last time, and even if it was two weeks late, they were finally going to celebrate Mitchell’s twentieth birthday.

He held her so tight, wanting to just squeeze her into his body so that they would be permanently attached, never to separate again.

“Ten-past-seven,” Mitchell answered.

“Typical John. Late as usual.”

Mitchell stroked Ellen’s hair as she sat up to stretch. When she pulled away he felt his shirt — saturated and sticking to his ribs.

“What’s this?” Mitchell looked at her black floral top, which was wetter than his shirt. “What the — ?”

She fumbled with embarrassment at her leaking breast trying to wipe away the milk.

“How long since you’ve had a period, Els?”

Shyly: “I think I’ve missed about three or four. Maybe five.”

“What?” Mitchell wasn’t angry, just surprised. “Why didn’t you say something?”

“Well, with the HSC and everything, all the girls were missing them so I didn’t worry about it. I wasn’t really keeping track.”

“You go to the doctor and have a test on Monday, right?”

She smiled weakly as they eyed each other. Neither knew whether to be glad, sad or stunned.

Mitchell pulled Ellen towards him and kissed her on the lips. “Love ya.”

“Always.”

“Forever.”

Then they gave each other the finger-and-nose punk gesture and laughed. She leaned against the passenger door, he leaned against the driver's, as they beamed at each other.

Mitchell shook his head. “Your dad's going to bloody freak.”

She looked into her lap and her smile waned ever so slightly. He leaned towards her and cupped his hand gently under her chin. “Punk, look at me. Look at this bracelet on my wrist. What does it say?”

“*Ellen,*” she said.

“And the bracelet on your wrist. What does it say?”

“*Mitchell.*”

“And what does that mean, Ellen? ”

She didn't answer.

“It means that we're engaged without the rings, Els. We've been talking marriage for almost seven months now. So it'll just have to be sooner rather than later, ok?”

Mitchell tried to be gentle. She was such a sweet petal and she didn't need to be lectured. She knew how he felt.

Ellen's eyes flickered up to his and he saw she was suddenly more beautiful than she'd been just two minutes earlier.

“Besides,” Mitchell said, “we've already named the little punkette. Who do we have in there — Hayden or Rebecca? Identify yourself!”

Ellen rolled her eyes and laughed as Mitchell talked to her tummy in baby talk. “We better get dis big icky mess off us before John-boy comes.”

“What mess?” came the voice from outside as he rapped on the window.

Mitchell looked up and saw John and Sue tapping at their watches, then Mitchell gave Ellen a wink. “Me Tarzan! You big spunk.”

“You big punk too,” she returned.

Mitchell sighed to himself as he jumped out of the driver's side. "I hope old man Walsh doesn't go totally berserk and want the kid adopted out."

§

The following night was the Stella Maris formal. Mitchell and Ellen dressed completely in white. Two virgins — they wished! All these so-called debutantes who'd had boyfriends for years, lined up to be presented to 'Bat Woman', the school's head nun. Mitchell looked at all the other boyfriends and wondered if they'd been chased down the street by this woman the way he had whenever he turned up at lunch to talk with Ellen and her friends through the school fence.

Ellen pointed out Mr Corcoran the science teacher. "You should go up to him and apologise for disturbing his class every time you drove past tooting."

"Right! Like I forced the whole class to hang out the window yabba-dabba-dooing at me!"

Curse the alphabet! They were at the end of the presentation line. They listened as the girls were presented, middle names and all — including confirmation names! Ellen was mortified.

"God! I hope they don't say it!"

"Els, you're hardly going to be the only girl with the confirmation name of Mary!"

"Yeah, but I hate it. 'Ellen Therese Walsh' flows off the tongue nice and neat. 'Ellen Therese Mary' is just so ... so ... "

"So Catholic?"

She was not amused. Not only was she stuck with this boring old-fashioned name but now they were going to actually say it — in public! She hoped the "Mary" bit had been left off her enrolment forms but to no avail.

"And lastly, Ellen Therese Mary Walsh with partner Mitchell Hearn."

Ellen winced at the "Mary," which did seem to be announced with a little extra emphasis, but being last they received the loudest cheer, simply because the tedium was over and everyone could get on with the party. "Bat Woman" gave Mitchell a knowing look. Maybe he *was* the only one she'd ever chased down the street. Mitchell turned to see Alana's boyfriend Tony slyly point at them and elbow Sepp (Julia's squeeze). "*Le guarda preнна! Guarda il senno!*" he whispered. Alana punched him in the shoulder, "How could you be so rude?"

Mitchell just wondered.

As always, Mitchell didn't want to dance, preferring to sit at the table and mime-drum. Without a drum kit he was better than Keith Moon, but it drove Ellen insane.

Then the DJ put it on. Ringo. Who plays Ringo at a dance? Apparently this guy did.

"Did you request this?" Mitchell asked Ellen. She smiled but shook her head vigorously and grabbed his hand. This was their song. How could he refuse?

You come on like a dream,

Peaches and cream,

Lips like strawberry wine,

You're sixteen,

You're beautiful,

And you're mine.

You're all ribbons and curls,

Oo what a girl,

Eyes that sparkle and shine,

You're sixteen,

You're beautiful

And you're mine."

This girl really had "walked out of his dreams and into his heart" when she was sixteen and Mitchell was so proud to have her as his "angel divine." He really didn't mind dancing with her to this song, although he mocked protest long and loud.

She laughed, and the photographer caught her perfectly, a shot which from that night sat on Mitchell's lowboy, radiating out at him for the next two and a half years.

They danced, they laughed, they sucked face.

Mitchell drove Ellen home by the twelve-thirty curfew — her dad had allowed an extra half an hour because of the formal, and at the door they kissed so passionately their souls collided. It was awesome.

But it would be the last carefree night they would ever have together.

§

Lawry Decker slammed the phone down.

“I think you were a bit rough on her,” Roslyn said as she walked down the hall.

“Stuff her, Ros. I’m just asking her to do her job.”

“Lawry, she’s been a good friend for a long time. She’s doing what she can.”

“She’s only a good friend because we’ve been on her bloody waiting list so long. And as for these begging letters!”

This is what had set him off. The St Mary of Dolleurs envelopes had been arriving now for five years and every single one was like a knife in the ribs, promising good news but delivering searing disappointment when opened. Ros picked the latest one up from the telephone table.

Send your donation today and the Lord will bless you greatly.

“I think we’ve paid our dues by now, Ros. It’s about time Maureen got off her backside and gave the Lord a little help in blessing us. I mean, she is the CEO for God’s sake! She must be able to do something.”

Ros sighed. She was as frustrated as Lawry. Five years had been a long time to wait, but since the Whitlam years, the supply of white Australian babies had dwindled to a trickle. Even with a constant supply of pregnant Catholic teenagers, St Mary of Dolleurs Adoption Agency was still unable to keep up with demand. For years they’d been taking fifteen hundred non-refundable deposits, but placing only two hundred babies.

“We’re not the only ones she has to think about, Lawry. I think it must be very difficult for her. Complicated.”

“Well, if she doesn’t come through in the next year we’ll just have to look overseas.”

“Yes, I heard you say. How’d she take that?”

“She went very quiet. Says with overseas adoptions the kids are usually stolen. Don’t know if we have that much money, anyway. Not on top of what we’ve already spent.”

“Lawry, I’m sure Maureen’ll come through, if we’re patient.”

“We *have* been patient. The only way we’re going to get anywhere is to push. That’s all I’m doing. The system just doesn’t work, Ros. These kids just aren’t having their babies adopted anymore. They get paid to keep them! Even if they can’t look after them.”

“Your dad’s coming up the driveway.”

“Hell, is that the time? The cows will be all over the top paddock by now. Tell dad I’m just getting my boots on. Get him to start up the bike.”

He walked over to Ros, put his large cattleman’s frame around her and kissed her robustly on the forehead. “I’m sorry, chook. I just get upset for you. I know how much you want to be a mum.”

“It’ll happen.”

“It’s just that, well, you know the time is right. We’re both thirty-one. Soon they’ll be saying we’re too old or something, and then we’re stuffed.”

She knew he was right. They’d been married for eleven years — childhood sweethearts who’d built a perfect life together. But, there was just one thing missing.

She smiled and kissed him. “You’d better go and see what your dad’s doing in the garage before he blows something up.”

As she spoke they heard the bike explode into life and Lawry’s dad screamed “Holy Mother of Pearl, Lawry! Get out here, quick!”

By the time they reached the front door, all they saw was Reg Decker’s broad-brim hat disappearing behind the rise in a puff of blue smoke, heading towards Oberon’s town centre.

Ros and Lawry said it in unison. “He’ll kill himself one day!”

2

Ellen and Mitchell sat in the back room playing music like they did every weekend in winter. But this was summer — a typical late November day in Sydney, hot and sticky. Perfect for the beach, but there'd be no sand between their toes today. Living on the headland as she did made staying in the house bearable, with the sea breeze blowing in, but for the first time ever, Ellen was refusing to take the short stroll down to Dee Why Point for a surf. Still, they were having fun just being in each other's company.

Lynette Walsh called from the kitchen, "Ellen, do you have a minute?"

Ellen could just hear Lynette over the music. "Yeah, coming mum."

She tapped Mitchell on the inside thigh. "I'll make you a cold-milk coffee."

"Eh loovely," he said in his fake John Lennon voice and went back to his drumming.

Ellen left the music behind as she entered the kitchen. Her mum looked somehow different. Still fussing and always kind-hearted, but her smile wasn't as convincing as usual.

"You two should really be down the beach."

"Yeah," said Ellen a little questioningly. "Just don't feel like it."

"You've been trying to lose weight for summer haven't you, Ellen?"

"Oh, yeah. A bit."

Mrs Walsh fixed a gaze on her daughter. "Is the reason you've been having trouble losing weight, because you're pregnant?"

Ellen hesitated for the slightest moment, then felt the blood rush out of her entire body. She was sure that even her red hair and freckles had instantly turned white. The room started to spin and her eyes rolled into the back of her head.

“Mitch!”

From the back room he heard a female Walsh voice calling in panic over the top of Queen's “Tie Your Mother Down”. The record jumped as Mitchell raced out to the kitchen to see Lynette Walsh clasping her hands under Ellen's arms trying desperately to hold her up. He caught them both — not hard since they were both so small — and they laid Ellen on the kitchen floor.

Kneeling over Ellen was the closest Mitchell had ever physically been to Lynette. And she to him. She fanned Ellen and slowly looked up at the youth, where their faces met. A strange mixture of pain and confusion reached out of her eyes and wrapped a fist around his conscience.

“Oh Mitchell ...” Her voice just trailed off. An unfinished sentence that spoke more eloquently than any Churchillian oration.

With quiet resignation to a now open truth, she engaged Mitchell. “Young man, I've been watching you all this time, when I should really have been watching her.”

Although her lips tensed as she spoke, she really did like this boy. He had been uncommonly polite for a teenager. A typical northern beaches cheekiness, but with an extreme determination that had seen him represent the state in two sports: swimming and squash. Yet, he was so conservative for a psychology student. It bemused her. Square with round corners, she used to call him.

Lynette genuinely enjoyed his weekly dinner with the family. She never feared him looking after the house alone while they all went to church each Sunday night. And she knew he was absolutely in orbit about her daughter. He was always sending Ellen roses, writing poems about her and sending her songs he had written for her. The tapes were pretty unlistenable, but they thrilled Ellen's heart. Lynette knew he'd make a very decent son-in-law. She'd never had the heart to tell him it could never happen. Her husband Lionel would never approve of a boy like this no matter how well they got along. Lynette could see too clearly the problems Lionel would have accepting Mitchell for Ellen. Non-Catholic. Conceived out of wedlock. The son of divorcees. His father into a fourth marriage. And now it seemed a case of “like father — like son.”

Ellen started to come 'round.

“Mum, get me a glass of water.”

Mitchell went to the sink.

“Well, pumpkin,” said Lynette to Ellen, “Looks like your squash-playing days are over for a while.”

Mitchell returned with the glass of water but it wasn’t needed. Lynette held her daughter and there were water works enough for everyone.

§

A week is a long time to carry such a secret in a marriage. Mrs Lynette Walsh wrestled with it for seven sleepless nights. By the first Saturday in December she had steeled herself for the onerous task, of approaching “the Patriarch.”

She watched stony-faced through the front bay windows as Lionel Neil Walsh and Mitchell returned from their Saturday afternoon squash game. She noticed Mitchell was driving Lionel’s Mercedes. Nothing unusual there, particularly after squash. Lionel had been a district champion in his youth and now his daughter was dating her coach, a first-grader and junior representative. The man and the boy would have a hit each weekend. Of course at fifty-nine, Lionel wasn’t the player he used to be, but they both enjoyed the chance to get to know each other.

That morning Peter, Ellen’s younger brother went too while Ellen just watched. Lionel thought that unusual. Mitchell parked in the garage and the four of them bounded through the back door into the kitchen.

“Yo, Mrs W.”

“Afternoon, Mitchell.”

Lionel went upstairs for a shower, while Peter, Ellen and Mitchell raided the refrigerator for drinks.

Peter disappeared next door, so Ellen and Mitch retired to the back room to play records.

The shower upstairs stopped and about five minutes passed quietly as Ellen and Mitchell tried to decide which album to play.

They were just placing *Atlantic Crossing* on the turntable (her choice) when an almighty groan, a sudden exhalation like a shot bear filled the house from above. Ice ran through both their veins as Ellen grabbed Mitchell’s hand. Hers were frozen.

“Ohhh! Oh, no! Please, no! No! No!” It was Lionel staggering around upstairs finally falling on his back onto his bed. Lynette Walsh's hurried footsteps ran down the stairs into the kitchen. Ellen went to her but Lynette said nothing as she rushed past with a wet face towel, then back upstairs.

Suddenly it didn't seem appropriate. Rod Stewart would have to wait. Ellen and Mitch sat almost motionless opposite each other holding hands for twenty minutes. They said virtually nothing trying to hear the direction of footsteps through the ceiling above. Muffled conversation. Occasional groans.

Finally, Lynette appeared at the door to the back room. “Ellen, your father wishes to see you.” So formal.

Mitch followed close behind Ellen up the stairs but at the top few steps she just took off, running into her parents' bedroom. Mitchell heard her crying loudly, mournfully, as he walked into the bedroom to see her lying on top of her prone father. The boy hesitated, wondering if he should be part of this moment, then moved quietly to the far side of the bed and knelt in a prayer position with his elbows on the quilt. Lionel hugged Ellen deeply and she cried like a baby into his neck for an eternity. Was this repentance, fear, manipulation, sorrow at being caught, or was it her way of saying, “Daddy, what are my instructions?”

Eventually her father spoke. “Well, my little girl, what are we going to do about this?”

Mitchell said, “I hope that ‘we’ includes me.”

Those were to be the last words he would ever speak to the man, and they floated straight through the roof like a ghost. Mitchell was invisible. Non-existent. Not another word was spoken for a full ten minutes.

Lynette Walsh came in and sat on the bed, stroking Ellen's back. Still not a word. But communication aplenty.

Ellen eventually raised herself from her father's body, pressed a torrent from her eyes with her thumbs and left hastily for the downstairs toilet next to her room.

Without her near Mitchell felt far from welcome so he gripped the rail and cautiously took to the stairs expecting anytime there would be a shove from behind and he'd land sprawled at the bottom with a broken neck. But it didn't happen. Mitchell was not to get off that lightly.

As he stepped onto the safety of the entrance hall carpet, he could hear Ellen violently retching in the bathroom, so he went to see if she was ok. The door had been locked, so he paced like a little boy with a full bladder, not feeling particularly well himself.

The retching stopped, exchanged for sobbing.

“Punk, you ok?”

A huge sniff. “Yeah.” Then Mitchell heard a tissue and a blow of that cute button nose, now red and swollen like her eyes.

The bathroom door unlocked. “I look a mess.”

The door opened and they just rocked each other arm in arm. “You’ll always be a spunk to me, Els.”

She half-a-smiled.

But then cold adrenaline shot through them both as her mum thundered down the stairs. “Mitch, I think you’d better go.” Lynette was beyond anxious.

“No, I really think I should stay and sort this out with — ”

“Mitch, for your safety’s sake, go!”

“I want to stay and talk about — ”

“Mitch, you will go and you will go now!”

As she started to bundle him towards the door, total confusion pervaded Ellen’s face. “I’ll call you as soon as I can.”

“Tonight!” Mitchell was stumbling backwards out the door. “I love you, Punk. I love you.” The door was shutting in his face.

“I love you too, Punk.”

Mitchell pushed the door back open. “What about the Elton tickets next week?”

“I’ll call you.”

“Go!” shouted Lynette and the door slammed.

Smokka the cat saw Mitchell to the gate. Neither of them was seen around the house for the next week.

“Saint Bernadette’s Hospital.”

“Yes. Could I speak to the social worker please?”

“Putting you through.”

Phone chimes.

“Louisa Puddle speaking.”

“Mrs Puddle, my name is Lynette Walsh. Dr Sussman suggested I call.”

“Yes?”

“I have a seventeen-year-old daughter who is pregnant and I wanted to find out what her options are.”

“Right. What’s her name?”

“Ellen.”

“And when’s she due?”

“April 22nd.”

“Right. So she’s five months’ then. Her confinement is here, I take it, with Dr Sussman?”

“Yes.”

“And has she expressed any preferences herself?”

“Well she wants to keep the child, but — ”

“And what about the child’s father?”

“Yes, well, that’s a bit of a problem.”

“Shot through has he? Pretty typical.”

“Oh, no. Quite the opposite. He won’t go and my husband is extremely — ”

“Hostile?”

“Yes. Ellen and I have sort of given the impression to Lionel that the boy’s disappeared but, well, you know. Really, I don’t know what’s going to happen when my husband finds out they’re still, you know, seeing each other. He wants to marry her, but there’s no way Lionel’s going to allow it.”

“How old is the boy?”

“Twenty.”

“Well, they’re old enough to make their own decisions. Still, it’s probably worth getting you and Ellen in for a chat.”

“And what about the boyfriend?”

“Not at this stage.”

Louisa continued to probe for details and as the conversation progressed she started to see an obvious picture in her notes. It excited her.

“You’re Catholics?”

“The boyfriend isn’t. He’s had a rather, umm, confused up-bringing. Nice boy. Just, you know, a lot of divorce and so on in the family.”

“Good. Good.” Louisa Puddle smiled. It was sounding better all the time. She knew the next question was against the law but she could no longer resist. “Have you considered adoption?” she said.

Lynette was a bit taken aback. “Well, it crossed our minds, me and Lionel, but I don’t think Ellen could ever ... She’s very, umm, homely, you know. We just want to find out about benefits and child care and things like that.”

“Oh, yes, of course. We just need to examine all the options, that’s all. Look, I have another appointment so I better go, but I’ll get back to you very soon.”

They exchanged particulars and the call ended quickly.

Louisa’s eyes grew large as she read her notes.

Girl’s Father: pharmacist/shop owner. Mother: home duties, upper-middle class.

Girl: Ellen, 5 mths. Cath. sch. ed. HSC. Prob. uni. ’80.

Putative Father: Mitchell, 2nd-year psych. priv. school ed; state rep. swim, squash. Parents divorced.

PF’s Father: engineer. Mother : theatre actress.

“Very impressive,” she hummed. “Very impressive indeed.”

Louisa dialled hurriedly, muttering to herself, “This child could be anything!”

“Maureen Dyson speaking.”

“Maureen? Lou here. Just had a call you might be interested in.”

“Oh, yes?”

“High IQs everywhere. University potential. Elite sports ability. Due April 22.”

“Really! Very impressive allotment!”

“Just what I said!”

"I don't know how you find them, Lou!"

"Oh, this one fell in my lap, really."

"I'm so sick of trying to place retards."

"Maureen!"

"Sorry. What are the chances?"

"Oh, probably 50:50. Maybe 60:40."

"Promising."

"The girl's father is the key."

"Always are. Interesting. Thanks, Lou. Keep us posted."

"Yes. I'm following it up in the new year."

"Fine. Have a nice Christmas if I don't speak to you before. I'll send a card home with Heather."

"Of course, Maureen. And to you and your husband. The children, too."

Maureen was so chuffed she snapped her pencil in half. "Autumn is such a lovely time of year in Oberon."

3

Mitchell really didn't know how Ellen and her mum pulled it off for so long, but he wasn't asking questions.

Since the Elton concert there had been suggestions of pressure from Ellen's parents. When Mitchell dropped her off that night she turned to him in the car and said, "I'm supposed to tell you we're splitting up tonight. But I just can't do it. I love you too much."

"It's ok, Punk. We'll work something out."

Since then Mitchell had seen her just about every third day or so. They exchanged Christmas gifts on Christmas Eve and had gone to a New Year's Eve Party with Julia (who'd split with Sepp that night). They went shopping together, movies, occasional shows.

Mitchell had the feeling they were sneaking around, but had nothing concrete on which to base his suspicions.

It was Friday the first of February and they were sitting in the back room. Lunchtime had just passed and Lynette was cleaning up in the kitchen.

"Bloody hell!" Mitchell had never heard Lynette swear before, but it was quickly drowned by the Merc engine roaring up the side of the house and into the garage. It was then Mitchell realised that he hadn't actually seen Lionel since the first week in December. The two girls had been arranging their meetings around times that Lionel was out of the way.

Today the plan had gone frighteningly awry.

Ellen's eyes bulged and she screamed, "Hide!"

But they knew too well that Mitchell's trademark '67 Premier was sitting out the front. Ellen grabbed his arm and started to drag him out of the back room.

"What's going on?"

"Just shut up and hide!" And she pushed Mitch into her room. He sat on her bed wondering if he should secret himself in Ellen's cupboard.

The kitchen door erupted — it was a miracle it didn't shatter.

"What's that little shit doing in my house?" Lionel exploded.

"He's come over to see Ellen."

"How dare you! How dare you let him past the front door? I gave you explicit instructions!"

Solid hand on female flesh and screaming.

"Leave him alone, dad!" Crying. Shrieking. More hitting. Ellen's head smashed against the 'fridge door.

"You little slut!"

"Lionel, don't!"

Lynette's demur middle-aged frailty took up battle with Lionel's raging self-righteousness. Ellen in timid pregnancy was this time flung into the oven where she regrouped to tackle her rampaging father. Again he overpowered them, dispatching them both to the floor before turning to the benchtop.

Mitchell heard a cutlery drawer spin into the toaster.

Primal screams. "No, dad! No!"

Then Mitchell realised that wasn't the cutlery drawer. It was the second drawer filled with cleavers, carving knives, the Wiltshires, an ice pick, tenderising hammer and dozens of other lethal weapons.

From animal depths Ellen disgorged, "Run, Mitty! Run!"

She needn't have bothered. Ellen's room was a dead end, in every sense. If Mitchell didn't get to the front door before Lionel barrelled out of the kitchen, the boy would be mince on the carpet.

Mitchell burst through the beads that hung on Ellen's door.

Fumbling with the front door deadlock. "Why won't my hands work properly?" Finally it swung open. He slammed it shut behind him, partly to slow Lionel down but mostly to give a clear audible signal that he had left the house, so that this lunatic father would back off the girls. Mitchell took

about three steps across the perfectly cut lawn, jumped the rose bushes and the neat red-brick fence in one stride, dived across the primer-coloured bonnet of the Premier. “Damn these bloody keys! Get in there! Get in!” The engine roared its usual unmuffled grunt. Mitch found first gear and hammered the right foot against the fire wall.

At the T-intersection at the top of the street, Mitchell finally released the hand brake. “Left? Right? Or reverse? Go back and let him have a few free shots in the street. Breathe Mitchell, breathe! Think! Which way?”

Nothing moved. No breeze. The car just quietly rattled in idle. Nausea simmered within him and all he could do was bury his head against the steering wheel. “God! Oh, God. Don’t let him hurt her. Forgive me for being so weak. Just don’t let him hurt her.”

Mitchell pulled left and cried for an hour.

§

“You stupid bitch.”

“Oh Li — ”

“Just shut up and listen, you brainless cow!”

“Don’t you understand anything? I have never met anyone so bloody stupid.”

He had them all backed up against the living-room wall and the index finger was working overtime.

“How could you let that possessed little arsehole in my house?”

“He’s not possessed,” Lynette challenged in exasperation. “He’s just a kid.”

“I beg your pardon? I suppose you actually like him, do you?”

“He’s alright. We could do a lot worse for a son-in-law!”

“Shut up!” He raised his hand, she cowered, he controlled himself.

He turned to Peter. “What do you think?”

“He’s alright.”

To Ellen, “And what about you? After what he’s done to you?”

“Dad,” Ellen spoke softly, scared as a mouse but determinedly. “Dad, I love him.”

He looked at her shaking against the wall. “You wouldn’t know.”

This girl. His treasure. This baby who carried his name. Not just his surname; just as he was L.N. Walsh, so she was Ellen Walsh. And now she stood in front of him leading this revolt in his own house. It was too much.

“All of you have to get one thing through your pathetic, thick skulls. For the past two years, this boy has been the voice of Satan in our home.”

“Oh, really, Lionel!”

“Don't argue with me on this, Lyn! My God, you're not the woman I married, are you? I *will* divorce you, you know. I'm not joking. Satan has overcome you!”

“I've never seen you like this, Lionel. You're talking gibberish.”

“Shut your ugly face, Devil! Go out of her!”

Even Peter started getting worried. “Mum, do something. He's — ”

“The horrid little demon had me fooled for a while, too, don't worry. We put our guard down. But no more. From this moment on, all of you will do the rosary without ceasing and pray against this attack which has come on our home. Pray that he be given over for the breaking down of his flesh, so that he'll be consumed by the devils which control his soul. This is the only way we can be safe once this is all over.”

These last five words totally unnerved Ellen. “What do you mean, ‘when this is all over’?”

Lynette interrupted. Concern over Lionel's mental state convinced her she should handle this. “Your father and I have discussed it with the social workers over the last month or so, and we all agree the best option for the baby will be adoption. They have lovely couples who — ”

“No bloody way! You're not taking my baby!”

Lionel tightly wrapped his fingers around Ellen's wrists and pressed his face into hers. “This is the child of Satan. If Father Tantini had said yes, I would take a coat hanger and rip this vermin out of your body myself. It has no place in our home.”

“Dad, you're hurting me. You're scaring me, dad!”

“Good. Maybe you'll understand what this demon has done to you.”

He let her go, throwing her hands away from his in disgust. “Why? Why did you let him — ”
The thought made him sick.

“Because I love him, dad. I love him.”

“He forced himself onto you, didn't he?”

“No, dad. Never. He would never — ”

“Listen to yourself! Defending such evil. Young lady, for the next few months you’re going to live in confession. Take her downstairs and talk some sense into her, Lyn. And if you ever let him into this house again, God help me, I promise I’ll throw you out. All of you. Anyone who even talks to that excrement is not welcome in my home.”

For the most fleeting moment Lynette Walsh thought that didn’t sound so bad. But her rationality returned. Once this was dealt with they could return to their quiet life. That’s all she longed for — peace and quiet and for all this to be over.

§

Lynette had prepared her speech for Ellen. It was now time to deliver.

She parted the beads hanging down Ellen’s bedroom doorway. Ellen entered first and Lynette closed the door behind her. Ellen calmly sat on her bed, but started crying.

“I don’t want to lose my baby, mum. I want to marry Mitchell.”

“Ellen, you can’t. You just can’t leave school and immediately become a wife and mother. You haven’t even lived life. You have to go to uni and do your degree.”

“Mum, I didn’t even pass the HSC!”

“Well, you can still do teaching. Listen, honey, think about it. You have your life ahead of you. When this is all over you can go out and date lots of boys. Break lots of hearts.”

Ellen lost her temper. “I don’t want to date lots of boys or break lots of hearts. All I want is Mitch! I love him. Don’t you understand that? And I love this baby. I could never give it up. I feel it every day — moving. Mum, there’s life inside me. This *is* my life. You’ve had babies, mum. You understand, don’t you?”

“Ellen, one day you’ll meet a nice Catholic boy, get married and have lots of babies. But this is not the time.”

“I’ve already met a nice boy who I want to have lots of babies with. And you like him, too. You told me!”

“Ellen, Mitch is a nice boy. But he’s not like us!”

“No, he’s fun and exciting and doesn’t talk all this crap about Satan and — ”

“Now listen here, young lady. You respect your father. He’s just very upset about all this.”

“But he wants to get rid of his own grandchild. His first *grandchild*, mum. It’s insane!”

“No, it’s not. You’re just not able to think it through clearly. You’re too close to it all. Listen to the voice of experience Ellen.”

Ellen covered her face with her hands, her elbows resting on her tummy, now around seven months.

“Ellen, they have lots of very nice couples. Lovely people who are married and wealthy and are desperate to have a child to love. They can give any child everything it needs. They have nice happy homes. And the agency said they’ll find a couple just like you and Mitchell, with the same interests and — ”

“Agency? You’ve been talking to an agency? Mum!”

“This is for your own good, Ellen. And it really is the best for your baby.”

“Oh bull, mum. How would you have felt if they’d taken me and given me to someone else?”

“That was different. You and Mitchell have no way of looking after this — ”

“Neither did you and dad. You’re always telling me how tough you did it. But you got by.”

“You’re too young Ellen.”

“I’ll be eighteen before the baby’s born.”

“Ellen, you do not want a Judy on your hands. Trust me.”

The gravity of the name made Ellen shudder. Mrs Walsh had made her point and pressed it firmly. “You have no money. Nowhere to live.”

“I can get benefits and stuff. You can help. Mitty’s parents want to help.”

“You’re not even married, Ellen! The shame!”

Her voiced trailed off like it always did when things became too difficult.

“That’s it, isn’t mum? You *could* help us. Just a tiny bit of support and you know Mitty and I would be ok. But you don’t want that because everyone on the headland will talk. ‘Oh the naughty little Walsh girl. She was such a lovely thing. But, oh deary me, she went and fell in love and got herself in trouble and oh deary deary me.’ Well, mum, they’re already saying all that. And frankly, I don’t care. I love Mitty and I love this baby and we’re going to make the best of it. Ok, so it’s not perfect. Ok, so I’ll miss uni. I was never all that interested in the first place.”

“Ellen, when this is all over you’ll have your life back and you can start — ”

The phone rang outside Ellen's door, so she stood to answer it.

"I'll get it," said Lynette with a certain suspicion, and with a hand on Ellen's shoulder, she pushed herself off the bed to leave the room.

"Walsh residence. Oh, yes, Julia. Well, she's just about to get in the shower."

Ellen pushed passed the door beads and said loud enough, "Mum, I'm right here!"

"Oh, here she is." Lynette handed Ellen the phone. "Don't be too long. I haven't finished with you yet."

"Hi, Julia?"

Julia was whispering. "I just had a call from Mitch. God! What's going on, Els? I know you can't talk but Mitch told me to tell you he'll be at your side-window after work tonight. Leave it open so he can pass you a letter, ok?"

Ellen replied with bravado, "Yeah, well, I'll have to ask my folks about tomorrow night so I don't know. But thanks for thinking of me. It's nice to know I haven't been forgotten, if you can tell the gang I'm thinking of them."

"Umm, does that mean you want me to phone Mitchell and tell him you still love him?"

"Oh, that'd be great. Definitely. Anytime you want to come around. Fantastic."

"Far out, Els! You've either lost the plot or you need help. I'll call Mitch now!"

"Great."

"Then I'll come and see you."

"On the weekend. That'd be great."

"Gotcha."

Ellen went back to her room and pulled the cream out of her top draw to rub on her swollen abdomen. A foot here, a hand there. She could feel it, playing with her, chasing her hand as she massaged. She stopped and just watched the little lumps under her skin protrude then disappear replaced by another in a different place. Lazy elbows and knees stretching. Or feisty fists knocking at the outside world, wondering what all the fuss was. A little life calling "mumma." Calling her in unspoken words which Ellen strained to hear. "I love you, darling," she whispered.

She wiped her hands and picked up her pen.

At the top of Ozone Parade Mitchell pulled up as quietly as he could – which wasn't very quietly in a '67 Premier at ten-thirty at night. It was raining so hard, that Mitchell looked like a sewer rat, by the time he'd run the three streets to be standing underneath the small white ventilation window on the side of Ellen's bedroom.

Mitch pulled his letter out from under his jacket and cupped it in his hands so it wouldn't get wet. He prised the window open a little more and stood on his tip-toes to place the letter on the ledge. Suddenly, a hand gripped his arm and almost pulled him in! "Shit! Old Man Walshie's got me!"

But then Mitchell felt his name bracelet on her arm and his heart raced for a different reason. She gently stroked the back of his hand against her wet cheek. She kissed each of his fingers in turn. Mitchell cupped his hand under her chin like he had so many times. He pawed at her face imagining how pretty she was. For twenty minutes, Mitchell stood out in the rain and didn't feel a drop. His calves ached from standing on his toes. His forehead and nose scraped against the brick, stinging as salty tears washed into each new scratch.

The skin on her arms felt so soft — he had never noticed before. And then her hair. Her beautiful hair. Her trademark auburn, the thing that had attracted Mitchell to her that day two years before when they went with Julia to the Totem Bowling Alley. Julia wrote in the name places on the scoreboard "*Ellen luvs Mit*" before Ellen turned bright red and tried to erase it. That night after driving her home, Mitchell kissed her under the big tree at the gate. They had been inseparable since.

Mitchell could now see that same tree fighting the wind back and forth in the night. The memory of that wonderful moment inspired him to stretch even further — oh how his legs ached — but anything to stroke her hair. Touching blind it seemed so much thicker and lovelier.

He could feel her eyes were closed as he ran the tip of his index finger over her eyebrows. Every tiny feature on her face had become so immeasurably precious.

She enveloped his hand inside both of hers squeezing so tightly he felt his thumb would burst.

Finally, she placed a letter into Mitchell's hand and he felt her open lips on the back of his hand as her hot breath slowly caressed to his wrist. She turned it over and tongue-kissed the inside of his forearm. He couldn't help but smile. She wiped Mitch's arm and gave it a pat. It was time to go.

He pulled his hand out and watched the window close. The rain had stopped. Just the wind now eating through him. Mitchell ran back to the car and turned on the inside light to read her letter.

Dear Punk,

It was terrible. Thank God you got out of here alive.

Dad lined us all up tonight and he just went off. Pete's stressing out.

They want to have the baby adopted! What are we going to do?

I asked mum about going to see 'Boys Own Macbeth' next week.

No way!

Should I pack?

Mitty I love you so much.

Hugs and kisses. Kisses and hugs.

Love ya forever.

Ellen. (Your lil' punk.)

He drove home and sat up all night writing a letter to Ellen's father begging him to let them continue.

Dear Mr Walsh,

I just don't know how to start the most important letter of my life.

I understand you being upset, but I can only beg you for your daughter's sake to let us see each other.

I know I am only twenty but I love her so much. And I know that she is not yet eighteen, but I am sure she loves me too.

I know I have done the wrong thing by you. But I want you to know that I respect you and your wife. I am truly sorry, and I ask you to have compassion on us.

Ellen is carrying your grandchild.

We can work this out if we talk to each other, I'm sure.

I will do anything you want me to just to have the chance to see Ellen and to keep our child.

Please, I ask you in all humility for Ellen's sake. She is suffering terribly.

Yours sincerely,

Mitchell Hearn.

Mitchell placed it in a large envelope without folding it, drove back to Ozone Parade. It was now about two-thirty in the morning, and the lack of subtlety in his Holden's engine noise seemed exaggerated as he pulled over. He ran to the Walshs' house and slid the letter under their door. He wanted to knock on Ellen's window, but it was directly under her parents', so discretion was the better part of valor.

Mitchell ran back to the car, took a blanket out of the boot and collapsed on the back seat.

§

Fortunately, like all squash fanatics, Mitchell always carried a set of sports gear in the boot, so when morning dawned he went to Dee Why Racquetsports, asked the manager if he could use the showers and change clothes — a small advantage to being so well known in the sport.

It was probably a bit cold to wear shorts and T-shirt when he hopped back in the car, but it was now nine o'clock and Mitchell knew Lionel would be safely ensconced in the pharmacy for the rest of this Saturday morning.

Mitchell pulled up boldly outside the Walshs' house, but as he opened the car door he saw Lynette running out to him.

“Please go away, Mitch. Please.”

Ellen heard his name from inside and ran out to see her lover. Mitchell tried to walk past the gate but Lynette kept pushing him back. Not wanting to push her in return, Mitchell just held his ground outside the perimeter of the fence.

“If Lionel sees you here, we'll all be shot.”

“What about the letter?”

“It made no difference. Mitch, it's over.”

Standing right behind her mother, Ellen asked Mitchell with a smile, “What happened to your face?”

“Oh, I scraped it on a brick!”

Ellen covered her giggle with her hand. "Have you had any breakfast?"

"Ellen!" snapped Lynette. "Mitch you have to go. Please understand. It finishes right here."

"You're not having my child adopted!"

"Mitch, let us look after it. Ellen is too young. Make a clean break right here before something terrible happens."

Mitchell was stunned. "There's no such thing as a clean break, Lyn. Your daughter is having my baby. I want her to marry me. We need your help. Please."

"Ellen can't marry now!"

"Why not?"

"Yeah, why not?" Ellen chipped in.

"She's nearly eighteen!"

"She's eighteen going on fourteen, Mitch." Lynette turned to her. "Can't you understand what's going on here? This isn't a game, Ellen!"

"Please, Lynette, please. I beg you! Do something."

All three of them were silent as Mitchell locked his eyes onto Lynette's. She fidgeted.

"Please, mum, help us."

Lynette Walsh knew the choice. Someone had to be sacrificed. Either it was her home, her marriage, her peaceful existence, or it was this boy. She could look him in the eye no longer.

"I can not help you, Mitch. Now please go before I have to call the police. I'm very sorry."

She spoke so quietly Mitchell could hardly hear her.

"I can't just go, Lyn." His voice was giving out. His mouth was so dry he could hardly shape the words. Droplets were falling out of Ellen's eyes onto the garden path.

Lynette broke the silence. "Ellen, your toast will be cold."

Then mother turned daughter towards the door and they both left Mitchell standing under "first kiss" tree.

"Punk, please!"

Ellen disappeared into the house but Lynette turned back to Mitchell with a stern word of warning.

"Don't you dare run off with her, young man, or we'll have you charged. Remember, she's still seventeen."

“Bring on March 14,” he replied.

The front door closed.

He stood on the small brick fence screaming. “You’re not taking my child! You’re not! I’ll screw you to the wall if you have my child taken away, Walsh. By God, I’ll bury the lot of you!”

Ellen just watched him through her bedroom window as she plaited the tassels on the end of her bedspread.

Mitchell half-smiled at himself. “What a silly performance,” he said out loud to no one in particular. “I suppose Lionel won’t be wanting his squash game this afternoon, then?”

There was no answer, so he went and found something else to do.

Next day as the Walshes left St Kevin's Oaks Avenue, Father Tantini stopped Lionel. “I had a visitor yesterday. Mitchell Hearn.”

Walsh was livid. So livid that they changed churches — from that day they would attend St Keiran’s Catholic Church Manly Vale.

4

“Miss Puddle will see you now.”

Lynette took Ellen’s arm and guided her into the office.

“Good to see you again, Mrs Walsh. And this is Ellen?”

Ellen smiled weakly and took the seat nearest to the door.

“Now, your mum’s told me you’ve decided to have your child adopted.”

It was difficult with her mum in the room. Ellen wished “Miss Puddle”, whoever she was, would send her mother out so that she could talk freely, but Puddle did nothing except give them a supercilious grin. Ellen had never seen anything quite so plastic.

“I’d really like to talk about benefits and alternatives.”

“Ellen, we discussed this at home!”

“It’s ok, Mrs Walsh. We need to look at every possibility. Now Ellen, if you kept your baby, what would you do?”

She knew from her nightly letters at the window that Mitchell’s father had offered to have them all live at his place. His mum had said she’d “look after the baby like a shot.” Mitch’s step-mother Caroline was over the moon at the prospect of baby-sitting now that Chris (her son and Mitch’s half-brother) had started school. But, with her mother in the counselling room, Ellen couldn’t reveal a word of this.

“I just ... ” She wrestled with how much she wanted to say.

“Where would you go? Is there room for the baby at home?”

Ellen brightened for a moment but faltered in delivery. "Oh, there's plenty of room. We have two spare bedrooms, one is right near my room, so it wouldn't be hard."

"Right," Louisa Puddle took a note: *subject uncomfortable re: allotment at home.*

"There's no room and you know it, Ellen. That's my sewing room."

"Well what about the back room? We could easily convert that."

"That's for entertaining." Another note: *subject unreal expectations of home. No room for allotmt.*

"So, we still haven't solved that problem. If you kept your baby, Ellen, where would it sleep and how would you take care of it?"

"Well, if worst comes to worst I can have the baby sleep with me in my room. And I know how to look after babies. I've had cousins. I've done heaps of baby-sitting. Changed plenty of nappies. When I work in dad's pharmacy, I'm always looking after the kids for the mums. I know what to give them when they're sick."

"Yes, that's good, Ellen." Note: *Over-confident.* "But they're always someone else's baby aren't they, Ellen? How would you go, looking after your own baby twenty-four hours a day? You could never give it back to someone else."

"I'm sure I'd be ok. I would have help." Ellen hoped she hadn't suddenly given too much away.

"What sort of help?"

"Well, you'd help wouldn't you, mum?"

Lynette simply smiled.

"And, well, I'm sure there are other people to help. Doesn't the government have people?"

"Sometimes, in special circumstances. But you don't really qualify. Your parents earn too much. It's really up to them to find help if you need it. We'll be sending someone around to check on you and see how you're going. Someone from Community Services, to make sure the baby is being looked after. You know —"

"I know I'd be ok," Ellen said, mustering as much confidence as she could in this cauldron.

"Well, good for you, Ellen. That's good. Now, you said you could have the baby in your bedroom with you. Do you have a bassinet or a cot?"

Ellen knew that Mitch's step-mother Caroline was pulling all of her son's baby paraphernalia out of the closet as they spoke. Why didn't this woman send mum out of the room? It wasn't fair!

“Well, I’m sure I could get one.”

“So you don’t really have anywhere for the baby to sleep, do you? Do you have any bottles for feeding or nappies or baby clothes?”

“I’m not due for two and half months. I have time.”

“What about bathing?”

“I’d just bathe the baby in the bath tub, wouldn’t I?”

“Well, no actually, Ellen. You need a special little baby bath.”

Ellen felt totally deflated.

“You see, Ellen, it’s not as easy as it seems.”

A knock at the door. “Heather’s here.”

“Oh, good. Send her in.”

A clone of Louisa walked in. Grey skin, hair in a bun, skinny but short.

“Lou!”

“Hetty.”

They kissed Ellen thought, rather too familiarly.

“Heather Merken, this is Mrs Walsh and this is Ellen.”

Polite nods all around.

“Heather works in another department and she has a few forms for you to fill out, Ellen.”

Ms Merken produced a pristine manila folder emblazoned with the words *Walsh, T.M. conf: 22.4.80.*

She gave Ellen a pen then placed in front of her a form headed *St Mary of Dolleurs* in large letters. Bracketed in smaller letters under this header were the words *Adoption Branch.*

“I don’t want to have my baby adopted,” protested Ellen.

Heather chipped in. “That’s perfectly alright dear. We understand how you’re feeling. We have to do this just in case. You know, it’s standard.”

“It’s standard, Ellen. It’s fine,” echoed Lynette.

“It doesn’t mean you’ve agreed to anything. It just helps us with our paper work,” said Heather.

Ellen looked at the questions. Height, weight, age. But then there were more personal things — hobbies, interests, education level, family background, hair and eye colour. This was followed by a

whole section titled *Putative Father*. Ellen wondered what the word “putative” meant but she daren't ask.

Under *putative father occupation*, she wrote *Pharmacist*.

“No, dear. That section's about Mitchell,” instructed Lynette as she scrutinised each of Ellen's answers.

Ellen looked at Lynette, her facial expression inquiring, “What is this form?” but the words refused to fall out of her mouth.

“What do I put here?” Ellen pointed to the question *Does putative father keep in touch?*

“You answer ‘no’ to that dear,” said Lynette.

“But it's only been a few days since I last saw him.”

“It's been almost a week now, Ellen. And that's long enough to put ‘no’ to that question. He won't be keeping in touch, I can assure you, and if he tries to come within two hundred metres of our home, he'll be put in gaol. He won't be standing out the front of our house screaming and shouting threats at us again!”

“What have you done?” protested Ellen.

“Never you mind Ellen. Just fill out the form. I won't put up with his behaviour in our street again. With Sergeant Neal across the road, young Mr Hearn won't dare to come near our house any more.”

Little do you know, thought Ellen. I've held his hand every night.

Puddle made a rapid note: *P.F. unstable? Threatened Mrs Walsh. AVO in force against P.F.*

Ellen came to the bottom of the form: *Putative father background information. Circumstances re: birth.*

“What do I put here?”

“Well, what's this boy like?” replied Merken.

Ellen smiled. She turned her face to her mother. “He's kind and charming. He makes me laugh. He's exciting.”

“Sounds more like he's excitable.” They chuckled — all except Ellen.

“Write that down, Ellen. *Excitable*. That's him,” chuckled Lynette.

Ellen wrote slowly. Too slowly for everyone's liking. She had completed about four words describing Mitchell when Merken took the pen and the form away from her. "Anything you can think of, Mrs Walsh?" she asked impatiently.

So Lynette proceeded to tell them all the sordid details of Mitch's home life — wealthy, upwardly mobile, but riddled with divorce. Merken seemed satisfied with that and placed the date at the top of the form: 8.2.80 (*Friday*).

Puddle turned to Lynette. "Dr Sussman says she's very clean."

§

"Chatswood Squashlands. Mitchell Hearn speaking."

"Mitty, it's Ellen." She was whispering.

"Oh, punk, it's so good to hear your voice again!"

"Look, I can't talk. Mum's just in the shower. She took me to this place today and I had to fill out all these forms. Stuff about you."

"Do you know what it was?"

"It was an adoption form or something. They said it didn't mean anything. That it was standard. I have a phone number — Louisa Puddle, she's from Social Security or something. I tried to ask her about benefits, but she wouldn't tell me. Umm, the number's 310 466. Call her Monday and ask her about single-mother's benefits or if we can get assistance. Gotta go."

"Tonight at the window."

"Love ya!"

"Always."

"Forever."

Click. Beep. Beep. Beep.

"I love you, punk."

"Yes, lovely, son," said the large sweaty customer at the counter. "Now, can we just have the lights on court four?"

§

The Chamber Magistrate at Manly Court really couldn't have given a rat's backside.

To him, Mitchell was just a naughty little trapdoor spider who lay in wait for some tasty Catholic schoolgirl to ambush. Once the dirty deed was done, the vermin would then scurry back into pounce position, chuckling until his next pert little victim happened to stroll by. To the magistrate, Mitchell was getting what he deserved.

"Mr Hearn, the only way you can lift the restraining order is to go to court."

"But they've locked their daughter in her room. That's kidnapping, isn't it?"

"Well, she's not yet eighteen, so they are the legal — "

"A month to go!"

"As I said, until she turns eighteen they are her legal guardians. Anyway, only she can make a complaint."

"But she can't get to the phone. She can't get outside to make a complaint."

"My hands are tied, Mr Hearn."

"What about when the child is born? Can I do anything then?"

"About what?"

"About this adoption nonsense?"

"It's my understanding that only the mother of the child can decide on that."

"But she's being stood over! She doesn't want to have our child adopted. Bloody hell! I don't want our child adopted. Don't I have rights as a father?"

"Mr Hearn, it is my understanding that only the mother can make those sorts of decisions. Adoption law is very complex."

"Well, adoption law is stuffed!"

Mitchell was amazed at how little this magistrate knew. It was like asking a GP to cure a brain tumour. "Take two aspirins" legal advice.

"Do you know anyone who would know?"

"Have you asked the adoption agency? They'll know. They deal with these things all the time."

Mitchell Hearn stood up and walked out.

Somehow it all made very macabre sense. Mitchell had watched his father over the years be cut to pieces by the Family Law. It was completely stacked against men and adoption law was just another example.

Solicitors had carved a trench through Mitchell's family and now it seemed they were doing it to him personally.

He needed a solicitor on his side for a change; but mostly, Mitchell needed money! He had been saving like mad to put together something to start taking care of Ellen and the baby. The middle of February was fast approaching. That left two months and he didn't want to blow his nest egg on solicitors.

Why did his dad have to go to America right now? And why did his mum have to go to Rockhampton? Now there was a woman who knew how to use the law — just ask Mitchell's father! She'd probably get private D's out to photo Old Man Walsh masturbating in public or something.

But Mitchell's mum and dad weren't here. They'd both offered their homes to Ellen and the baby, then gone on holidays to leave Mitchell to sort out the mess. He felt exposed. He was the one who had been threatened with murder by Lionel and yet Lionel Walsh had taken out a restraining order on Mitchell!

Yes. The law was stuffed, and in a big way.

That night, Mitchell had dinner with Caroline, Les and Chris, Mitch's half-brother. Sure they were step-family, but they were family to him. The Walshes could never understand that, nor could they understand that Mitchell had seen what divorce does to people, especially the kids in the middle, and he was determined to never have it happen once he was married. Even if he accidentally married an absolute dragon, divorce was not an option.

And Ellen was no dragon.

Caroline and Mitch had heaps of fun sorting out the baby gear, separating the boy's clothes from the gender-neutral. Chris laughed so hard to see the things he used to wear just a few short years before in 1975.

There were bottles, dummies, rattles, mobiles and teething rings, all still usable. The nappies were a little frayed but mostly brilliant white. While Chris snoozed on the lounge Les and Mitchell put together the bassinet and the cot. It was as stable as Mount Rushmore. They trialed the baby

Rebecca's Law

capsule in the car. Left the bolt in place — no point removing it, really. They discussed arrangements for baby-sitting.

And they talked about what an ass the law was.

5

“Three, one, zero, four, six, six.” Mitchell mumbled to himself as he dialed.

Three rings then “Hello. Louisa Puddle.”

It was her direct line, which caught Mitchell by surprise. “Umm, is that Louisa Puddle?”

“Speaking.”

He fumbled through explaining who he was. She immediately became evasive, but Mitchell pressed her.

“I am not at all happy about having the baby adopted!”

“Well, it is entirely Ellen’s decision.”

“That just doesn’t seem right to me. Surely the father of the child has some say?”

“Mitchell, dear, it has always been that the birth-mother is the one who decides.”

Interesting, Mitchell thought, that they already referred to Ellen as “birth-mother” two months before delivery.

“What about single-mother’s benefits and so on? What can she get?”

“Oh, it’s not much. Ten dollars a week or something. I’m not quite sure. Hardly enough to live on.”

“And what if I marry her?”

“Well,” she chuckled, “She won’t get anything dear! You only get single-mother’s pension if you’re single.”

“That’s idiotic! If she stays single and keeps the baby away from its father, she gets benefits but if we do the right thing and get married, she’s hung out to dry?”

“Well she has you to rely on, doesn't she? How much do you earn a week?”

“One-hundred-and-sixty dollars. But I'm a student.”

“But you have a job don't you? I hear you're a big-time sports star or something.”

Mitchell did not like her attitude. “Is everyone at Social Security like you?”

“Social Security? Oh! Oh, no, dear,” she chuckled again, “Some of them are a bit useless.”

“Is there someone else I can check this out with?”

“Certainly, dear. I'll give you a name and a number. The name is Heather Merken and her number is 277 875. But she'll tell you the same as me, dear.”

Mitchell immediately rang Merken.

“Can I adopt this child?” he asked, a little aggressively.

“Only Ellen can decide if she signs the consent forms or not. You can sign them if you wish but we only need her signature.”

“So I can't even adopt my own child?”

“Ellen is the only one we need to sign the consent form.”

“Can my mother adopt the child?”

“It goes like this, Mitchell. Ellen decides. That's it.”

“That's it? What if she can't decide? If she's in a coma or something?”

“Then her parents get to make the decision.”

“What? Ok. What if her parents are dead?”

“You're planning to kill her parents are you?”

“No. Hypothetically.”

“You're planning to kill them hypothetically, are you?”

This woman was worse than Puddle.

“Mitchell, I don't know how many ways I can put this. Ellen is the only one who is needed to sign the consent form.”

Mitchell was devastated. This law seemed so ridiculous.

That night Ellen told him in her letter that she was going to see Ms Merken that Friday, without mumsie. Great, he thought. I'll definitely tag along.

But then he wondered why Merken didn't tell him about the appointment?

The meeting did not go well. Mitchell had all his angles worked out.

“Can I adopt my own child?”

“No.”

“Can I veto the adoption?”

“No.”

“Can anyone in my family apply to adopt the child?”

“No.”

“Is there any way I can oppose the adoption?”

“Not as such.” Mitchell felt he had astro-traveled into Monty Python’s *Argument Sketch*.

Merken hardly looked at him. At each question she was furiously writing notes. “My, you are the excitable one aren’t you?” she said.

Ellen sneaked a girly-giggle, filled out a form or two and they left for Circular Quay and the ferry back to Manly.

“I don’t know why you’re getting all aggro about it, Mitty. It’s not going to happen.”

“Then why are you going through with all these appointments, all these forms?”

“Just to keep mum and dad quiet.”

“Let’s grab the bus to Balgowlah and I’ll drive you home.”

“I’m meeting mum at the shop.”

“Well, let’s go down to Queensie Beach first.”

“Cool.”

The two of them used to do this almost every day during the first term of summer 1979, before the HSC. He’d pick her up after school at Stella Maris and they’d just hang for an hour at Queenscliff Beach — his beach. Mitchell was club champion there when he was sixteen. Held all the records at the swimming club. His favourite childhood memories were body-surfing Queenscliff point with his dad. He’d spent adolescent hours at march-past practice and sprint training on this sand and knew every grain.

But a good day at 'Queensie' had to include writing *PUNK 4 EVER* in the sand. And this day was definitely a great day. They played "bumper-bars dodgem-cars" with Ellen's tummy and Mitchell made circus drum noises each time they collided.

A small group of clubbies on the pavilion balcony were kept amused as Ellen and Mitch did the fast-motion Benny Hill chase-thing up and down the water's edge. They looked like idiots but couldn't have cared less.

They leaned shoulder to shoulder and strode in unison, Mitchell's feet in the surf, Ellen's feet on the dry. Then her feet would gradually get further away from his as they leaned on each other until they were like a walking triangle with the apex at the shoulders. Usually they'd lose balance and fall over but not today. There was too much at stake.

They wandered down towards the lagoon in the shadow of the sandstone retaining wall and played "dead man's bluff" — one person had to pretend to be dead while the other could do anything at all to make them come alive. That was the best game of all.

Mitchell lay his head on her pregnancy and listened.

"Hoh!" giggled Ellen. "Did you feel that?"

"Feisty little punkette! Must be practising his goal-kicking!"

"I don't think so," said Ellen wistfully.

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know. I just have a feeling. I'm having a Rebecca."

"You think so?"

"Yeah. Just have this funny feeling ... "

"I gotta funny feeling coming over me, too," Mitch said pseudo-Yosemite Sam. He held her close and kissed her and their baby went crazy kicking, so they kissed on, neither of them able to hold a straight face.

Mitch wondered how Ellen would explain to her mum why she was late or about all the sand in her hair.

But Lynette wasn't that stupid.

From that day on the beach, Mitchell only saw Ellen three times before the birth. On Valentine's Day, Lynette put Ellen on the bus at Dee Why to go to the city to see the doctor, but she jumped off at Balgowlah on the off-chance Mitty was home. She had told him in her letter the night before so he cancelled all his coaching appointments and waited for her. Mitchell always thought Lynette was a bit thick to let Ellen go out alone on Valentine's Day.

He had to hang around outside the doctor's surgery in Macquarie Street while Ellen had her appointment. She feared Sussman would tell her father Mitchell was there. Lionel and Sussman attended Oddfellows together.

Ellen pecked Mitch on the cheek when she came out. "All healthy," she smiled.

"What does he do to you in there?"

"You don't want to know! He pokes around and probes and feels for the baby."

On March 18 Ellen rang Mitchell in the morning. "I'll meet you at the movies," she said, so they saw an eleven o'clock showing of *Kramer Versus Kramer*. It was the only time ever that Ellen saw Mitchell cry at a movie. She thought that hilarious. It was only a movie to her but it was way too real for Mitchell.

He gave her her birthday present — a little porcelain pink clown. She loved it and he noticed that night she had put it pride of place on her bedroom window sill. Her signal to the world.

Their nightly holding hands had been no less passionate from that first night and their letters were full of hope. Ellen would write about how Puddle had turned up at home a few times to speak to her parents but never to her. Mitchell named Ellen's new budgies 'Bellybutton' (the yellow one) in honour of her pregnancy and 'Freddie' (the blue one) in honour of, well, Freddie, their special little friend who had got them into this mess in the first place.

Ellen told Mitty about all the forms she was filling out and her 'counselling' sessions with Merken. Mitch told her about Caroline's baby gear and how his dad and he had started arranging the sun room at the back of their home. Sometimes Ellen would worry about the pressure from her parents to adopt and Mitchell would write to her about the grief she'd experience if she did.

And every single one of their letters ended *Love you forever, Punk*.

On Tuesday April 1st they again went to Macquarie Street and Sussman gave a diagnosis befitting the date.

“Everything’s fine,” Ellen said as they walked down towards Bridge Street. “Baby’s engaged. Could be another three weeks or so.”

Excellent, Mitchell thought. Three weeks to prepare. Cots and strollers and mobiles into the back room. Get all Caroline’s baby stuff around to his place. Arrange babysitting rosters between mum, dad and Caroline. Talk to Social Security. Talk to Tantini. Psych-up to talking to Lionel. Maybe once the baby was here he would fall in love with it and calm down.

And of course, three weeks to save up for that secret lay-by at the jewellers.

All this in between study, training, competition, coaching and manning the squash centre at Chatswood.

Would three weeks be enough time? Mitchell never had the chance to find out.

§

On Wednesday 2 April 1980, around a quarter-past-seven, Ellen was just helping her mother clear away the plates when a very nasty twinge shot through her womb. This was no ordinary movement. It was searing and deep, but fleeting. Ellen stopped in her stride and winced. Then she noticed her mum looking at her.

“Everything alright, Ellen?” her mum asked, her face clothed in experience.

“Yeah,” Ellen struggled half-questioningly. “Yeah, ok.”

About five or six more hit her before eight o’clock. This can’t be happening, she thought. I have another three weeks.

By quarter-to-nine she was in regular agony. The contractions were coming more regularly and they were hitting harder. She could no longer hide the pain and she noticed that her mother kept looking at her watch every time she saw Ellen gritting her teeth.

“I think I’ll go to bed early tonight,” Ellen declared during a short respite. “I’m getting very tired.”

Her mother went with her into the bedroom.

“It’s ok, darling. I spoke to Dr Sussman yesterday and I packed your bag for you.”

Another one hit. “I’m alright, mum. Argh! Oh! They’re not that bad yet. I’ve got hours.”

“Well, I’ll check on you every now and then, ok?”

Ellen knew she had to hang on until ten-thirty when Mitch would turn up. But these stabs were striking hard. Wave after wave. She looked at the clock — only another hour and fifteen minutes. “Hang on Ellen. Hang on,” she grimaced to herself. “Only an hour and ten minutes. You can do it, girl.”

She buried her head into her pillow and screamed. It was muffled, but still easily audible upstairs over the television. A second muffled scream in three minutes brought Lynette rushing into the room.

Ellen shrieked in protest, “I’m ok, mum! Leave me alone!”

“I’m just outside the door, dear.”

Ellen dragged herself off her bed and knelt at her desk, unable to sit on the chair. She fumbled for a pen but found only a lipstick, then dragged a writing pad towards her. The sweat on her fingers made the lipstick hard to hold, but still in shaky hand she wrote, *Labour. St Bernadette’s*.

It was now ten-past-ten. “Oh, please, Mitty, be early.” She found an old plastic bag and scrunched it into a ball, shoved it into her mouth so no one would hear her suffering, then with an almost super-human effort, threw herself up onto the desk to reach the side-window. Eyes crushed tightly closed in anguish, she bit into the plastic bag and hung one arm out of the window gripping the message for Mitty in her strangled palm. She could see her clock radio glowing in the dark: *10.15, 10.16, 10.17*, every minute a torturous eternity.

A strange wetness filled her underpants and ran down her leg soaking into the writing pad.

10.18.

§

As usual Mitchell tallied up the night’s takings at Chatswood Squashlands, threw them into the safe, snapped off all the lights and ran down the fire escape whistling “You’re Sixteen”.

He looked at his watch and interrupted the Ringo recital. “Ten-eighteen. Right on time.”

The ’67 Premier drowned out the passing train as Mitchell drove under the railway, left into Anderson, up to Ashley, turning right then left into Archer to Boundary Road, towards Roseville Bridge.

He hit the top of the big dipper at around 85 k's and midway between the overpass and the bridge itself the Premier was hitting over 110 kilometres per hour, coasting. Mitchell was slowly pulling his foot off the clutch when there was a thump, a roar, a screech of rubber and he was nearly thrown through the windscreen! The warranty on this GMH gearbox must have just expired as it jammed itself into first gear and wouldn't budge.

"Come on, you useless piece of crap!"

Mitchell struggled with the lever but it wouldn't move. He was now stuck in first gear all the way from Roseville Bridge to Dee Why headland. "Sorry Els, you'll just have to wait a bit tonight."

§

Ellen's arm was blue with cold, and the amniotic water all over the desktop made it treacherous for her to keep balance. All she wanted to do was collapse onto all fours. In agony she looked across the room. *10.45.*

Taking the soggy plastic bag out of her mouth she whimpered, "Mitty, where are you?"

With the next contraction, she dropped the note out the window. It was a breezy night and before long *Labour. St Bernadette's* was being tumbled to a smudged nothing in the North Curl Curl surf.

Ellen grabbed the window sill for support, then dropped to one knee and released a scream of defeat, "Mum! Help me!"

As the contraction passed she raised herself up momentarily to close the window. Lynette entered and turned on the light.

"Ellen! What are you doing?"

"I was just closing the window."

"Don't worry about that. When you went all quiet I thought it must have been a false alarm so I went to bed." She helped Ellen off the desk and noticed the amount of fluid. It made no sense to Lynette who silently wondered, "How long has she been up there? What was she doing?"

Lionel backed the Merc out of the garage, Lynette tossed Ellen's bag into the boot and the two women fell into the back seat. At ten-fifty-three they were passing the red-brick fence. Ellen leaned

on her elbows looking for Mitty's car. Nothing. By ten-fifty-five they were onto Griffith Road and on their way to St Bernadette's Hospital.

At ten-fifty-seven Mitchell was approaching the intersection of Griffith and Headland Roads growling along in first gear. By eleven o'clock he was standing outside Ellen's bedroom. Every light in the house was on except Ellen's and Peter's bedroom, and he noticed there was no car in the garage. He sneaked around the house trying to look in without being seen. The side-window had been locked. Mitchell crumpled his letter in his hand, thinking through the possibilities. Had her parents found out the teenage lovers were passing letters and taken Ellen somewhere else? What was going on? Was Peter home? Was it worth the risk to bang on the door? What if Ellen had just forgotten to leave the window open?

Mitchell knocked gently on it but no answer came. He was standing under the side-window wondering what to do, when the neighbours drove their car into their driveway, headlights shining straight onto him. He froze like a frightened rabbit realising that if he was caught there he could go to gaol. He had to leave, although the neighbours never said a word.

All Mitchell could do was chug the car home and hope Ellen could get through to him somehow, someday.

§

St Bernadette's glowing red emergency cross reflected in the sparkling gold of the Mercedes' bonnet. The car door flung open liberating a guttural howl, "Get Mitty here! I want Mitty! Please!"

"Can't you shut her up?" scowled Lionel.

"She's delirious, Lionel."

"No! I'm not! I want Mitty! I want Mitty here now! Please! I beg you! Arrrrgh!"

Ellen was crawling on the pavement and nurses ran in all directions, until finally a gurney almost ran over her.

The maternity staff laid Ellen out on it and Lynette held her daughter's hand into a birthing room. They looked into each other's eyes.

"Please, mum, please. Phone Mitchell. Get him here. I need him mum, please!"

"Ellen, forget about Mitchell. He would be totally useless!"

“Aaarch! No! Please, mum. Phone aaargh!”

“Breathe, darling. I'll rub your back.”

Ellen screamed in panic, “Mother! If you don't ring Mitty now, so help me I swear I'll kill you! I'll kill you, you bitch! You hear me? I'll kill you!”

“Ellen, when this is over, you'll think differently.”

“Shut up! I hate you you bloody bitch! I hate you!”

The contraction eased slightly. “Mum, I'm begging you. Please don't let me go through this without him. You have to ring him. Please — ohhharrgh! No! Oh Please! I want to go home! Please! Oh Mitty, where are you?”

A gas mask was shoved onto her face and in the chaos she sucked in deeply, sending the room spinning. Her eyes turned white. She grabbed her mother's jacket. “Help me, mum. Help me! I'm falling. Get Mit — ” She could feel her rectum extruding as she reached down to her front passage to touch the top of a child's head. Infantile fingernails clawed Ellen's insides trying to dig a purchase point, trying to crawl out.

Ellen's pelvis expanded then sharply contracted as Sussman in his ignorance turned Ellen onto her back. This forced her coccyx up into the delivery passage and into the baby's emerging head. If only male doctors could personally experience labour in med school.

“Please, I want to go home.”

“You're nearly there, dear. A few more pushes. Come on!”

Tears filled Ellen's eyes. “You didn't call Mitty, mum. I'll never forgive you.”

Another solid push. “Come on Rebecca, please!” A triumphant exaltation came. “Well done, Beckie! Good girl!”

The nurse made a note — *3.41 a.m. 3.4.80. Cried lustily.*

Lynette hollered, “Quick! Get the pillows! Aby, do the injection!”

“We don't do that anymore, Mrs Walsh,” said the nurse, who picked up this pink, white, and blue, bloody mess and placed it on Ellen's half-deflated gelatin tummy.

“Hi Beckie. I knew it was you, darling. I knew it was you. You just call me ‘mummy’.”

Ellen lifted Rebecca onto her breast before they'd even cut the cord and Lynette just looked on, hand across mouth in astonishment.

“Blimey,” exclaimed Sussman. “You've got a real coppertop there!”

Just like Lionel when he was young, thought Lynette.

She watched Ellen smiling as she caressed the head of the newest addition to the Walsh family, and suddenly Lynette knew, she really had a problem.

6

“Julia, I will never forget this moment as long as I live.”

Mitchell had spent most of the night staring at the ceiling. A distant telephone forced him to turn over. 7.40 on the clock.

Mitchell sprang out of bed and ran to the phone.

“Hello?”

“Mitchell? It's Julia. This morning about four o'clock Ellen had a baby girl!”

“You're joking!”

“Nope. Saw Peter just now.”

“I'm a dad, Julia. I'm Beckie's father!”

Julia giggled and cried at the same time. “Yep. That's right. You're a dad, Mitch.”

“Three weeks early! The little punkette couldn't wait!”

“About the first time a Hearn was ever early.”

“Rebecca Hearn. I like it!”

“I'm taking a sickie so I can visit.”

“Which hospital's she in?”

“St Bernadette's.”

“Why'd they take her all the way over there?”

“Mitch, why do the Walshes do anything?”

“Hmm. Look, I have to phone Ellen. I'll see you. Thanks for ringing.”

Mitchell scratched around for the phone book. *St Bernadette's Private Hospital*. He found the listing for maternity and dialed hastily, then spoke breathlessly, excitedly.

"Can I speak to Ellen Walsh please? She was admitted last night."

"She's sleeping at the moment."

"Can I leave a message?"

"Sure."

"Just tell her — write this down — 'You are my brave, brave little girl. I am so proud of you. I love you. Mitchell.' Have you got that?"

"Yes."

"When can I visit?"

"Are you immediate family?"

What a dumb question. "I'm her boyfriend."

"Well, you'll have to wait 'til two-o'clock visiting hours, since you're not immediate family."

"What?"

"Sorry. That's the rule."

§

Mitchell sneaked up the steps at about quarter-to-two, carrying a huge bunch of roses. Hers was the first room at the top of the stairs, so Mitchell gingerly opened the door, poked his head around to see the most beautiful sight he had ever seen. The love of his life nursing their daughter. A pair of apricots.

Mitchell spoke so softly. Completely overwhelmed. "Howdy Punk. How ya doing?"

Ellen just couldn't stop smiling. "I got your message." She showed him the note. Mitchell kissed them both in turn on the forehead.

"Hello Rebecca." A tear escaped Mitchell's eye. It had been barely two seconds but his heart had been eternally captured. "I love you my little girl. I loved you from the moment I saw you."

He placed the roses on a shelf and then just hugged these two gifts. Thank God for those seconds alone together. Mitchell's life started from this moment. It had just been a rehearsal up to now, but this was the real thing. At last. Through all the pain and doubts and fights, Beckie was

here. She was real. Mitchell was real. Ellen's love had made him aware, but Beckie's physical presence now made him complete. He was twenty but Mitchell felt like he had suddenly joined the human race, in an instant.

Rebecca was sleeping after a bottle feed. Ellen had been forbidden to breast feed so she was bound up like a Christmas turkey and had had about three injections already, but nothing seemed to stem the flow of milk.

She placed Rebecca into Mitchell's arms and then he sat on Ellen's bed. As they talked Ellen's eyes just flickered from Mitch's face to Beckie's face. Mitty's face, Beckie's face. Maternal love and kindness just oozed out of her every pore. She'd only had Rebecca for a few hours, but already she'd changed a couple of her nappies and given Beckie a feed.

Ellen knew exactly, instinctively, how to hold her child. She knew how to wrap the blankets around Rebecca. Mitchell was in awe of her. It was as if Ellen had been born to be a mother, he a father. It was magic.

"I kept calling for you, Mitty. All the way through. In the car, in the ward, but they wouldn't phone you. I wanted you here so much. Mum just said you'd be useless."

"I probably would have been, Punk."

"Yeah, but I still needed you there. Just to hold my hand."

"You like your roses?"

"Beautiful."

Mitchell was nervous. This was big. Deep down he wasn't sure he could look after them both, but he knew he couldn't live without trying. "I have something else for you here."

Mitch reached into his pocket and gave Ellen a little green velour covered box. Her eyes grew. "Mitty! What the — ?" She opened it and the golden band just hit her heart. It's tiny sapphire and diamond twinkled as best they could in the dull hospital light. She jumped out of bed and skipped over to the window where the light was better, defying the pain of her night's ordeal. She was about to place it on her finger.

"No! Don't," Mitchell said. "Let me."

He put Beckie in her crib, so he could hold Ellen's hand. Then he looked into her eyes, as he smiled and cried, she in return. And he slipped the ring onto her finger.

Mitchell was too choked to say all the right words or to say any words, but Ellen wrapped her arms around his neck, his around her waist, and they kissed so deeply, each watching the reflection of autumn clouds in the other's eyes.

§

“Oh, what are you doing here?”

Ellen and Mitch both jumped. “Oh! Hi mum.”

“How did you know?”

“Julia phoned me this morning.”

“You can't stay. You have no place being here!”

“I beg your pardon!”

Ellen tried to cover the ring on her finger. Too late.

“What the hell is this?” She grabbed Ellen's left hand and just stared at it. “You can't! She's too young! She has her life! What about us, Mitchell! Think about us! You can't do this!”

“Lynette,” he started nervously, knowing this was do or die, “it may have escaped your notice but your daughter has just given birth to my daughter. You can threaten me, you can do what you like. But nothing's going to change the fact that this little baby here is my Rebecca.”

“No, no, no! This is too much. Please, no! Why didn't you just leave when you had the chance!”

“Lynette, please try to understand. Please! I know you. We get on ok, Lyn. I know that deep down. Please give us your blessing for this.”

Lynette was like a little school child almost putting her hands over her ears so she wouldn't have to listen.

“Mitchell, why do you have to be this ‘oh-so-responsible’ lovey-dovey idiot? Why can't you just shoot through like every other boy would? Why do you keep hanging around wanting to do the right thing all the time? You're making things very very difficult for us. Why can't you just go away and leave us alone to sort this out properly?”

They were rhetorical questions not even addressed to Mitchell. She paced up and down. Ellen was observant but unusually quiet. He looked at her and tried to involve her in the exchange, but

she was far too happy allowing Mitch to fight the fight. He had run out of argument, so for the first and only time in his life, he tried flattery.

“Lynette, I’ll tell you something. Someone once said to me that to find out what your wife is going to be when she’s older, look at her mother. And over the months, Lynette, I’ve watched you, and I like what I see. And that’s one of the reasons I want to spend the rest of my life with Ellen.”

Mitchell couldn’t believe it! For a fraction of a second it worked. Her head got a little cocky wobble in it, she straightened up, she half smiled. The theatre’s in my blood, Mitchell wondered. I’m better than I thought!

The phone rang. Ellen answered it. “Oh, hi dad. Yes, I’m ok. Yep. She’s just arrived. I’ll put her on.”

“Hello, Li. Yes, she seems comfortable. Hmm. Yes. Well, yes, he does. Julia rang him this morning. He’s here now, actually.”

The screams that came from the other end of the phone were nothing short of manic. Ellen jumped off her bed at the sound of it, hastening to the single-seater near the window and protectively pulled Rebecca’s crib towards her. Mitchell sat opposite her in the other single-seater, their knees touching.

She leaned forward and started to cry. He leaned forward until their foreheads pressed against each other.

“Mitty, I want this little girl to be Rebecca. Rebecca Hearn.”

“So do I, Punk. So do I.”

“I want that so much.”

“It’s ok. We’ll do it somehow.”

Ellen was intensely afraid. The months of bravado were now giving way to piercing reality. It was dawning on Mitch that she had been living in a battle zone. He quietly held Ellen and eavesdropped on the telephone conversation across the room. He could sense that Lynette had for months endured almost daily abuse from her husband over this affair. And Ellen, Mitchell’s most precious jewel, had been emotionally trampled by incisive, carefully chosen words from her father. She had kept it all to herself so as not to worry Mitchell. She needed to have complete confidence in the father of her child, for him to be unshakably strong, so she had hidden the details of the last few months at home. Now the toll was starting to show.

And, of course, there next to them lying serenely in her cot, as delicate a flower as innocent seed could create, about to be flippantly crushed in earth's war.

Somehow Mitchell felt this wasn't real. That they were all just puppets in a much larger game. Reactions weren't normal. How had Lionel maintained his sanctimonious, self-righteous posture, when it was clearly destroying his wife, his family and his marriage? Lionel was hell-bent on sacrificing his own daughter, the apple of his eye, as well as his granddaughter, on the altar of convenience, status and his pathetic social standing. And for what? A peaceful existence. Couldn't he see that that was a ghost? He had made his own life intolerable for months, and the lives of his two most treasured people. This wasn't normal psychology operating here. Mitchell felt he was missing something vital, but in all the confusion, it was impossible to think it through.

Rebecca chewed on nothing while she slept, as babies do. Finally, the phone went down.

"Ellen can't leave school and just become a mother. Ellen has to travel. Ellen has to live life. Ellen has to continue her education. We have all these plans for Ellen!"

These were just words spouting from a fountain of emotional panic. Lynette was hitting the wall. She'd run out of options so she had become Lionel's pull-string dummy.

"Well," Mitchell said, looking at Ellen's red, swollen eyes. "Let's ask Ellen what she wants."

"I want us to be a family. I want this little girl to be Rebecca Hearn."

She had said it twice now.

"Mitchell," Lynette started pacing, "You just can't see what you've done, can you?"

"Look, I know I've done the wrong thing by you and Lionel but if you — "

"I'm talking about everything, not just the baby!" She was now reaching fever-pitch. "I'm talking about Ellen!"

"I love Ellen."

"That's what I'm talking about. You came in, you swept her off her feet. You weren't just one of the boys in the squad. You were the coach! The big shot!"

"I'm no big shot. I'm just a student!"

"Yes, a uni student, with a car and a job and lots of money!"

"I don't have lots of money! And my car is only an old bomb and my job is pretty ordinary as well."

“But it’s impressive to Ellen! You’re not like the other boys that were chasing her. You’re ‘big time’ to her.”

Mitchell just couldn’t see it. He had never thought of their relationship like this before. He thought he was pretty ordinary and he thought that’s how Ellen saw him and loved him anyway.

Mitchell looked at Ellen. She was still remarkably quiet and contented. It was strange, surreal. Here she was in a very difficult situation, with her mother basically insulting her, and she kept mute, happy for Mitchell to do all the talking.

Why doesn’t she fight? he thought. Lynette just turned away and put her hand to her forehead. She silently took her flowers and placed them in a vase. She looked at Mitchell’s roses and sighed. “Mitch, you’re an emotional cripple. You have no real family, so you’re just sucking your emotional needs out of us because we have a close, happy home. Stop using us as your crutch! You’re just an emotional cripple.” Lynette had resigned herself to passive hysteria, talking obsessively. This was a desperate woman who had plummeted so low she was no longer worth listening to.

The copper-top pixie started to stir, so Ellen picked her up.

“My cuddle,” Mitchell said and Rebecca’s eyes flashed open.

“Did you see that!” exclaimed Ellen. “She knows who you are!”

Ellen placed her in Mitchell’s arms. “Support her head.”

“I know. I know. I looked after Chris, you know.”

Whenever Mitchell spoke Rebecca’s eyes darted in his direction. He cuddled her head to his breast and took her to the window.

“You feel that big lump in my shoulder there, Becca? That’s where dad broke his collar bone! Mummy forgot to hold on to him when she took him ice-skating and he smashed into a pole. Remember that, mum?”

Ellen laughed but Lynette didn’t. She sat on the bed exhausted. She just clasped her hands in her lap and stared at the floor. Now you know what it’s like to be invisible, Mitchell thought.

The nurse came in and Ellen asked for another vase to put the roses in. They were placed in the centre of the shelf. Lynette’s blue irises to one side. Lynette felt she was in exactly the same place.

Ellen felt completely unreal, floating.

Mitchell felt tired, confused but somehow content.

And Rebecca felt comfortable — well, she did to Mitchell as she snuggled in his arms.

Visiting time was over so Lynette and Mitchell prepared to leave together.

“I’m comping at Racquetsports tonight, but I’m pulling out of the Erina Easter tournament so I can be here most of the weekend.”

“Great!”

“And I’m ringing around all my coaching lessons, moving them to next Wednesday. Most are going away with Easter anyway.”

Mitchell bent down to peck Rebecca. “Look! She smiled when I kissed her!”

“That’s wind,” said Lynette.

At least they all parted with a bit of a laugh.

Ellen changed Beck’s nappy, cuddled her for a while, then placed her back in the crib next to her bed.

With her right hand, Beckie reached out from the blanket and gripped Ellen’s little finger. Ellen leaned against her pillows and with her left thumb rotated the ring on her third finger around and around. It hadn’t been properly sized yet so it turned easily. But to Ellen it fitted perfectly.

And so it was that both of Mitch’s girls fell asleep smiling uncontrollably.

7

“So what do we have?” Maureen Dyson chaired the meeting.

Each of St Mary of Dolleurs’ consent takers in turn gave updates. Two misses, one conversion. An average strike rate these days.

Maureen turned to the final woman in the room.

“And, Heather, I hear Walsh delivered last night?”

“Oh, Lou rang you, did she? Good. Sorry I was late. Plumbing problems. Yes. Walsh, umm, let me look at my notes. You probably know as much as me at this stage. I only spoke to Lou on the phone myself. From what she can tell, the allotment was full term, nineteen inches, six-and-a-half — ”

“Tiny tot!”

“Well, they’re all small people, the Walshes, and the paternals, too, for that matter.”

“Mmm. Amazing background, but the immediates are rather unstable.”

“Especially the boy!”

“Did you look at those placements I suggested?”

“Yes, umm, I personally think the Lanhams are the match. Physically similar, they’re both shorties, theatre background with the uncle, water sports. They even live up on the northern beaches.”

“Well, to me that’s just the problem, Heather. Increases the possibility of a chance meeting.”

“Oh, pretty slim, Maureen.”

“And what’s wrong with the Deckers?”

“Nothing, Maureen. They’re fine people. But, you know. Physically there’s no match at all, especially now Lou tells me about the child’s bright-red hair!”

“The Deckers have red-headed nieces.”

“But that’s just one thing, Maureen. Where’s the sport, where’s the lifestyle, where’s the IQ in the family?”

“Are you saying my friends are stupid? She’s a teacher, you know.”

“No, I’m not saying that at all. But this allotment is very peculiar. We have to be careful.”

“And that’s why I say the Deckers. We know their history. We know they’re excellent people. Hardworking. They’ve never missed a payment. They’ve been with us probably twice as long as the Lanhams. No, you’re wrong, Heather!”

“But where’s the match, Maureen?”

This was getting embarrassing for the others in the room.

“Give me the file, Heather. Give me the bloody file and I’ll show you where the match is!”

Heather skidded the Walsh file across the boardroom table. Maureen rummaged through it humming aggressively to herself merely to hold the call in the conversation.

“There! There’s your match, Heather.”

She took her pen and scored a deep circle in the file then skidded it back to Heather who did a double-take. “Squash? Since when have the Deckers taken up squash?”

“They belong to a tennis club.”

“But they hardly ever play!”

“I believe they play every weekend.”

Heather looked at the others in the room in disbelief but could see there was no point going any further. “Well, I don’t know what we’re arguing about at this stage.”

“And that’s another thing, Heather.” Maureen sensed she was on a roll. “You’ve been soft peddling a bit lately. It is absolutely vital we rescue this one. There’s too much at stake. We have AAA product and XXX immediates. We have the very best placement lined up. We’ve got Lou in there. If you can’t convert this one Heather I’d have to look very closely at your ability. I assume you’ll be in there on Tuesday?”

Heather nodded, childishly. She felt decidedly small being chastised by this older woman.

“Well, that’s day six — bugger this Easter break — so you probably won’t have the double chance, unless we can get Sussman to agree to an extra day or two. And Heather, I really don’t want to have to go through all that. It gets messy as you well know.”

Maureen Dyson fixed an ebony eye on Heather Merken. “Don’t let me down on Tuesday, Heather. This is too important.”

§

In half-sleep, Ellen felt a stiff breeze hitting her ear, which turned to a red hot iron slamming her flush on the left cheek. She started awake to be almost swallowed by her father’s face barely an inch from hers. Her jaw felt like there was a golf ball swelling in the joint, stiff, almost dislocated.

She frantically looked for Rebecca — gone!

“Beckie! Where’s Beckie?” She went to sit up but Lionel’s heavy, smooth pharmacist’s hands forced her back against the bed head. He was kneeling on the bed straddling her thighs with his knees. She was entirely trapped, although abject terror would have riveted her anyway.

“The baby’s in the nursery. We felt you needed a break,” said her mother as she watched the traffic from the louvred window.

Lionel took over.

“You unbelievable slut. How low are you going to drag us all? Haven’t you been taught what’s right and wrong? You’ve become some sort of sick whore!

“First you get yourself mixed up with that putrid family. Now you think you can live in sin like they do? Haven’t we taught you anything? Your mother and I won’t stand for it!”

“Don’t think Mitch will stand by you like we have dear,” Lynette added. “He’s just like his father. All boys are.”

“After all we’ve done for you, you selfish, ungrateful little tart. Not everyone gets this sort of treatment in hospital. En suite, room to yourself. I don’t see him forking out for the best doctor in Macquarie Street.

“You’d better start waking up to who’s really looking after you otherwise it might suddenly just stop. You’ll be out on the street, you understand me, tramp?”

“Now, I’ve brought you a prayer book. This is my own prayer book I’m lending you so you better look after it. You get your nose into that the whole time you’re here, and start forgetting about that little turd you’ve been hanging around with. And his nasty little off-spring. Do you hear me?”

“Dad, she’s your granddaughter. Can’t you — ”

“Aren’t you listening to me? She’s no granddaughter of mine. She’s a bastard, you understand? And if you ever even think that thing is coming out of this hospital with you, then you better get used to the idea that you’re a bastard, too!”

“Oh, dad! You’re not being fair!”

“Fair? Have you ever once paid one cent towards your schooling or your home, or your food?”

“I worked in the shop for years, dad!”

“Exactly. And when was the last time? Around about the day you started hanging around that dickhead.”

Lionel had really lost his temper now. “And as for this!”

He grabbed her hand and tried to remove the ring but Ellen closed it in a fist.

“You cheeky little bitch!”

He threw his leg over her outstretched arm and man-handled it like he was shoeing a horse.

“Oww! Dad, you’re hurting my fingers!”

“Well, stop fighting me! Stop it now!”

She was screaming in pain, “Dad! Please! You’re breaking my arm! Please, no, dad!”

He prised her fingers open as she tried to head-butt him off her. She was bashing his back with her free hand and his shoulder with her forehead, both as hard as she could, but it made no difference. She was crying frantically, “Somebody, please! Dad! Stop it! Nurse, help! My arm! My arm!”

She wondered why no one came to check her impassioned cries.

Lionel victoriously ripped the ring from her now straightened finger and he released her, jumping off the bed to run to the open louvres. She grabbed her fingers to her chest, then seeing what her father was doing, chased him to the window. Lynette dived out of the way as Lionel calmly flicked the ring out into the breeze. Ellen reached the glass pressing her face flat against it, while the three of them watched the spinning band. For Ellen, all other sound departed. She clearly

heard the tink of her gold band bounce off a passing taxi-cab roof. Another tink — it was all so much in slow motion — as the ring hit the asphalt. She squinted, but her eyes lost it as a flatbed ran over it!

Ellen's eyes searched the street feverishly for any glint of gold, diamond or sapphire but she could see nothing from her second storey cell.

Perfectly manicured male fingernails now dug slightly into her scalp as Lionel callously grabbed her from behind and dragged her to the bed.

Ellen almost didn't care what happened to her now but still she involuntarily backed away from her father's erect finger, up into the bed head, trying to push her whole body through the wall into the next room.

From the lobby two floors below, Caroline, Les and Chris could hear Ellen's frenzied protests so they hastened up the stairs. Outside her room they noticed a small, grey figure shoing concerned nurses away from the door, and Caroline gave this short scrawny woman a worried look.

"Family business," said the woman as she tucked her clipboard under her arm and disappeared down a corridor.

The three of them froze for a minute, not wanting to expose young Chris to unfettered scenes of violence, but a muted shake of the bed, and a solid bang on the wall followed by tormented screams from Ellen made their decision to enter instinctive.

Les entered first and Lynette said calmly, "Lionel." Caroline came in to see Lionel mid-sentence spitting insults into Ellen's face with the prayer book held over his head.

He turned and yelled, "Get out of here. This has nothing to do with you!"

Caroline replied bravely, "Well, I'm afraid it has. This is Mitch's child too and we want to see her."

Les moved closer to Ellen to make his presence felt. Lionel could see the challenger was accomplished enough. Who knows what these weirdoes are capable of? Lionel thought, so he backed off Ellen physically but not verbally.

"You get your nose into that prayer book and get your morals straightened out!" With that he threw the book into Ellen's face, then pushed passed Caroline almost knocking Chris to the floor.

Like a blindly loyal cockroach, Lynette scampered after him.

In childish innocence, Chris asked Ellen, "What happened to your face, Els?"

All three were embarrassed. "It's ok, Chrissie," Ellen replied and she stroked his face and tried to smile. It hurt her jaw and she touched it.

"I'll get a cold face towel," said Caroline pointing to the en suite.

"I'll look after that, darling. You look after her." And Les walked through to the adjoining bathroom.

"Where's the bubs?" asked Caroline.

"In the nursery."

"We've taken out all his old stuff," Caroline pointed to Chris. "We'd have a lot more if you had a boy, but we have plenty of things."

"Good," replied Ellen wistfully as she applied the cold face towel.

The four wandered down to the nursery, much to the disgust of Lionel, who paced the corridor like a caged panther.

"Glad you're here," said the nursery sister. "She's kicking up a storm. Feed time."

They each had a turn cuddling and feeding with the bottle. Ellen's breasts ached to release but she knew the rules, particularly with her father's face staring through the nursery window. It was bad enough she was in here with the baby, let alone exposing herself.

"She is absolutely gorgeous," Caroline gushed like any mother. "Look at the personality in her face. She knows exactly what's going on. She's checking everything out. And she knows you! She knows her mum!"

Every word wounded Ellen deeply.

After baby gave burps all round and one milky accident down Caroline's back (which she loved), the four returned to Ellen's room without Rebecca, every movement under the constant scrutiny of Lionel and Lynette Walsh.

Caroline didn't want to leave but visiting time was well and truly over.

Chris gave Ellen a big hug. "Ellen, I like your baby Rebecca. She's got cute hair! You going to take her home?"

"We'll see, Chris. We'll see."

"I want to see her in my old jumpsuits!"

As they left they noticed Lynette talking to the grey lady. Lionel pushed passed Les to go back into Ellen's room but Les menaced him quietly. "Back off buddy. Back right off. I'll be waiting out

here and if I hear anything more than a 'Goodbye honey. I'll see you tomorrow', I'll be in there to sort you right out. Understand?"

Stony-faced, Lionel said nothing, as he reentered the room with Lynette.

"Go and wait in the car darling, you and Chris," Les said to Caroline. "I'll be five minutes."

True to his word, Les waited for a few minutes. He heard muffled conversation, slight angry voices and Lynette saying, "Ellen believe us, it's best for you and it really is best for the baby". Lionel's instruction followed. "Hurry up Lyn, we'll be late for the Twelve Stations of the Cross."

Les shook his head laughing then followed behind them down the stairwell and out onto the evening street.

Ellen sighed with relief. At least with Good Friday tomorrow they wouldn't be coming. Ellen never thought she'd have a day she'd be pleased to not see them.

Louisa Puddle watched them all leave from the nursery doorway — a good time to have a tender chat with Ellen.

"How are you going dear? Have you had any more thoughts about what's best for baby?"

§

Lynette threw the mail on the dining table and her fishnet string bag on the floor. It had been a very long day. She was exhausted, not just from the buses and the walking and the lack of sleep but also from cold anticipation.

Lionel walked briskly through the back door, grabbed a beer, bounded up the stairs, hastening to switch on the TV. She looked across at the orange beads dangling down Ellen's bedroom doorway and sighed. "Stuff it. I have to clean up that mess."

She thumped the table top with her open hand and went to the kitchen to drag out the disinfectant, a dish cloth and bucket.

Once the bucket had enough hot water she passed through the hanging beads and the pungent odour hit her.

She opened Ellen's front windows wide, then just as her daughter had done nearly twenty-four hours earlier, climbed onto the desk and opened the ventilation window.

She wiped the table, the chair, various objects on the table. Tossed the writing pad into the bin. Followed by a dried out lipstick. The stick hit the writing pad with a pop which echoed in the metal bin. A slight pinkish mark was made on the pad and she realised she had wiped that lipstick colour from Ellen's fingers in the hospital during the previous night's drama. It was a strange detail to remember, but it was a strange incident.

She looked at the bin. She looked at the window. She looked at the desk. She remembered Ellen two months before and very pregnant, insisting on moving the furniture around in her bedroom.

She rifled through the top drawer of the desk. Nothing.

She rifled the second drawer. Nothing.

She opened the third, and dozens of hand-written papers sprang out of their cramped prison.

Angrily she pulled the drawer out onto the floor and sat crossed-legged next to it.

Yes, this was invasive, but this was her daughter.

She took each letter out and smoothed it, then placed the next one on top. She eventually lost count at fifty.

Slowly a revelation dawned as every line opened a window to the boy's true soul:

Grow but retain your peace ...

Forgiveness and sacrifice ...

You can not anticipate the grief ...

There is a God in Heaven Ellen. He will pull us through.

I love my little punk, Ellen.

Poems. Humour. Quoted scriptures.

One that made her shriek. "They named the budgie after his — !" she laughed. And she cupped her hand over her mouth and sniggered for five minutes. "Who's a pretty boy then?" she chortled, thinking of how Lionel doted over the bird.

But then the next letter sliced her in two.

Through it all, no matter what they do Punk, we both must respect and love your parents. We don't understand what they're going through. Maybe one day we will. They're just trying to cope the best way they can. This is hard for them, too. They want the best for you, Els. We have to convince them of what is best. They'll come around I'm sure.

Lynette tipped her head back against Ellen's built-in wardrobe and sighed at the ceiling. "Such a shame she's so young. Such a shame he's not a Catholic. Such a shame Lionel's ..." as always she was unable to finish saying the really hard things.

She felt a pressure welling in her throat and behind her eyes. She looked at the pile of tattered correspondence laid out in front of her, unraveling the mystery of how Ellen had coped so well until now. "And we thought it was us," she snuffled, shaking her head.

It was the moment Lynette began to realise who the emotional cripples really were.

8

The word for Good Friday was “He what?”

Mitchell rounded the door to see Ellen sitting on her bed reading a little dark-green book.

He noticed immediately. “Where’s your ring, Punk?”

She burst, “Oh, Mitty! Just hold me!”

She dragged him onto the bed and just bawled into his collar for almost half an hour.

It had been a hard night. She’d been bleeding profusely, making her feel weak, and nauseous; her breasts were totally engorged despite two more injections, so she had gone to the en suite twice during the night and spent twenty minutes expressing milk into the sink. This was nothing less than mental cruelty — Rebecca crying for a feed and receiving a bottle while perfectly good mother’s milk went straight down the drain. In the dead of night Ellen ached to press that beautiful little carrot-head against her overflowing breasts, but each time Rebecca stirred, nurses would be quick to attend, bottle in hand.

So this was motherhood. It was more torturous than Ellen expected. And it appeared the promise of a change in heart with her father was not going to eventuate. By morning it had become too much.

“What’s going on, Punk? You seemed so happy yesterday.”

Ellen told the story of the night before and Mitchell must have exclaimed, “He what?” about thirty times, especially at the ring being thrown out the window.

“Listen, beautiful, don’t you worry about the ring, ok? Mum’s promised me the two engagement rings my dad gave her. They’re worth heaps. Plenty more than the one I bought you.”

"I've seen them," Ellen's eyes lit up, "She showed them to me once."

"There you go, see? When mum gets back from Canberra next week, I'll ask her for them."

Ellen smiled. The contentment started to return.

"Now what are we going to do about your breasts?"

"Why? You never thought there was anything wrong with them before!"

She had cracked a small joke. She was beginning to see some light. "You have to start breast feeding Ellen, or you're going to be in serious trouble."

"I'll only be allowed if I tell the nurses I'm definitely keeping Rebecca. And if I do that, Sussman will tell dad and dad will have a cow!"

"Ellen, you have to start breast feeding, for your health's sake. The injections aren't working! Look at you. All trussed up but you're constantly leaking. If you stay like this your nipples will start chaffing, you'll never be able to breast feed. You have to tell them."

She knew Mitchell was right. But it seemed paradoxical that she had to reluctantly resign herself to do this thing she absolutely longed for. "There's only one way I can do this, Mitch. And that's if I know you're always going to be there with me — always. Forever. You'll always be there, won't you, Mitty? Won't you?"

This was a desperate plea.

"Ellen, I bought you a ring. I want to marry you. I love you with everything I have. You've given birth to our daughter and I love her more than life itself. I don't know how I could be more committed."

"But you'll never leave me, Mitty? You're always going to be there?"

Mitchell looked at all the floral arrangements on her shelf. Daffodils from Julia, irises from her mum, carnations from Caroline.

"Look at all your flowers, Ellen. There are so many people who love you so much. And right in the middle are my roses. And Punk, my love for you will outlast everyone else's love for you, just like my roses are going to outlast everyone else's flowers." He engaged her eyes. "Before you leave this room to come home, all those other flowers will wilt and fade away, but our roses will never die. The rose that I give to you — it will never even fade. Do you understand what I'm saying to you?"

She understood perfectly. She was satisfied. Even Rebecca smiled.

§

Mitchell came back from the hospital chapel, Bible in hand. He'd had enough of Lionel's pseudo-Catholic nonsense.

"Ok, let's take a serious look at this."

Lionel's little green prayer book had been opened for her at a section titled, *Preparation for Confession*.

It purported to list the ten commandments and under each commandment was a list of questions to be asked before confessing the answer.

But there was something wrong. Very wrong to Mitchell's Protestant mind.

"In the great scheme of things, Els," he asked her, "what's more important? A prayer book or the Bible?"

"Well, they're both important."

"But which is more important? If one contradicts the other, which one do we take notice of?"

"The Bible I s'pose."

"Right. Why?"

"Because, umm, it's the original?"

"Right. Because the prayer book is supposed to be based on the Bible, not the other way 'round, right?"

"Right."

"Well, here are the ten commandments in the Bible. And here are the ten commandments in your prayer book."

Even Ellen could see they were different. The prayer book had expunged the second commandment and made two out of the tenth commandment.

"The prayer book edits out the bit about not making statues and graven images. Now why do you think that is, Ellen?"

She did not like what was happening. Eighteen years of Santa Claus stories were crumbling in front of her eyes and she didn't like her reality being fractured. Far safer to believe what the nuns had taught her from birth.

“It can't be right, Mitch.”

Ellen was totally unskilled in scriptural argument. It wasn't a fair fight and Mitchell knew it.

“Ellen, I know how important these beliefs are to you. But, if we're going to get married then I have to show you a few things and I don't have the luxury of time to pussyfoot around. I'm happy to compromise and marry you at St Kevin's. But, Tantini insists that we raise Rebecca as a Catholic and that's a problem for me. And I have to show you why.”

She nodded patiently. This wasn't the first time in their relationship that they had discussed spiritual things but Mitchell felt a hypocrite preaching the Bible at her when he had been the one to get her pregnant in the first place. He tried to go easy — she'd been roughed up enough.

He showed her Luke 1:47. “If Mary's immaculate, then why does she say she needs a Saviour?” Ellen had recited the Magnificat dozens of times but she'd never seen that before.

He turned to 1Timothy 4:3. “Forbidding to marry and forbidding to eat meat. Both evil doctrines according to this, Ellen. Where does your celibate priesthood and your nuns and your fish on Fridays fit in?”

Then 1Timothy 2:5. “There's one mediator between God and man, and that's Jesus Christ. So where does your pope fit in?”

Luke 11:27 and 28. “You see Ellen, any person can be more blessed than His mother ever was.”

Mitchell turned to Matthew 6:7 striking home to Ellen, about her rosary-obsessed father.

“Do not pray like non-believers do, going on and on in meaningless repetitions, thinking that they will be heard because of the number of words they speak,” read Mitchell. Ellen had confessed to him often that church responses and rosary recitals meant nothing to her although she did them out of duty. “Ellen, tell me where your ‘Hail Mary's’ and ‘Our Fathers’ fit in, unless they come from the heart?”

Ellen was part excited, part badgered, part confused. But she had the wit to see right through him. “And what about the ‘no sex before marriage’ bit, then?”

Mitchell closed the Bible with a slight pop. A wry smile came across his face. “Punk, that's why we need a Saviour, I guess. None of us is perfect.”

It was a bit of a cop out for sure. A non-answer, and both of them knew it, but Mitchell was still amazed at how much both of their minds had retained. Ellen with her Stella Maris religion classes, and Mitchell? Well, he had always worn his HSC year at secular Pittwater High like a crown, but

perhaps all that money his parents had spent on his six years at Trinity Church of England Grammar wasn't wasted after all. Or was it that, over the years, mere Anglicanism had messed with his mind just as surely as Catholicism had messed with hers?

"Ellen, I don't have all the answers. All I know is this — I have a Bible at home on my chest of drawers. And sitting on top of that Bible is a photo of you, smiling at your formal. Now, I haven't picked that Bible up in years but somehow it's still up in here," he pointed to his temple, "And I look at that picture of you every day and somehow I know that it will always be in here." He pointed to his heart. "That's all I know, Punk. That's all I know."

§

"Watch this!"

Mitchell had never known newborns could be so much fun. He was standing over near the windows and Rebecca was in her crib close to Ellen's bed. Beck's eyes were just riveted on Mitchell, her dad, trying to stare him out!

He ducked down onto the floor and crawled across to the other side of Ellen's bed. "Becca!" Mitch called, and straight away her eyes flashed across the room to his voice and she'd stare at that point. Down onto his hands and knees again, back to the window. "Becca!" And her eyes would zero in there. Mitchell crawled over to the crib and climbed up its side, popping his head into the baby's view. "Becca!" Her little arms jumped, her eyes widened and a bubble came out of her mouth.

Mitch picked her up and held her in front of him admiring what a lovable pixie she was.

So she spewed all over his arms, down his T-shirt and onto his shorts.

"Sucked in a beauty!" laughed Ellen so hard that she nearly fell off the bed. "You can't get her all excited straight after a feed, dumbo!"

A pungent explosion from the other end. "Uh-oh! Nap-nap time."

"Sounded like a biggun! Oh! Mitch! It's leaking."

"Quick into the bath!"

"Put her in the vanity. I'll get the nappy stuff. She's due for a wash anyway."

Carefully the proud parents unwrapped the pooey parcel.

"I'll take her head," said Ellen, knowing full well which end of a poeey baby is less trouble. Mitchell didn't mind. He knew which end of a poeey baby was more fun.

"You wipe her bot with the nappy as you take it off," Ellen instructed, her great experience of just over twenty-four hours shining through.

"Ellen, I was doing this with Chris when you were still in second form!"

They made the water suitably mild, lapping it onto the baby's smooth nakedness.

And Rebecca didn't take her eyes off dad for one second.

"She's obsessed with my body," Mitchell suggested to Ellen.

"That hairy scrawny thing! Trust me Beckie! *You* have a better body than his!"

Ellen towelled Becca down and tried to teach the father of her firstborn the latest nappy folds.

Mitchell cleaned Beck's umbilical cut with a cotton bud and metho, then wandered around the room with her, singing "A Little Ray of Sunshine".

He pressed Beckie's cheek against his, then kissed her little fingers as she squeezed his.

Finally Ellen insisted Mitchell let Beck have a sleep so he rocked the baby gently and off she dozed.

While Rebecca snoozed, Ellen and Mitch talked through issues: the set up of the back room, transport home (the car had to be repaired), baby-sitting and company for them both when he was working, how long before they moved into their own place, and a marriage date. The 'A' word was never spoken.

All in all they put the "good" back into Good Friday — and Mitchell had a big juicy steak sandwich for dinner.

9

If Good Friday could be called “Daddy’s day” then Easter Saturday was “Puddle’s Day.”

Louisa Puddle made a point of being rostered on for the weekend, swapping shifts on Thursday.

“Just wanted to pop in, dear. See how you’re doing,” Puddle said to Ellen who was just about to give Beckie her second bath.

“And who folded that nappy?” inquired Puddle.

“I did. Why? What’s wrong with it?”

“Oh it won’t hold, dear. Look! Big gaps around the back of the legs!”

“Yes, we had a bit of a spillage yesterday. Mitch copped it!”

“Well, little wonder. No, I’ll show you the proper way in a minute. And what are you doing in the vanity basin?”

“Mitch and I washed Beckie in the vanity yesterday.”

“You can’t do that! Bang the child’s head on the side! And the spout could be hot! Burn the poor little thing. Never, never, never in the vanity dear! What do you think this is for?”

Puddle pulled a baby-sized plastic bath out from where it had been wedged upside down between the wall and the vanity. Ellen hadn’t seen it there.

“You’re supposed to put this in the bath or on a table and wash the baby in there.”

“Oh, ok.”

Ellen placed it in the bath. Kneeling was a problem for her but she managed, then turned on the hot water.

“No! Not straight hot water!”

"I was just about to do the cold!"

"You have to do the cold first, otherwise you make the bottom of the baby-bath hot and you could burn her little bottom, dear. Now bubby's uncovered and she'll get cold like that. You should have wrapped her in something."

Ellen smiled weakly. "I'm learning, slowly."

"You have to learn fast with babies dear. You don't get second chances. Your mum will teach you."

"Hmm. Maybe."

"Still a bit of a problem there, dear?"

"Well, I don't really know. They weren't in yesterday."

"Makes it so hard without your parents' support, dear. Have you sorted out where you're going to live?"

"Mitch's dad has cleared out the back room. They're setting it up today I think."

"Moving in with a couple of blokes! I'd like to be a fly on the wall to that!" And Louisa Puddle laughed out loud, a shrill derisive cough.

"Oh, Mitch and his dad have had a young child around the house not so long ago. They'll be fine."

"You don't have much experience with men, do you dear? Why do you think his father's divorced with a young child? They just can't handle it. A woman really needs her mother's help. She's always the wise one with a baby around."

"Not much chance of that in my case."

"Oh! Silly girl, the baby bath's overflowing all over the place!"

Ellen turned around to see hot water steaming all over the bath.

"Oww!" She turned it off and tipped half of it out to fill up with cold.

"Check the bottom, dear! It'll be too hot. You'll have to start again. Remember, cold first. Just as well I was here. If you'd put baby in that!"

Ellen could see her failure. And now Beckie was starting to cry. She'd uncovered herself with her kicking and was shivering a little.

"Look at the sweet little thing," said Puddle. "Her lips are turning blue!"

Ellen wrapped Beckie again under the eagle-eye of Louisa Puddle, but her confidence was shot.

“That’s a better wrap than the first time, dear.”

Ellen almost dropped the babe as she picked her up for a cuddle and Rebecca, sensing the sudden lack of assurance let out her first really lusty wail since birth.

“Hold her head up. Hold her head up,” fussed Puddle.

Meanwhile the baby-bath overflowed again, this time with cold water.

“Let me do it, dearie. You’re obviously having a few problems.”

Ellen sat on the toilet with the lid down holding Beck to her chest to warm her up, but the baby could smell the milk and wailed even louder.

This was not like yesterday. Rebecca didn’t want a bath, she wanted milk. But bath had to come first because Puddle had the water just right. Ellen wondered why she couldn’t get the water just right the first time.

Rebecca whinged and thrashed around with her legs in the water splashing both women and her cries echoed to an excruciating pitch in the en suite.

Ellen would try to wash and Puddle would correct her. Ellen tried to clean the umbilical wound, Puddle showed her a better way. Ellen reached for the Vaseline, Puddle exchanged it for sorbelene cream. Then of course Puddle went through the nappy-folding lesson while Rebecca screamed in hunger and cold. Ellen nearly lost her off the edge of the change table. Puddle was there to catch.

Once Beckie was dressed, Ellen longed to just sit on her bed and pull out her breast, but Puddle insisted that they wait for the bottle, which took an age. In fact Puddle went to check on it three times. It had never taken so long. Meanwhile, Beckie just screamed the room to new heights of embarrassment.

Puddle re-adjusted the angle Ellen was holding the bottle. Too high you’ll drown her, too low you’ll frustrate her.

Puddle corrected the angle that Ellen was holding the baby — too flat she’ll choke, too upright she’ll lose interest in feeding.

Half way through the feed Ellen just broke down. She couldn’t cope. She was weak. She wasn’t a good mother.

“It’s ok, dear. Motherhood is hard. It’s best you find these things out early. It’s ok though. Every mother goes through this. This is what being a mother is like. It’s hard work. It’s not like the Lucy show.”

Ellen didn't even know the Lucy show.

"You'll have a lot of days like this, dear. That's for sure."

"Did you have these problems with your children?"

"I don't have any children, dear."

Ellen felt lower than before. Here was this woman who had never had a child and she seemed to know exactly what to do, while Ellen sat there with her child in her arms, not knowing what to do next.

I'll never be a proper mother — I'm just too young, she thought.

And her weak smile to Louisa was enough for Puddle to know that her day's work was done.

§

Puddle left about midday, then Lynette Walsh visited around two o'clock for an hour. Both Ellen and her mother hardly said anything for the first forty-five minutes.

Ellen twice changed Beck's nappy in that time, trying to do Puddle's new fangled diaper fold, which she found much more difficult. Her mother didn't feel it was her place to help anymore. This was not the way she'd shown Ellen, so obviously she was rejecting all mum's advice.

Ellen found this wall between them unbearable.

"Say something, mum. What did you come for if you're just going to sit there staring at me?"

"Ellen, you know what I'm going to say. And you're obviously not going to listen, so why should I bother saying it?"

"Mum, I'm finding out. Motherhood's tough. I need your help."

"I can see that, the way you're all thumbs with that nappy."

"The pins aren't sharp enough."

"It's not the pins," Lynette said with repetitive resignation. "Ellen, admit it! You're just too young for this!"

"Oh, mum, please! I'm having a go. I want to keep my baby."

"Ok! You won't listen to what's best."

"I can do this, mum." Then she thought, under one condition ...

Inside her the pressure had been working its 'craft.

Ellen changed the subject. “So, you caught the bus in?”

“Mmm. Your father’s not coming in until you’ve signed the consent.”

Ellen was almost speechless. Her own father refused to see her. Even though he’d been angry he still came to see her on Thursday.

“What about Peter?”

“Your father forbids him. Your father’s not coping very well, Ellen. I think we’ll only get him back when this is all over.”

Ellen wanted to scream. Instead she took two deep breaths.

Lynette pecked her on the cheek and left abruptly. “I might see you tomorrow.”

§

Come mid-afternoon Ellen slept, dreaming.

I am a medieval princess, the prize of the tournament.

I’m standing with Beckie under my arm at the impact point of a jousting competition. Sitting on one horse is a five-headed monster.

On the other sits a lone knight decked in armour.

As the two horses gallop closer I realise that the lances are not aimed at each other — they are aiming at me.

But I can’t run. I try to protect my child but if I turn left the baby will be impaled by the monster’s lance. If I turn to the right, the knight’s lance will just as surely do the job.

At the last minute I throw the baby into the air and wait for both lances to impale my body.

When I look again the large lance has run straight through the knight’s armour but there is no knight inside. It’s just an empty shell.

I look around and see a near-naked man running into the bushes.

Is he carrying my baby? I can’t see.

The monster reaches down a tentacle and pulls me onto the horse.

The horse can hardly bear the weight. As we ride away I see two baby footprints on the ground where I had been standing.

Ellen woke with a suddenness and walked briskly down to nursery. Beckie was sleeping soundly.

"I'll take her to my room thanks," she told the nursery sister.

She put Beck under the bed covers next to her own body and held her hand.

It was safe to close her eyes again.

§

By the time Mitchell bounded in at four-thirty, Ellen's self-belief had disintegrated.

"Howdy Becca! Howdy Punk!"

"Hi."

"What's the matter with you?"

"Nothing."

"No, come on. What's the matter?"

"I notice you said hello to the baby first."

"What? Well I didn't mean anything by it. I was saving the best for last." Both of them knew that was pretty weak. "Had a hard day, Punk?"

"Yep."

"Your parents come in today?" Mitchell probed.

"Mum did. Didn't say much."

"Oh, right."

"My boobs are killing me."

"Haven't you been feeding her? You should be feeding her, Els. You're going to really end up with serious problems if you don't!"

"Everyone's an expert, aren't they?"

She obviously doesn't want to talk about it. Best not to push, he thought.

He's obviously bored with my problems. I won't push, she thought.

There had never been this space between them.

"Dad and I have nearly taken all the junk out of the back room."

“Oh good.” She brightened considerably — a sudden mood swing. “His flowers arrived today. Nice card.”

“He’s a nice dad.”

She knew that. In fact she’d known Mitch’s father longer than she’d known Mitch. He’d coached the junior squash squad she was in for a year before Mitch took it over. Like father like son, she thought. But just how much alike were they, that’s what worried her, especially going to live there with a newborn, all by herself. No female help, unless she took a bus out to Mona Vale where Caroline lived.

The more she thought about it, the harder it looked. And she didn’t want to insult Mitch’s father — he’d been kind enough to offer his house — so she kept her doubts to herself.

She’d never done that with Mitch before.

Time came for him to leave. It had not been as fruitful as the day before and Mitchell couldn’t figure out why. Oh well, good days and bad days he supposed.

“Love ya,” he said.

“Always.”

“Forever.”

Then they did the finger and nose punk gesture. That brought a smile to her face.

“We haven’t done that for a while,” Mitchell suddenly realised.

“You mean it?” she asked. “Always, forever?”

“Oh, Punkie!”

“You’re always going to be there, aren’t you, Mitch?”

“Of course, Punk.”

What’s going on in there? he wondered. Why these sudden doubts?

§

It was almost midnight and Ellen heard Rebecca ‘goo’.

Not sleeping has its advantages, she thought.

Ellen slipped out of bed and tip-toed to the en suite. And there, with almost orgasmic satisfaction she began to unwind the breast bandages. Finally free — ecstasy.

She abandoned the elastic strapping to the bathroom floor, wiped the moisture from under her skin-folds and just “hung loose.” Then, covering herself with her nightie, she tip-toed back to the side of Rebecca’s crib. The feed wasn’t due for another half an hour and Rebecca probably needed a nappy change, but Ellen had more important things on her mind.

“Let’s do it, Beckie.”

Ellen lifted the child, wide awake, and parted her nightie.

Beckie needed no encouragement. The babe instinctively turned her head. Rubbed her gummy mouth back and forth over the nipple. Locked on and drank greedily.

Ellen had never known a pain so pleasurable. She held her daughter in one arm and pulled herself back to rest against the bed head. Beck’s little hand cupped around the breast gently caressing her provider. Ellen played with Beck’s bright red hair. Tears of joy flowed as freely as breast milk.

After a time, Beckie pulled off. A quick burp then Ellen offered the second nipple. Becca latched on again effortlessly.

Presently, the night nurse came in with the bottle. She took one glance at Ellen and smiled.

Ellen smiled back and sniffed, “I’m a mum. I’m a real mum.”

The nurse gave Ellen a peck on the cheek and ran her hands through Ellen’s hair. “I’ll light a candle for you at church today,” she said. “And one for the baby.”

“I’m going to be the best mum in the world, Beckie!”

§

In the morning Puddle was back. So conscientious a social worker to be in on Easter Sunday.

She had organised her day so she could watch Ellen closely. More criticism. More correction. And a note from the night book.

“I read in the ward diary that you were up last night. Couldn’t sleep?”

“A lot of pain. I’ve been bleeding rather heavily.”

“Have they given you anything for it?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“I’ll ask for you. I’ll get you something to help you sleep, too. I notice in the diary you’ve started breast feeding.”

“Yes, I had to. The injections were just not working and my breasts were ready to blow up I think. It seemed the best way.”

“Well, you have to be careful. You might bond a little too closely and that’ll make separation very hard on you.”

“Oh, I think I’ve decided to keep the baby.”

“Good for you. It’s good to see a girl who can tough it out. You must be one strong young lady. I’ve never seen a girl really go for it with her parents so hostile. Good for you. You know what you’re facing and you’re going for it, anyway. A very brave decision, dear. I really hope you can manage. You have a way to go, though, dear.”

Ellen knew she wasn’t strong. Everything Ellen did Puddle criticised. The only thing she had done with ease was breast feed and Puddle wasn’t there to see that. She did so much want to impress this woman, to win her stamp of approval. She seemed to know so much, a tick on the chart from her would be all Ellen needed to know she’d be ok.

But Puddle didn’t hand out ticks to teenage mothers. Ever.

§

Lynette Walsh didn’t show that day, but she phoned. “I hear you’ve been breast feeding.”

There was little warmth in the enquiry.

“Mum, I have to. Milk’s pouring from me everywhere and my breasts are killing me.”

“You know you’re not supposed to. It makes separation very hard.”

“That’s what the social worker said this morning, but I’ve decided I’m — ”

“Ellen, think very carefully about this.”

“I have mum. All I need is a little — ”

“Ellen, don’t live in fairyland. This is real.”

“I know it’s real, mum, but if you’d have seen me last night!”

“Ellen, you’re driving a wedge right through this family. I won’t have it.”

“I’m sorry mum, but I don’t want to give up my daughter!”

“You’ve already signed the papers, dear.”

“I haven’t signed anything. They were just — ”

“You’ve signed nearly ALL the paperwork, dear. We’ve all given commitments. The agency have chosen a lovely couple — just like you and Mitch.”

“Well, why didn’t they just take Rebecca the moment she was born? Why do they let me feed her and change her and bath her? They’re letting me be her mother! Why can’t you?”

“These days they give the girls some practice with a baby. You know — for when they have their own child.”

“This IS my child!”

“Ellen, you’ve signed papers. You’ve shown them your intentions. They’ve gone to a lot of trouble to get just the right people. You can’t let them down now. Those people will be so disappointed. You can’t change your mind now!”

“I never changed my mind. I always wanted — ”

“That’s not what you told us. That’s not what you told the agency. And that’s not what you were saying by filling out all the forms.”

“Mum, I’ve got to go. I’m bleeding all over the place.”

“Yes, your father’s just arrived home, I’d better go too. But you think about what I’ve said. You have an obligation to all of us — and the agency.”

“Yes mum.”

“Ellen, just remember Judy.”

Ellen didn’t answer, suddenly feeling almost convulsive, so Lynette closed off the conversation.

“This is God’s will, Ellen.”

Ellen rolled her eyes. Now her mum had cracked up, too.

“I love you, darling.”

Ellen just had time to press the buzzer before she fainted.

§

“I really am sick of this place. When can I go home?”

Sussman's face was concerned. "You're very weak, Ellen. You've lost a lot of blood. At this stage you don't need a transfusion but you really have to rest yourself. Stop jumping around all over the place. Just stay in bed and relax. Keep the baby in the nursery as much as possible."

"But I like her here with me. I enjoy bathing her and changing her."

"At this stage it's not your place, Ellen. Now I think I'd like to see you in here until Thursday."

"Thursday!" Ellen suddenly felt depressed. All she wanted was to sleep in her own bed.

But then, if she left the hospital with Rebecca, that would probably be out of the question too.

It was hard to think straight. The smooth white tablet they'd given her the night before certainly fixed the sleeping problem, but now that she'd woken late she was constantly disorientated.

"I think the tablet they gave me last night was a bit strong."

"Oh, a pretty standard dosage. It'll wear off. Anyway, you won't be doing anything much apart from lying back with your legs up, so you should be sleeping on it most of today, anyway."

She was battling even to ask questions.

By early afternoon and another half-tablet to ease ovary and breast pain, she was decidedly drowsy. When Mitchell arrived around one o'clock she was "on-the-nods" and impossible to converse with sensibly.

"What's the matter with her today?" he asked a small skinny grey woman who popped her head in and then tried to scuttle away.

The woman took her jacket off before she turned to talk to him, so Mitchell missed her name badge. "Oh she's been having a lot of trouble sleeping. She's been up and down all night, so I think doctor prescribed something for her."

"What? Elephant dope? She's off her face!"

"It might be a bit strong. I'll tell the nurse." She seemed eager to get away from Mitchell.

"Is Rebecca in the nursery?"

"Who?" replied the grey woman impatiently.

"Rebecca? Ellen's daughter."

"And are you immediate family?"

Mitchell had learnt his lesson the first time. "I'm the child's father."

"Well, you shouldn't be here at all!"

"What? Why not?"

“Well there’s a restraining order. You’re not supposed to be within two-hundred metres of Ellen.”

“Two-hundred metres around their house.” How did this person know all these details? “And who are you?” Mitchell retorted.

“I’m the hospital social worker and I’m just looking after Ellen’s welfare. Now, you’re not supposed to be here as far as I can tell. We’ll make a small exception for the moment, ok? But, if you cause any trouble I’ll have security march you out the door so fast the change in air pressure will blow your eyes out. The Walsh child is in there,” she indicated the nursery with a flippant wave, “but I think she’s sleeping. Ask the nurse.”

As Mitchell entered the nursery he saw a sister giving Rebecca a bottle. “I thought Ellen had started breast feeding!”

“Not according to the chart I saw,” protested the nurse. “Anyway she’s bombed off her face in there. Doctor overdid the sleeper last night I think.”

“Can I do that?”

“And you are?”

“The baby’s father.”

“Ellen’s chart says, *Father contact — nil.*”

“That’s bollocks. I’ve been in here every day!”

“I’ve never seen you.” The nurse saw the grey woman waving a back-handed approval at Mitchell, so the nurse handed Beckie over. She was due for a burp so he put her over his shoulder, put the bottle in the crib and pushed down to Ellen’s room.

Ellen was burbling Rod Stewart’s “Sailing”.

“Oh, please, Ellen. If you’re going to blubber you might as well make it something decent.”

“Scaramoosh! Scaramooch! Will you do the fandango!” She giggled.

“This is pathetic.”

Mitchell sat in one of the single-seaters near the window and continued Beckie’s bottle feed. Another nurse came to check on him, so he asked, “Is she alright? What have they done to her?”

“She had a bad turn yesterday.”

“Yeah, I know. Lost a lot of blood.”

“And mood swings. So she’s on — ” the nurse looked at the chart, “Pento! That’s pretty unusual these days. They probably want to make sure she gets some sleep. She’s had a lot of abdominal pain, restless nights. She’ll be right. She’ll sleep it off.”

It really didn’t seem right to Mitchell, but what would he know? A twenty-year-old squash head. And besides, he was here on a good-behaviour bond. Sussman is supposed to be Macquarie Street’s best, Mitchell thought. Lionel wouldn’t hire anyone less. Suppose he knows what he’s doing.

Rebecca was cute. But Mitchell found it wasn’t as much fun without Ellen to talk to.

This is how it’s going to be for her once we’re home, he thought. Just the baby at times. Still, I can take her out to Caroline’s before I go to work. Back room’s looking good. Wish I could tell you about it, Els. We put the cot in today. I’ve ordered the double for my room. I’ll pick it up next pay. Get dad with the trailer. It’s not the brass bed head you wanted, but we’ll get that one day, don’t you worry.

“Love ya Punk.”

The bottle fell to the floor and they all snoozed.

§

The first thing Ellen did when she woke Tuesday was check the roses. Sure enough. The hot autumn had caused the irises, daffodils and carnations to wilt, but the roses were as perky as ever.

“Why did I ever doubt,” Ellen said to Rebecca as she brought her in from the nursery. “See your daddy’s roses? He loves us, Beckie. Dad-dad loves us very much.”

The tablet seemed to have done the trick. Ellen had slept right through dinner the night before and only blinked at first light.

Her breasts were heavy and leaking again but she was just about to fix that.

“Change that pooey nappy, girlie! Change the poo-poo nap!” She sang to Rebecca as she cleaned and wiped that gorgeous round white bottom.

The babe gurgled back and meticulously inspected the entire room as usual.

After the breast feed Ellen was starving, so she asked the nurse with some urgency, “When’s breakfast?”

It was the nurse from the Saturday night and Sunday morning shift.

"You look great! When are you going home?"

"Doc says Thursday."

"Thursday! You could go home today! You look fantastic."

"I've had a lot of bleeding. He seemed quite concerned, from what I remember."

"Oh, every mother bleeds. Gets a bit anaemic. You look fine. Must have been my candles, see!"

Puddle walked in with breakfast. Ellen just wanted to eat in peace but Puddle kept asking questions.

"How you feeling, dear?"

"I feel great today."

"That's the pills, dear. They make you feel better than you really are. You can't live on those when you go home. Although plenty of women try. It all gets a bit much for them, you know, having a baby with no support around. So they start hitting the bottle or popping the pills. Sad really. Especially sad for the children involved."

Ellen was beginning to dislike this woman. Her earlier admiration was giving way to an uneasiness about Puddle's negativity.

"Well, I feel fine. I feel awake. I think the pills have worn off. Anyway, that stress stuff happens when you're older."

"Oh no," replied Puddle, "the younger you are the more susceptible you are. You don't have the experience to cope. As you get a bit older, you get wiser, more able. No, it's the young ones I see all day every day, dear. Especially low-income husbands. Or no husband. Met your boy yesterday. Funny kid."

"Well, we love him, don't we Beckie?"

"You need more than that to get by, dear. You need stick-ability. Commitment. Something a boy learns from his father I suppose. What do you think, dear?"

"I'd really just like to eat my breakfast."

"Oh, by the way, Heather Merken will be in to see you about three-thirty, just after visiting hours, ok?"

"Mmm. Whatever." Ellen took no notice. More interested in shovelling food in. "God, I'm hungry."

10

“I have heaps to do today,” Mitchell said down the phone. “Can you cope without me until this afternoon?”

“Oh yeah, I’m feeling pretty good today. I think I’m right to go home.”

“Excellent. Everything’s ready here for you. How’s the pixie?”

“Oh, gorgeous as ever. She’s just lying there as usual checking everything out.”

“She seems very placid. You all over!”

“Well, everyone comments how curious she is. Which is *you* all over!”

“Yeah, I know she’s alert but she’s seems very calm. Actually, I’ve never heard her cry.”

“You don’t want to! She can scream the hospital down when she puts her mind to it.”

“Really? Well, I’ve never heard her. S’pose I’ll have plenty of chances soon though.”

“So when are you coming in?”

“Probably not before three.” The nurses had dropped the “visiting hours only” routine. “I can only stay an hour. Working tonight.”

“Doctor’s just walked in. Better go. Love ya!”

“Always.”

“Forever.”

Phone down. A double click.

“So how are you this morning, Ellen?” Sussman inquired.

“I really think I’m ready.”

“Chart says you went through eighteen pads yesterday. That’s not good, Ellen.”

She'd been asleep most of the day. She shuddered to think people unknown were changing her as she slept.

"Your blood pressure is still a bit low."

"I feel fine. I just want to go home."

"We'll see. Maybe this evening, or tomorrow. I think Thursday is still the go. I'll check again this afternoon, and if the blood pressure hasn't come up a bit I'll organise a drip for you."

"Oh no!"

"Just overnight. Not blood. Just nutrients and so on. Make sure you're ready. We don't want to make any mistakes."

Ellen's shoulders sagged, just a little.

§

"I hope you've been reading that prayer book."

"I was off my face most of yesterday. And Rebecca's taking up most of my time."

Lynette pursed her lips.

"Anyway, Mitch says it's all wrong."

"What's all wrong?"

"The prayer book. We compared it with the Bible and it's all different."

Lynette couldn't believe her ears. "What's this nonsense he's put in your head?"

"He showed me in black and white. Have you ever looked at the Bible, mum?"

"Of course I've looked at it. I've kissed it! At your confirmation!"

"But have you ever read it?"

"Don't be silly, dear."

"You should read it. It's different to church."

"You're not supposed to read it."

"Mitch and I read it the other day. Good Friday. It was like we had church right here."

"You're not supposed to read it! It'll only confuse you."

"Didn't confuse me."

“It looks to me like it did. Like this room is a church. You’re hallucinating Ellen,” Lynette laughed slightly. “No, you don’t read the Bible darling. What do you think they have priests for?”

“Doc says I might be here ’til Thursday.”

“Yes, well that all depends.”

“Gotta get my blood pressure up.”

“Have you thought any more about what you’re going to do when this is over, Ellen?”

“Oh not this again, mum! I’m not having Rebecca adopted so just shut up about it!”

“I beg your pardon! Mitch has you swearing at your mother now, does he? Showed you that in the Bible, too, I suppose?”

Ellen was too angry to reply.

“Heather Merken’s coming in soon and you’re going to have to sign.”

“I don’t have to sign anything. I’m leaving here with Rebecca, whether you like it or not!”

“It’s not whether I like it or not, Ellen! It’s what’s best for you, the baby, your family, for the rest of your life. I won’t let you ruin the rest of your life. Now you’ll sign the consent, you’ll leave here and forget all about this. You’ll have lots of other babies one day when you’re ready.”

“I’m ready now, mum. I want to go home!”

“I’m sorry, Ellen, but you won’t be coming home with the baby!”

“Well, I’ll go and live with Mitch and his father then!”

Lynette turned white instantly. “You’d live in sin with two men! With a divorcee!”

“Mum, you’re forcing me to!”

“I’m not forcing you to do anything of the sort. You’re making a choice, Ellen. And you just wait ‘til your father hears about it!”

Lynette started to pick up her things. “I see our flowers were the first to be thrown out,” she sniffed.

“Mum, please. I’d much rather bring Rebecca home to our place. You — ”

“Ellen, hopefully we’ll be in tonight to pick you up and take you home. It’s up to you.”

Merken entered. She was forty-five minutes early. She’d heard every word.

Preliminaries all 'round.

“Lynette, I'm supposed to do this one-on-one with Ellen so if you could just wait outside.”

“I was leaving anyway. I'll phone later, Ellen, to see how it went.”

“You already know how it went, mum.”

As Mrs Walsh disappeared around the door, Merken produced a swag of forms.

“Now, as you can see, you've already filled out these some of the way. We just need a few more details. Updates.”

“I'm not signing my child away, so you might as well — ”

“We just have to complete our paperwork. Office stuff, you know. So we have a full explanation for the adoptive family.”

“So you've already picked someone out?”

“It doesn't matter, dear. They'll just have to handle their disappointment. Again.”

“Surely they can have someone else's baby?”

“It's not that simple, dear. We try to match them exactly to the background of the family. We found a couple just like you and Mitchell.”

“Mum said that.”

“A very good couple. Hardworking. Wealthy. Bit on the short side. Even red hair! They've built a nursery onto their house and everything. No baby could do better!”

“They sound nice. Hope they get a baby soon,” Ellen said wistfully.

“Oh, they will, one way or another. Whatever's God's will.” Merken sighed. “I hope you know what you're doing, dear. Anyway, let's get on with these. Get them finished. Now, did you give the baby a name?”

§

At five-past-three Mitchell arrived to see Mrs Walsh standing outside Ellen's ward listening intently. Lynette straightened immediately she saw him.

“You can't go in there!”

“What's going on? Is she alright? The bleeding?”

“She'll be fine.”

Then Mitchell heard Merken's voice — and Ellen's. "Bugger this!" he exclaimed and quickly barged in.

The bed with papers all over it. Ellen pen in hand. Merken close to her pointing to the page. No baby to be seen.

"Ellen, what are you doing?"

"Oh it's nothing. Just paperwork."

Mitchell looked at it. "Ellen! This is the consent form."

"No, it's not. This gives me an extension of thirty days to decide."

"That's bollocks, Ellen! Wake up! And where's Rebecca?"

"She's in the nursery," said Merken agitated. "Go and check if you like."

Mitchell was torn — check the nursery, or stay and make sure Ellen didn't sign anything?

"Ellen, give me the pen." She did. "I'm going down to check on Rebecca. Don't you say anything. Don't you sign anything. Don't you even look at a form until I get back. I'll be thirty seconds." To Merken: "I trust you can wait thirty seconds?"

Mitchell left the room and noticed that Lynette had gone. Checked the nursery: his daughter was there. He could tell the glow of her red hair from the door.

Mitchell calmed to a walk, smiled at the nurse. "Good, the nice one is on today." Without a word he wheeled Becca back to Ellen's room.

"We can't have the baby in here," said Merken. "Ellen needs to concentrate on all this."

"Cool," Mitchell replied. "I'll look after Rebecca." He put his mouth to Merken's ear from behind. "But I'll be watching very closely. And I'm telling you now," he snatched the consent form from the bed, "she's not signing this one." He threw it in Merken's lap.

"You can sign it too if you like," Merken replied defiantly.

"Thought you said I couldn't sign?"

"We don't need your signature. But you can if you wish."

She was engaging him in discussion. No way.

"God, you're desperate, aren't you?" He was surprised at it. "I'm not signing anything. This is wrong. Very wrong. Completely wrong."

A baby called. Ellen's eyes were distracted from the forms to Rebecca.

Merken knew the cause was lost.

§

After Merken left, Mitchell stayed for about three-quarters of an hour having the best fun with Becca. Dancing with her, playing the “staring” game, changing her, watching Ellen feed her.

Ellen enjoyed his tomfoolery with the baby, but she was subdued. Something was troubling her.

“You ok, Punk?”

“Yeah, I suppose. Just a post-natal mood.”

“Learned a few big words in hospital, eh?”

“And what’s that supposed to mean? I’m not stupid. I’m quite capable you know!”

“I never said you weren’t. You’re very capable. I’ve been in awe of how you can look after Beck and — ”

“I can do other things too, you know!”

Mitchell stopped and walked over to the window. Where was this coming from?

“What’s going on in there, Els?”

“Oh, here we go! The big psyche student is going to analyse the HSC flunky.”

“Is that what you think? Is that what you think I think? Well, Ellen Therese Walsh, perhaps you need to hear the truth. I went and did psychology when I left school because I was such a screw up myself. And do you know why I fell for you? Because you seemed so cool and calm and together. In fact, I never told you this, but I was going to transfer to Phys. Ed next year and you know why? Because you make me feel so together. You straightened me out, Els. I need you. And don’t worry about the HSC. You know why you flunked the HSC? Because you spent too much time mucking around with me. You’re not stupid. You’re fantastic. You’re the best thing that ever happened to me. You and Becca.”

“And you’re always going to be there for me? I can do this if you’re there with me, Mitty. You’ll always be there, won’t you?”

Mitchell sighed. There was this question again. He had answered it at least once every day since Rebecca’s birth. Here it was again. Perhaps he wasn’t answering it properly. So he tried a new approach.

“I’ve told you every day for the last twelve months that I love you and that I will forever. I could never get you out of my heart. From the moment I found out you were pregnant I just fell in love with you all over again. You are the most beautiful, wonderful person in the world to me. You see my roses?”

She smiled.

“What did I tell you? You see the chain on my wrist? I will never want to take it off.

“But Punk, we don’t know what the future holds, and I don’t know. Stuff happens. Maybe one day I won’t be there, but you have what it takes to get through. Ellen, you are more than able to get by without me. You really are. But as long as I have a brain that works, I’ll love you. I’d be a fool not to.”

It wasn’t Shakespeare, but Mitchell tried to just cover all bases.

Ellen showed little reaction. Just a small pull back with her head. It would be many months before he would find out how selectively she had listened.

“I have to go to work, Punk. I wish so much I could stay.” Ellen smiled very weakly. Mitch kissed them both with a special lippy-chew on Becca’s cheek and she “goood”. It was a sound that was to ring in Mitchell’s ear for the next eighteen years.

“I have a huge day tomorrow, Punk. I thought you’d be out of here by now, so I’ve got all my postponed lessons tomorrow. I’ll call you in the middle of the day, right?”

She hardly responded. Tired, he thought. “Punk, don’t worry. I’ll be in on Thursday and whatever Sussman says I’m taking you home, ok? Love ya bulk.”

That made her smile.

As Mitchell pulled back the door the small grey woman was standing outside with her clipboard.

§

The moment Mitchell left for work that night Puddle was back in there at her critical best. For an hour she undermined everything Ellen did with Beckie.

Then without so much as a cursory glance at Ellen’s chart Sussman put a drip into the back of her hand.

Within an hour Ellen was slurring her words, dribbling her food and Beckie was wheeled back to the nursery.

§

“We’re in the middle of a drought, here Heather. We’re damned lucky the girl is bleeding all over the place.”

“You can’t do this, Maureen!”

“Heather, it’s not a matter of ‘can or can’t’. It’s a matter of ‘must’. You’ve seen her. You’ve heard it all from Lou! The girl can’t cope! What’s going to happen when she gets the kid home? She won’t have hot-and-cold running nurses to fall back on then! In fact she won’t have any female help. What sort of a life is this child going to have? I mean, three divorces in the house! Two de factos from what I can understand. And a child being raised by another child! It’s tantamount to abuse to let this baby out of the hospital with her. You know all this, Heather! What’s the matter with you? Perhaps I should give you the choice task of driving up to Oberon to explain.”

“Maureen! You haven’t notified them already?”

“We’re going to lose them Heather and I don’t want to see that. The Deckers are worthy people. This child deserves them.”

Something in Merken withered whenever this woman attacked her.

“She had the pen in her hand, Maureen. That bloody boyfriend of hers.”

“Oh, he’s a psycho! He shouldn’t even be in there. What’s Louisa doing?”

“Doesn’t want to cause a fuss. He might be violent. She just wants to keep him calm. No point making a disturbance in front of the rest of the patients. She’s warned him off, so he’s behaving himself so far. He’s been a bit aggressive with me the couple of times I’ve talked to him. I don’t know what she sees in him. She’s such a pretty little thing — she could have any guy she wants.”

“Typical. How do these girls get tangled up with such losers? And you know what happens to the child in the middle! Every time! Heather, you get back in there tomorrow. Sussman’s got her on the drip, so you should be ok. In early. I called Lyn Walsh — nice lady — they’re coming in around noon to take the girl home. And we can probably have the allotment transferred to Gynea just after lunch. I’ll have to call the Gynea fosters.”

“I’ll be glad when all this is over, Maureen.”

“That’s just what Lyn Walsh said, Hetty.”

§

At sunrise Ellen vaguely felt someone remove the drip — male or female, she couldn’t tell. She didn’t care. All she wanted was sleep. Despite the wetness on her chest, the ache in her belly and breasts, she just wanted to roll over. It was after eleven o’clock before the enormity of bladder pressure forced her feet onto the cold lino and into the en suite.

Liberal sweat from her brow, and her kidneys must have done a year’s work overnight. Ellen felt like she drained herself for fifteen minutes.

She was intensely drowsy, sitting on the bidet, leaning back on the cistern, dreaming, she didn’t know how long. A nurse eventually shook her into the light.

“Ellen. Ellen. Miss Merken is here to see you.”

“Did I miss breakfast?”

“I’ll get you a sandwich.”

Merken was standing in the en suite behind the nurse. “Overslept a little, Ellen?” Merken smiled.

Highly embarrassing to be caught dozing on the toilet.

The nurse left but Merken stood and watched as Ellen wiped herself. She could see Ellen’s erect nipples through the transparency of the wet nightie.

Such a pretty little thing, she thought.

Ellen let fly with enough wind to wake the dead. So much for privacy. “Sorry,” she giggled. “I’m really hungry.”

She flushed and shuffled to the vanity where she washed her face and then bent over to gulp straight from the tap. Merken watched her.

Ellen towelled her face. “I’m going to see my baby now.”

“I need to ask you about these forms first.”

Although drowsy, Ellen still knew what Merken wanted. “You’re wasting your time. I’m not signing.”

"Your parents are coming to pick you up any minute."

"Look, I'm hungry, I'm tired, I have to feed my baby before my tits explode."

With that Ellen ran her fingers through her hair, and pushed past Merken out of the en suite.

Destination: nursery.

A nurse was changing Rebecca.

"I'll finish that," Ellen sighed. "No, I won't." She flopped into a chair. "I'll just sit here and when you're finished just hand her to me."

Beckie again was serene. "She's a very good little girl this one," said the nurse.

Merken entered the nursery right in the middle of the feed. "Your parents are here."

"Good," said Ellen. "It's about time dad saw this."

"He's staying in your room."

"Has my sandwich arrived?"

"Ellen, I really need you to sign this now, otherwise it's going to get very ugly."

"Haven't I signed everything you want? What more is there?"

"There's just one more. Now this is a type of consent form. All you have to do is just sign your name and you have thirty days to decide whether you want to have your child adopted or not. Now, with your bleeding and so on, you'll be in and out of the hospital anyway, so you can see the baby every day."

"What! Beckie stays here and I go home? No way!"

"Ellen, you're not well. You'll have to come in for checks. You'll find it easier with the hospital looking after the baby while you fully recover. And let's face it, Ellen, keeping the baby in the hospital will make everything a whole lot easier with your parents. You can have the thirty days to smooth things with them. We'll arrange foster care so the child's in a normal home environment. Then you just phone us up and take baby home. It gives you a whole month to sort things out."

In some ways it sounded attractive. Ellen knew she could use all the time she could get. Thirty days to work on her father. Thirty days to sort out living arrangements with Mitch. She hadn't even seen the baby's room yet. Thirty days to recover physically, and mentally. She was exhausted emotionally. But then she looked at Beckie suckling away, and Ellen knew that she couldn't bear even a minute's separation.

“No. Look, I’ll be fine. I really can’t sit here feeding my child and sign a paper that’s going to separate us for the next month.” Ellen sighed. “I’m sorry, Miss Merken, but I’m really tired. Could you check on my sandwich?”

Merken looked at Ellen’s befreckled round face for a moment, then put her pen away. She left the nursery, Ellen finished her feed, and Merken returned with the sandwich just as Lionel Walsh’s face appeared in the nursery window.

He did not look happy.

§

The feed was over. Rebecca was burped. Ellen lifted Beckie’s singlet and kissed her tummy then pulled a few faces at the babe as she hugged her. Ellen was stalling, but her father’s eyes never strayed from the back of her head.

Finally, Ellen smiled weakly at the nurse, took a deep breath and asked her to put Rebecca down in the crib. The babe was drowsy and ready to sleep again after the feed and the short play time.

Ellen’s guts churned. All she wanted to do was empty her bowels, but she closed her eyes and breathed rapidly, deeply before turning for the nursery door. Onward into the mouth of the abyss.

She walked straight past her father in quickstep towards her room, but this was no dance d’amour.

If Ellen thought her room was to be a sanctuary she was very mistaken. Merken, Puddle and her mother waited for her. Lionel closed the door behind.

Lynette went first. “Miss Puddle and I have talked this over at length, Ellen. She has watched you trying to mother Rebecca since you’ve been here and her assessment is not encouraging.”

“She makes me nervous, mum.”

“Well, nerves or no nerves, how do you explain nearly dropping the baby on several occasions, nearly burning her in the bath, nearly drowning her in the bath, applying incorrect ointment to tender parts of the baby’s body, even trouble holding the bottle!”

“Well, if I breast feed, I don’t need a bottle do I?”

Ellen looked nervously at her father. He was surprisingly quiet, biding his time.

“Ellen, the list just goes on and on. You are not ready for motherhood. You're not coping. You're not able to do the most simple of tasks to look after this child!”

“That's because every time I start getting the hang of something, someone interferes or they take her into the nursery!”

“They take her into the nursery to save the child from a totally incompetent mother!”

Ellen could hold it no longer. She just burst into uncontrolled crying.

“And that's another thing. You can't just burst into tears every time something goes a little wrong with a baby. You have to be strong and carry on.”

Puddle chipped in. “I've seen you battling to control your emotions, Ellen. You're just not strong enough to cope. I'm sorry to have to say it, but it's true.”

“It's not true and how would you know, anyway, you barren witch?”

Ellen had crossed the line. It was now a fight to the death.

“Mum, you listen to her instead of me. But she's never been off my back since I came in!”

“That baby would be dead by now if I hadn't stepped in!”

“That's crap and you know it. I would never harm her. It's you! You cause me to make mistakes. You keep setting me up!”

“I keep saving you. You're so naive, you don't even know when you're about to do serious harm to your child. Even if you took your baby home, we'd have to send Community Services around to take the child away from you. You haven't learnt anything since you've been here. It is my professional assessment that a child deserves better mothering than you appear to be capable of. In fact I doubt if you could even take care of a dog!”

The only sound in the room was Ellen whimpering. The witch had won. And not a word from Lionel or Merken.

They all left the room except Merken who pulled the paper out of her brief case once more. She spread it on the bed and handed Ellen the pen.

“Now, I have to change the date here. It's typed the eighth, so I'll change it to the ninth and you initial it, ok?”

“Am I really that bad?”

“It's not for me to say, Ellen.”

“I know I’ve been kidding myself. But there must be something else. If I’m so bad as a mother, can’t someone help me? Show me?”

“That’s your mother’s job dear and clearly she’s not going to.”

Merken crossed *8th* from the page.

“I need to talk to my mum first.”

Merken sighed heavily and put the pen and page on the small coffee table near the window. “I’ll get your parents.”

Ellen sat on the bed drained, confused and still a little drowsy. Her guts were really doubling her now. She wanted to vomit, and defecate at the same time but perspired to hold it all in. She wanted to cry out loud. She just wanted to go home. And where was Mitty? Obviously I’m just not important enough, she thought.

Right on cue, in walked Lionel.

“What you don’t seem to understand, Ellen, is that this bastard is a child of fornication. That is a mortal sin, young lady. A mortal sin. The only way you can absolve your soul of this sort of sin is to completely turn your back on it. Like it never happened. Your eternal soul is at stake here, Ellen. No one will ever be able to pray you out of purgatory unless you show repentance. And unless you show repentance, you cannot be part of our family. You are corrupting all of us.”

He pulled papers out of his coat. “This is a new will I’ve had drawn up. You’ll notice that everything’s been left to Peter and St Vincent De Paul. You’ll notice that your name does not appear. You will also notice that this will isn’t signed at the bottom. Now it has cost me a lot of money to have that will drawn up. And I will not waste it, like I’ve obviously wasted all this money looking after you this last few months.”

He rushed towards Ellen and squeezed her cheeks into her mouth so hard they cut on her teeth. “And if you ever repeat that heretical poppycock he’s been teaching you, then you can leave immediately as well — with or without the bastard!”

“Dad, you’re making me bleed!”

“That’s the least of your problems. Now, you sign those bloody papers, you leave here now with us and you’ll forget as of this moment that all this ever happened. You will return to your old life and carry on like before. End of story.”

Merken re-entered. Picked up the pen and paper again.

Ellen felt herself leaving her body. She needed another opinion — an anchor.

“No,” said Ellen waving Merken away, “I have to talk to my boyfriend first. He’s supposed to be phoning soon.”

Merken was too incensed to speak. She stuffed the paper back in her brief case and walked out.

A few seconds respite. Why hadn’t Mitty rung?

Lynette entered. She was clearly aggravated. “Heather had to go. Apparently she’s not supposed to ask you to sign twice in one day. So now we all have to wait for tomorrow for Ellen to write her name. Is it so difficult, Ellen? You just keep dragging this on and on. You’re putting us through untold hell, dear! Grow up! Stop being so selfish. Have some responsibility towards us! We’re the ones looking after you, believe me. We drove all the way over here to take you home. Don’t you want to come home? Now everything has to wait until tomorrow! For God’s sake Ellen leave the baby in the nursery! Please, have some mercy on us! From this moment, leave her alone. She’s not yours, she’s not ours. She belongs to someone who can look after her properly, do you understand? God has chosen her, Ellen! You’re not a mother! I know what it takes and you haven’t got it. Give it up. Please Ellen, we want you back. We want our lives back, but you’re standing in everyone’s way. Tomorrow, sign your name, walk out of here and forget all about it.”

Lynette sighed, fidgeted, turned on her heels for the door, then screamed to the ceiling, “Give me my life back, Ellen!”

She stormed out.

The Walshes had a stern word with Puddle before they left.

Puddle came back in. “I’m sorry for having to get so heavy, dear. But this really is best. The very best for your baby, and for you. In years to come you’ll understand.”

Ellen didn’t hear a word. She didn’t say a word. She hardly breathed. She hardly cried. She was barely alive.

§

Three times Mitchell called Ellen’s direct line at well-spread hours and each time the call was diverted to the maternity main desk, where Mitchell was told that Ellen was sleeping. Have they put her on the elephant juice again?

On the third call at six o'clock he became very agitated. "Well, can you please leave a message for her to call me as soon as she's awake, and tell her I'll be in about eleven tomorrow to pick her up? Can you please make sure she gets that message?"

"Certainly, Mitch."

The hospital social worker offered to deliver it personally.

§

Thursday 10 April 1980 was Mitchell and Ellen's nineteen-month anniversary.

Sussman was in early to give a final medical assessment: still a fair bit of bleeding but she can go.

Then Puddle came to wish her well.

Ellen wandered down to the nursery and watched her beautiful coppertop pixie — Mitch's beautiful coppertop pixie — from the window. Just one more cuddle, in private.

As she pushed the trolley-crib down the hall she felt like a lone thief. A Dickensian orphan waif. Mitty hadn't even rung. He was obviously everything they'd said about him. And she was everything they'd said about her. Somehow deep down she wanted desperately to wave a magic wand and be the perfect mother, but all she had were two arms.

So she used them.

She scooped her baby out of the crib and held her so tight she thought she was going to suffocate them both. And she wished she could. It would be better than this. She went to the window overlooking the street and wailed into the autumn. Desperate pleas to no one there.

She smothered Beckie's red hair with kisses and tears. She sucked Beck's cheeks into her mouth — so soft, so tender, so innocent, so beautiful. "My baby deserved better than a mere HSC flunky."

But somehow this Easter present was all Ellen had ever wanted.

Merken was early as usual.

"I've changed the date. Just initial it. You'll have to put the baby down, Ellen."

The saddest motion of Ellen's life. All time ended.

As they sat going over the initialing of all the changes, Merken kept herself strategically between Ellen and Rebecca, as much as possible interrupting Ellen's sight-line.

Ellen didn't bother to listen to Merken's explanations or even look at what she was signing. She wasn't even in the room. She was in the gutter with her engagement ring. She was standing on her desk with her arm out the window. She was sitting in a '67 Premier with leaking breasts. But she wasn't in that room. Someone else was. And that person, whoever she was, just stared out the window or stole one last look into baby-blue eyes.

When it came to signing her full name Ellen completely ignored the line on the page. It was practically illegible. Not once in the previous days or months had Ellen Walsh ever expressed any wish to have her child adopted but here was someone scrawling her name in a sloppy metaphor of her hand.

And as if by some mental telepathy Puddle, Sussman and Mrs Walsh filed into the room.

Merken took the pen and the consent form while Puddle started to wheel the crib around the bed towards the door.

"Let me see her!"

"Best not to," said Mrs Walsh, gesticulating to Puddle.

"Let me see her. I want to see her." Hysteria welled within Ellen. "Please. My baby! Don't take my baby!" Pitifully she begged. "I love you, Beckie. Don't go!"

Puddle was almost out the door. Ellen leapt out of bed. Lynette grabbed her arm. Ellen was half out of the room as Puddle wheeled the crib towards Dr Burnard's experimental nursery. Mrs Walsh tugged Ellen but she clung to the door frame watching the skinny grey figure quick-shuffle down the hall.

"Beckie! Please! Come back. I don't want to lose my baby. Bring her back! Please!"

Shouting, crying, head pounding. Struggling to break her mother's grip. Lynette tried to envelope her in a hug, a motion less to comfort, and more to stop Ellen chasing red-headed curls. They glided behind the nursery entrance. Howls to stop heaven and hell. "I love you, Beckie. I love you so much. Mummy loves you, darling!"

"It's for your own good," Mrs Walsh whispered in Ellen's ear.

"Mum, let me go!" She started hitting her mother in the chest. "Don't let them take her! Please bring my baby back!"

Merken made a note: *Extreme reaction. B.M. unstable.*

Puddle never even turned her head.

Ellen became violent, kicking Lynette, fighting her with everything she had. “Let me go, mum! Let me go! I want my baby! I want Beckie!”

Lynette pulled her daughter tight to her chest to stop the blows but Ellen thrust the top of her head repeatedly into her mother’s chin, rattling Lynette’s teeth. Turning her head and taking the blows on the cheek, Mrs Walsh thought her neck would dislocate with the ferocity. Tight-held as Ellen was she now manoeuvred her hands towards her mother’s throat.

Suddenly her arms broke free and she beat her mother severely on each side of the head.

“Abe, do something!”

Ellen had almost broken lose, her arms flailing, so Sussman jammed the pentobarbitol into the struggling birth-mother’s backside.

“Aaaarrghh!! You deadshit!” Ellen bit her mother’s left bicep, but the sedative took almost immediate effect and she started to collapse. “Please, mum! Get her back!”

Ellen lost all control of her emotions. The depth of her cries turned to uncontrollable laughter, back to crying all in one breath. She fell back into her room, the ceiling now fuzzy around the edges. Her giggles familiar of something. “Mitty, catch me!” and she laughed incoherently. What was that? Mitty’s favourite record. Suddenly she was sitting in the back room, the black platter spinning. And slurring, a little girl started to sing.

The lunatic is in my head,

The lunatic is in my head,

You raise the blade,

You make the change,

You re-arrange me

Til I’m sane.

You lock the door

And throw away the key,

There’s someone in my head

But it’s not me.

“Bye bye Beckie. See you on the dark side of the moon.

Mummy has to sleep now.”

And the only life in that room was Mitty's roses.

11

Even the Oxford Street trendies thought Mitchell was mad. Way beyond eccentric.

It had been awkward on the bus with pram and carry-bag full of baby clothes but once out at Wynyard Station he opened the pram, put the bag inside and started wheeling up to St Bernadette's. Big stupid grin across his face, he looked like an A-grade fruitcake. The embarrassment of the walk up to the hospital would prove to be a billion times more tolerable than the confusion of the walk back.

He picked the pram up and proudly strode the stairs to the second floor, then wheeled it into Ellen's room.

Empty. Just an orderly tidying up. "Where's Ellen?" The orderly just shrugged.

Mitchell left the pram in the room and as he exited, the small grey woman entered.

"Mr Hearn," she spoke sombrely, "Bring the pram into my office."

"Where's Ellen?" he asked as she indicated her office door.

He sat down.

"Mr Hearn, I'm very sorry to have to be the bearer of such bad news. Ellen signed the consent this morning and went home with her parents."

"What? That's not possible!"

"I know this is a great shock to you, Mr Hearn. It was a shock to us all."

"How? What did they do to her?"

“I don't really know. It was between her and her parents. I was utterly surprised when the agency informed me. Ellen had been doing so well.”

“And what about Rebecca? Can I see my daughter?”

“She has been taken into foster care and I'm afraid I am not at liberty to tell you where that is. Once the consent is signed, these things become confidential. She is being well looked after. By a wonderful couple.”

“What? She's been put with the adoptive people already? What about the thirty days?”

“No, Mr Hearn, these aren't the adoptive parents. Ellen still has thirty days to revoke her consent.”

“This can't be happening. Didn't Ellen get my messages? Didn't she know I was coming in this morning?”

“I'm sure she got your messages. One of them I looked after myself.”

Mitchell wheeled the pram out of her office and went to the nursery window to check, just in case they'd taken the wrong baby. Just in case there had been two Ellen's in the hospital and he'd been mistaken for the wrong Mitchell.

He started breathing deeply, trying to control the uncontrollable.

Mitchell carried the pram back down the stairs. It was way too light.

By the time he had walked to the corner of Riley and Oxford Streets, he decided to use the thirty dollars he borrowed from his dad for a taxi home.

Putting the pram in the boot Mitchell told the driver, “Balgowlah, mate. Then I have to go to Dee Why Headland.”

§

He had to be careful. If Mitchell was seen he'd be in big trouble, and this was broad daylight. His birthday clown was still on the window sill, but the blinds were drawn. There had been no answer on the phone a few minutes earlier. Garage door was down.

He went to the side-window. Closed, probably locked. He turned his back to the wall and lopped his head against it.

“At least we have thirty days.”

He walked to Dee Why shops and the bus back home. Through the window of Walsh's shop he could see no one familiar.

At comp that night there was no winning bonus. He might as well have not played.

After, Mitchell went home and just sat silent in the baby's room. It was almost perfect. Almost.

Mitchell climbed into the cot and cried himself to sleep.

§

Ellen awoke in her darkened bedroom. Disoriented as she was, reality still hit her. Her first words a sickening, frightened plea, reminiscent of her cry from the same room just over a week earlier.

“Mum! Mum! Help me, mum!”

Lynette rushed through the door-beads to find Ellen fumbling for the light while holding her stomach.

“Where's my baby, mum? I want my baby!”

“You just rest a little while longer, dear. We're all about to have dinner when you feel like joining us.”

“I want to phone and get Rebecca back.”

“Well, it's a bit late now. We'll talk about it tomorrow. When you feel like dinner just let me know.”

Ellen slept another hour and a half, arose for half an hour to go to the toilet and to pick at dinner, then with a change of pad, slept through to the morning. A restless sleep. She'd made a terrible mistake, but tomorrow it could be made right.

The next morning, Ellen was woken by the phone just after nine o'clock. She rushed to answer it but her mother beat her to the bell — so Mitchell hung up.

Ellen and her mother exchanged glances of contradiction. “I want to use the phone, mum.”

“After breakfast, dear. You'll feel better.” Mrs Walsh wondered how she would be able to sustain this for thirty days.

“I don't want breakfast. I want to use the phone.”

“Ellen, I can't allow you to have the number.”

Ellen was mortified. Rigid. This was her mother, totally transformed. She could no longer look at this betrayer. Even this house was a betrayal. Ellen examined it carefully, and it gave up its secrets.

Ellen noticed that many of the trinkets with which her mother had decorated the house, were gone. Family heirlooms, Doulton show-plates, figurines, family-favourite porcelain. All gone. A new coffee percolator stood on the kitchen sideboard, a coffee stain in the kitchen tile grout and on the kitchen lino.

Then she looked back to her mother's face, but this time with an attention to detail. And it too gave up its secret, despite the unusually full make-up for this time of the day, or maybe because of it. There, through the heavy foundation, Ellen saw a slight yellowing under the left eye. Ellen put her hand to her mouth in shock. Her mother spoke softly, emotionally, but with finality.

"Ellen, this has to come to an end. You have to look to your future. What's done is done. We have to go forward."

Ellen felt emotion gagging her. "Mum, without Beckie I have no future. My life's over if I can never see her again! I have to get my baby back. I have to. I'm miserable without her. I need her, mum."

"Trust me, Ellen. You would be miserable with her. You have no options. Now please come and have some breakfast and forget last week ever happened."

Ellen sat at the table, elbow on the cloth and hand to her forehead. She picked at raisin toast but didn't taste a morsel. Something large in her was shriveling. Although she had hardly eaten for nearly forty-eight hours, she didn't feel hungry.

Leaving a good half of the toast and all her glass of orange juice, she re-entered her darkened room, and lay face down on her bed.

And so it started. The pit of a human soul opened to the air and so great was the tearing. It started low like a hapless sheep struggling in barbed wire. Then, just as the barbs tore at its flesh deeper and the soul bled so freely, she bayed like an undead fawn ravaged by wolves.

And the moaning became human, producing such mournful sounds that only divinely-breathed creation can utter: words. The full expression of grief.

A primeval wail spilled out of her. "My God! My child! My beautiful baby! Beckie, my love!" She cried and buried her head into her pillow. Her womb ached. Her flesh crawled. All she could

see was her tender innocence, her glorious likeness, Beckie, her treasure. She screamed through guttural tears. “What have I done? Oh Beckie, what’s to become of you?” Her deathly soliloquy now wore a skeletal mask.

Lynette stood riveted to the archway into the kitchen wishing she could have hung a noose from it. Two nooses, maybe three. Despair had never gripped a household like this and yet the depth of it was that there could be no touch, no comfort. Whatever bond had once existed lay shattered with the Doulton.

This was worse than a death in the family. It was the death of a family.

All for sake of one man’s standing.

§

During those first few days, Mitchell must have phoned Ellen’s number a couple of dozen times. And even though her bedroom was right next to the telephone she was never able to answer it. Always, Mrs Walsh. Mitch was sure on one occasion he heard muffled struggling voices and the beads on Ellen’s door bouncing around, then a door slam before Mrs Walsh’s voice. He just hung the phone up every time.

Mitchell phoned St Mary of Dolleours on Friday and they said Merken would ring him back but she never did.

On the night of the first Saturday, he went around to Ellen’s side-window and tried to force it open with a large flathead screwdriver. It wouldn’t budge and the noise brought the light on in Ellen’s room, so he fled.

Each morning Mitchell would lie on his bed and stare at Ellen’s photo. “Please make the call, Ellen. Please make the call.”

Each afternoon there was always something for Mitchell to do, usually coaching, sometimes training, then manning the desk at the squash courts into the evening.

He was carrying an ominous black hippopotamus on his back and its name was Tragedy. Mitchell would drive from Balgowlah to Chatswood, then sit in the squash centre car park trying bring himself under tenuous control, before going and acting for eight hours. Too often he lost all control of his emotions with clients.

Mitchell had experienced grief before: the day his dad walked out, the boy in his under 13s Rugby team, killed on the football field. But this was different. He was dying.

Occasionally his phone would ring once and then stop. He'd run to answer it anyway, then dial Ellen's number but always the same result — Lynette answering.

Each night after work Mitchell lay on his bed crying, calling, imagining. "Where are you now, my little pixie? Are they taking good care of you? Are they protecting you? I'm sorry I failed you, my love. I wish I could see your pretty blue eyes again. I wish I could kiss your little red head. Even if just for one last time I could hold you to my chest for a single second, I would pay with my life. Oh Becca, I never even said goodbye."

And through the tears always this silent prayer: "Please look after my little girl."

§

Julia stood at the Walsh's gate under orders. She didn't want to enter this world but she had been compelled.

It seemed to take an age for the door to open and Mrs Walsh poked her face around.

"Is Ellen home?"

"I'm sorry, Ellen can't come out to play."

That's ok, thought Julia sarcastically, I didn't bring my skipping rope anyway.

"Can I come in and see her?"

"No, Julia, she's not feeling very well. Now, please go away."

This mother had now become the gaol warden.

The door closed and Julia meandered to the gate, turning to take in the incomprehensible. The perfectly neat brick fence. The garden roses, not a petal out of place. Every blade of grass in the lawn had been combed immaculately parallel. And yet, on the front window sill, a little pink porcelain clown sat staring into the world, and quite audibly from the street came its sad cliché. Disembodied words of a girl's cry: "Baby." "Child." "Beckie."

All who passed knew the story, and yet there was this virginal façade.

Julia would never forget her encounter with this whitewashed tomb.

She breathed deeply one last time in case she had missed any detail, then strode to her house briskly, and immediately picked up the phone.

“They’ve her locked up, Mitch,” she said.

“Thanks for trying, Jules. Thanks for everything.”

This had an ominous finality about it which Julia didn’t like.

“Mitchell,” Julia had a note of warning in her voice, “Please don’t do anything stupid.”

Mitchell returned to his room and leaned on the chest of drawers gazing at Ellen’s joyous face. He examined it almost microscopically. This visage held no trace of the anguish that had now beset her. Yet the light in the background formed a distinct cross, the arms of which met right behind her head. The sacrifice had now been made manifest.

Then under the frame, this black book. Mitchell moved the photo to the wooden surface, leaving a square, clean patch amid the dust. A typical bachelor’s room.

Despite his Anglican schooling at Trinity (or maybe because of it) he didn’t know how to read the Bible. So he just opened it near the middle, kind of at random.

Psalm 22

My God, my God,

Why have you forsaken me?

So far from Your help

Are the words of my groaning.

Oh my God,

I call to you by day,

But you do not answer,

And at night I find no rest ...

I have become a worm,

I am not a man.

Mitchell snapped the black book shut. “Now I know how the Lord felt,” he said out loud in youthful arrogance, too ignorant to see that it was actually the other way around.

§

For thirty days a silver cord of grief suspended itself across the northern beaches sky from Balgowlah to Dee Why Headland.

Nights rent asunder by two people, human rubble, five-thousand metres apart, connected by an appalling lament: "Where is my child? Where is my child?" A stream of emotional vomit surged into saturated bed clothes. Mitchell prayed for the strength to drag a pillow corner into his mouth so far as to choke, and be no more. But in the depths of this tragedy, such strength eluded him.

Wave after sickening black wave, the stench swelled onto the shore of their mutual subsistence, a suffering too deep for words, a remorse beyond recognition, a punishment so far in excess of the crime that all the love in the universe could not compensate.

Ellen and Mitchell twitched continuously, like two crippled dogs, run over and lying on the gravel with broken backs, yelping in untreated agony sewage.

Mitchell grasped vainly at his own personality as it slid away. Eventually he emerged with hardly one dimension. Ellen however, endured a complete emotional lobotomy.

Thirty days and these two young corpses washed to the sea decomposed. Not even a shadow was left.

§

On the thirtieth day, for the first time in a month, Mitchell plummeted down a well of fitful sleep, and dreamed a dream.

As I sleep on my bed a thief comes into my room and steals half my face.

No ceremony. Just digging fingernails into my scalp and ripping half my face off.

In this torture I leap off the bed and stagger to the mirror to see the horror of a jagged flesh-edge where my face had once been. Sinew, bare muscle, skull. A single eye staring back in terror.

I run to my father's room. "Dad! Someone's stolen my face!"

"Forget about it," father says. "It never happened."

"Go back to sleep," says mother. "Life goes on."

This must be a nightmare, he thought. They haven't slept under the one roof for seven years.

I stagger down the corridor which segues into Sydney Road Balgowlah.

I accost everyone I meet screaming, "My face! My face! Where have you taken it?"

They simply turn their collars and recoil at this hideous sight.

"Madness," they nod to each other.

And then there, walking past the post office towards me is a couple pushing an empty pram.

"They haven't smiled for years," I think.

Then they see my half-a-face, and they point and laugh at this freak.

Holding their sides, they laugh on and on uncontrollably.

I want to kill them. But can't get near them. They laugh at me with total impunity.

I throw myself at them in utter rage –

... and slam into the bed head. Frantic, out of breath, Mitchell ran to the mirror, relieved to see a face intact.

But then, behind his eyes he saw. The dream was true.

12

By April 22, Ellen had oscillated from abject grief to numb indifference two dozen times.

Now she was desperate.

For a full two weeks her mother had not had a shower without Lionel standing guard outside Ellen's room. When Lynette cooked, Peter kept watch. This was a family burden.

Ellen had tried the front door — deadlocked from the inside.

The back door — deadlocked from the inside also.

She checked her key ring. Deadlock keys gone.

The side-window, unopenable. "I painted it. Must have stuck with the paint," was Lionel's explanation.

Once, when her mother was in the toilet, Ellen ransacked the telephone desk looking for the number, but even the directories had disappeared.

The sewing room had been converted via a fold-up bed so that Lynette Walsh could sleep downstairs in case Ellen tried anything in the night.

At three o'clock in the morning of April 15th she had called 013 telephone directory assistance, but her mother heard the whispered request, "St Mary of Dolleurs Adoption — " and click went the phone. The girl returned to bed chastened.

Another night she tried to drag the phone silently into her room. It had always reached before, but now the cord had been shortened and she dropped it, bringing both her mother and father to investigate.

This was no haphazard imprisonment. This was a meticulously planned operation.

Then on April 24th, Ellen lay on her bed at midday staring at the ceiling, when she heard her mother dialling.

“Hello, Louisa? It’s Lynette Walsh here. Yes, yes she’s fine. Doing well. Quite happy now with the decision. Still some flow I think. Seen a few pads in the bin. No, I haven’t noticed. She’s been a bit quiet, but that’s to be expected. She’s starting a new job in a couple of weeks, at the bank. Yes.

“I was wondering about the Form Thirteen examination. Ellen would like to especially request Dr Sussman to look after that. Just for peace of mind. Mmm. The audiology repeat too, yes. Thanks.

“Bit restless? Really? Funny little thing. Once she settles in she’ll be fine. Placid? Very much like Ellen.”

The girl couldn’t believe her ears. Mum was so chipper about it all. Was she blind? And what was this new job?

Ellen tossed her feet over the edge of the bed.

Should I run for the phone or just give up? she thought.

By this stage however, Ellen was so defeated, she could do nothing but sit there, unable to move her eyes from the wallpaper.

The moment she heard the phone hang up, Ellen shutdown.

§

Friday the 9th of May came and went. Mitchell heard nothing. He hoped against hope that maybe there’d be a call on Monday, since the thirty days fell on a weekend.

He stayed home staring at the phone all day. The 12th of May came and went.

Rebecca was gone.

The next day dawned but Mitchell couldn’t get out of bed. He ate nothing. Put no light on. He didn’t shower. Mitchell didn’t even bother to phone in as sick for work. There was nothing that the outside world could offer to give him reason to live.

Mitch’s father had said nothing about the situation for the entire thirty days. Mitchell figured he had forgotten, or didn’t care.

Rebecca's Law

But all day that Tuesday, Mitchell heard his father dismantling the baby's room and trucking it out to the station wagon. Mitchell heard him sniffing. He was a big man — a first-grade footballer in his youth, a chief engineer, frighteningly competitive on the squash court, a highly intelligent, polite man, unemotional, and always in control. Now choking.

He had kept track of the days just as surely as Mitchell had, and he was just doing a little something to help his son out, to save Mitch the trouble. He even took the bolt out of the Holden parcel shelf. Mitchell didn't notice for two months.

About two o'clock the boy heard his dad drive away and it was weeks later when Caroline told Mitch just how upset his father had been.

But his father never said a word, before, during or since. So typical. Mitchell thought his father didn't care, when in reality, he couldn't have cared more.

By early evening, Mitch forced himself out of bed to his desk and for the first time in probably six months, wrote song lyrics. Dozens of them.

He took Ellen's picture, placed it in front of him, and the first song fell out of his brain:

Rebecca.

See the dreams,

Smashed. Hatred scenes,

And choosing teams,

Who'll buy ice creams

For you to eat?

A life ahead,

The life we've led,

The tears we shed

That fell to wet

Your tiny feet,

And still we weep,

And still you sleep,

And still they cheated you.

Sojourn of a stolen father

*Don't change her name,
Don't leave her lame,
Who is to blame?
The answer is the same for me.*

*Desire's fools
Who broke all rules,
The devil's tools
Who fell to break
Your tiny heart.
Rent apart,
Left in the dark,
Will we start anew?*

*See your eyes following
My voice across the room,
You couldn't perceive,
And I couldn't believe
How they cheated you.
But will we start anew?
Still they cheated you.*

§

Somewhere in Oberon, a telephone broke the solitude of a childless homestead.

“Decker residence. Roslyn Decker speaking.”

“Good morning. And congratulations, mum!”

A whoop of unbridled joy filled the Decker loft. Lawry came running to see his wife moist-eyed on the phone. “It’s Maureen!”

She need say no more.

Hasty arrangements were made for the day's feed and herding, Ros's temping was cancelled and they talked non-stop as the four-hour drive to Gynea flew by.

Maureen was there.

Ros gazed at the baby — *her* perfect baby. Physically. Intellectually. Religiously. Racially. Both Lawry and Ros were stunned at the beauty of the child.

"She's gorgeous." This she spoke. But the inevitable thought remained.

How could anybody — ?

She scooped the infant from the bouncer, a motion the baby recognised. Ros held her tight and sighed. She passed her to Lawry whose single hand could hold the child without any over-spill.

"What a beautiful child."

"The very best for those who wait," said Maureen with a solid veneer of triumph. "You're very lucky. We nearly lost this one, Ros. Very touch and go. It was a pretty nasty adoption. Messy."

Dyson's words were like a dart to Ros's conscience. "Why? What happened?"

"Oh, don't worry. She's from good stock. The girl's family is wonderful. Catholic. Her father's very well respected. It was the boyfriend who made things a bit unsavoury. Kept interfering with the girl. Her family had to get an AVO in the end."

It was a strange tale that Ros wasn't sure she wanted to know. Lawry just tossed it off with a "humph!"

"What's her name?" Ros asked changing the subject and staring into baby-blues.

"Rebecca Ellen," said the foster-care mum.

"Lovely. Oh! But a shame it doesn't go with Decker!"

They all laughed heartily. Rebecca Decker!

Lawry laughed the loudest. "We can't have that! So what's it to be chook? Which of the three?"

"Well Andrew's definitely out!"

13

On the 15th of May, with the corpse hardly cold, Ellen finally made contact with her boyfriend.

“Punk! How are you? Are you ok?” Mitchell was simply relieved to hear her voice, but it was not the same Ellen who answered him.

“I have a job.”

“How did you get a job so quickly?”

“I don’t know! I just went to the bank and got it. I thought I was starting at the ANZ in Brookvale today, but when I arrived they said I was supposed to be at the Balgowlah branch!”

“That’s just around the corner! How about lunch? I’ll come up.”

“No! Please don’t. I’ll come to your place.”

“Brilliant!”

“Twelve-thirty.”

See ya. Love ya bulk!”

“Me too.”

At thirty seconds past the appointed time, there was bashing on the door. It continued as Mitchell casually strode to the door to open.

Ellen burst through completely out of breath and slammed the door behind her, then leapt onto him kissing and hugging so tight, squeezing for dear life and pouring tears all over his neck. It was mutual. Mitchell just rocked Ellen there in the hallway for the entire hour. They didn’t speak. They hardly breathed. They just whimpered in utter defeat.

The next day, it was the same.

But on the third day, the time bomb went off. As the two of them stood together in the hall a car went past and slowed for the stop sign. The squeal of breaks was enough to trigger Ellen.

She pushed Mitchell away with sudden ferocity and started screaming, "It's dad! It's dad!"

"What's dad?"

"The car! Didn't you hear it? It's dad! He's come to get me! He's found out! He's followed me! I have to hide!"

"It's not your father! No one's there!"

"I have to hide! I have to be a good girl!"

Ellen shrieked around the house looking for a place to conceal herself. Mitchell was chasing her, trying to hold her so she wouldn't hurt herself, but she fought him off with a brutality he had never seen in a teenage girl before.

"I'm not here! I'm not here! Don't tell him! Let me go! I have to hide! I can't let him find me! I'm supposed to be good!"

Mitchell finally grabbed her and bear-hugged her into submission. "Ellen! Ellen! Shut up and listen! There's no one there! There's no one!"

"Yes, it's dad! He's always watching me! He knows where I am!"

"No-one's following you! He would have banged on the door by now."

"He's out there waiting for me!"

Ellen broke into a thousand pieces right there in Mitchell's arms. Slowly she reduced her cries to loud sniffles, so he released his grip. She moved ponderously towards a chair in the dining room and then, as Mitchell watched in horror, she pulled the chair out from the table and crawled under, curling up in a fetal position, arms tight around herself caressing an imaginary baby and sobbing, "Beckie. Oh, Beckie. My darling, Beckie."

Mitchell crawled under with her, but Ellen didn't even notice.

He held her as they lay there on the dining room floor. Her eyes stared off at nothing. She simply repeated her child's name in various degrees of pain for almost forty-five minutes, while Mitchell periodically kissed her face.

His hand brushed her lovely round firmness and he noticed she was still wearing a pad. "This can't be normal — is she still bleeding?"

It was twenty-past-one when she fell into silence, her eyes closed. Mitchell thought she was asleep, so he gently said, “Punk, you have to go back to work.”

Emotion-free she answered, “Yeah, I know.”

Apart from being under the table, it was as if nothing had happened. She was only just eighteen but she had visited hell. Now she was too lost to know if she had returned alive.

“Ellen, you’re not well. You know that, don’t you?”

“Oh, the bleeding?”

“Well, yes. That too.”

“I’ll get over it.”

“I’ll walk back to work with you.”

“No! Never! We can’t ever be seen!”

“Ellen, please. You’re very upset.”

“I’m fine. I just need you to check outside.”

“Ellen, there’s no one out there.”

“Please, Punk. Just go to the letter box or something and check for me.”

Mitchell obliged. No one there. Only then would she come out. She refused to show any affection as she left. It was then that he saw she was sprinting back to work. She’d been running as fast as she could down to his place each lunch time, then the same on return. She was still physically weak, but so much worse, she was losing her mind.

Two beautiful little girls lost.

They continued to have lunch each day and slowly Ellen started allowing Mitchell to walk her back to work.

Then after about ten days, she came through the door, kissed Mitchell so passionately, took his hand and pushed it under her dress. No pad.

She then walked him backwards still kissing, into his bedroom and lay herself down.

Every soul must experience a moment so balming yet simultaneously so traumatic.

But, if Mitchell had not been there he would never have believed that anywhere in the history of lovemaking, two people could cradle together in so gentle a union, yet howl so violently into each other’s face in such raw, unbridled, unashamed, piteous agony.

Humanity was not created for this.

§

It was still another full month before they started dating, always with Julia as Ellen's excuse to go out. She was still very wary of showing affection in public, even just holding hands was difficult for her, but Mitchell was forcing her to slowly realise that she need not fear being spied on by her father. Her work colleagues were not writing notes on her when Mitchell turned up to her counter. Vagrants didn't have secret cameras under their jackets. Shopkeepers in Balgowlah Totem weren't phoning her home every time she walked past with her boyfriend.

The trauma was obvious to Mitch but she was an android to everyone else.

Periodically, Ellen would look at Mitchell's face and see her baby being taken away. She'd break down completely, then just as quickly return to ice.

But the sneaking around was getting to her. It was inevitable. And one morning as he was staring at her photo per usual, Mitchell heard the postman's whistle blow. Knowing fully what was inside, he opened the small envelope and read Ellen's uncomplicated school-girl script.

Dear Punk,

When we first got together you said to me that if ever there was something too hard to say, to write it down in a letter and send it to you. So that is what I am doing now.

I have never told anyone this but when you first kissed me under the tree I was very timid. I was so shy about you coming into my life. I lived in my own little world and never let anyone in.

But then you were so gentle, with your silly words and your baby-talk and you opened me up. So slowly I let you in.

Every day with you was wonderful.

But then of course, disaster. When I lost Rebecca, my world fell apart.

Mitty, I want you to know that I love you and I will never forget you.

But I can't cope with this secrecy anymore. I have to be a good girl.

So last night I told my parents that I have been seeing you.

They were very angry and said that I had to decide right then and there on the spot whether to pack my things and leave, never to see them again, or whether to stay.

With all that has happened, with all that I have lost, I couldn't stand to lose my family as well.

I am so sorry Punk, but I cannot see you anymore.

Please try and understand. Please don't cry. Time will heal the pain.

Goodbye.

With every ounce of my love forever yours,

Ellen.

Letter in hand, Mitchell ran to the bank and went to her counter. She was mortified.

“You can't come here!”

“I had to. Ellen, have lunch with me today.”

She was hyperventilating. “Ok. twelve-thirty out the back.”

In a way Mitchell was pleasantly surprised she kept the appointment. He had rehearsed all morning.

“Ellen I love you and I know you love me. We can't let them destroy us. So this is what I'm going to do. I'm sure our love can stand a separation. I'll wait for you as long as it takes.

“For the next couple of years, I'll be here for you. I'll send you a rose on the tenth of every month — our anniversary. We can have lunch together every now and then. And on your twentieth birthday, I'll buy you another engagement ring. A big one with a huge diamond this time, and we'll have proven our love to everyone, so that no one can stop us.”

Ellen listened intently to every word, smiled broadly, but said nothing. She liked the plan but couldn't see its end. Her twentieth seemed so far away.

Mitchell returned home and took out his diary marking the tenth of every month. It had a two-year calendar on the inside cover so he placed a huge red circle and red arrows around 14 March 1982.

The following week he won the State A-Grade squash final, so he met Ellen for lunch and gave her the trophy — a delicate silver cutlery set.

A few more weeks and they lunched again, and to Mitchell's utter dismay, Ellen had cut off all her hair. Her beautiful, precious auburn, gone.

“What did you do that for?”

“Just wanted to do something new.”

"I hate it! You look ridiculous."

Her head had suddenly and completely changed shape, from her gorgeous, youthful, roundness to a Frankensteinian square. But Mitchell's opinion no longer mattered, since with every clump of hair that floated to the hairdresser's floor, so Ellen had cut off every part of her personality which Mitchell loved.

Now Ellen could only converse in small talk. "Dad sold the Merc and bought two Datsun Sunnys! One for me! Dad and I drive identical cars now! Great, eh?"

Some trade-off, Mitch thought. "Your dad's a real hero, Els."

"And he's going to buy a racehorse, if the priest says it's ok."

The conversation ground to an awful halt. All this talk of her father raised a frighteningly difficult question. They sat in awkward silence like never before as Mitchell summoned the words.

"Ellen, I have to ask you. How did you ever sign that consent? What changed your mind? Was it the pressure from your father?"

"Oh, no," she answered whimsically, "it was you. When you said you were going to leave me."

"Ellen! I never said I was going to leave you!"

"Yes, you did. I asked you if you would always be there and you said you might not be!" She actually laughed nervously and shrugged with an off-hand pseudo-disbelief.

Her words were like an unceremonial stoning. "Ellen! Oh, Ellen, no!" Mitchell hung his head in his hands. "I didn't mean I was going to leave you. I was talking about if I died or had an accident and became a vegetable or something."

She showed no reaction whatsoever. She was happy for Mitchell to carry the blame, so he had to challenge it.

"Ellen, I bought you an engagement ring. I risked gaol every night to come to your window. I could have been murdered coming to see you and Beck in the hospital. I put together the baby's room. What are you talking about, saying I was going to leave you? How could you think that?"

"I asked you, and that's what you said. And I knew I couldn't do it without you."

Ellen had now become an android with Mitchell, too.

Mitchell couldn't stand his own company moping around the house, so he contacted the Sydney City Mission and offered to volunteer. Anything to get out of this self-pity. Perhaps attending to someone else's tragedy would take his mind off his own.

They sent him to the Youth Crisis Centre at Kings Cross, where two nights every week, sometimes three, Mitchell would ladle out soup or chat to nodding barbiturate addicts.

Then one week fat jolly Jenny and her intended Trevor asked him, "Why don't you come to church with us this weekend?"

Mitchell could think of a thousand reasons but none of them repeatable so he said "Ok" under duress.

It turned out to be Father's Day. And to celebrate, the church was having a "baby dedication", whatever that was.

This perfect anonymous couple stood at the front with their perfect five month old baby, all smiling their perfect grins and then the preacher said the perfect words for Father's Day in church. "All the fathers here this morning! Put your hand up! Give us a wave!"

Mitchell wanted so desperately to put his hand in the air and shout, "Yeah I'm a dad, but someone stole my baby" but he figured it wasn't the done thing on a first visit to someone else's church.

So he just sat there with perfect Father's Day tears running down his face.

Jenny nudged him in the ribs and said enthusiastically, "You're a father! Put your hand up!"

Mitchell just turned his face to hers and she sucked in a sudden breath. He clasped his hands in his lap and just stared at them. Jenny wrote out a note and placed it between his thumbs. *Please forgive my insensitivity.*

"Don't worry about it. I have to go."

Mitchell walked out, kept his back to the hall and stood on the step making a vow.

"Never again. Never again will I allow myself to cry on Father's Day. I will NOT let it happen, ever again."

It was a vow he was able to keep for eighteen years.

As for Mr "Raise Your Hands In the Air", six years later in that very hall he would conduct Mitchell's wedding.

A few weeks on and Ellen and Mitch lunched again. He gave her an invitation to his twenty-first birthday.

“See if you can go for a Sunday drive and come to the party. I put it on in the afternoon especially so you could be there.”

“I’ll think about it.”

On the day Mitchell sat there pretending to be happy, but inside he was miserable without her. He kept leaving the guests and wandering to the front gate to watch for her, but all in vain.

On the Christmas morning of 1980 he drove to Ellen’s house and left gifts in the name of Santa. No returns.

Early in 1981, Ellen went on a cruise on the *Fairstar*. The *Fairstar*! Mitch thought. With its reputation! What’s going on inside her head?

Mitchell heard she was dating Alana’s boyfriend Tony, but Alana didn’t know. This was not Ellen. Not the real Ellen. The loyal, charming, committed treasure who Mitchell had dated for almost two years. Where had she gone?

Ellen started part time uni: library studies. She quit after about three weeks.

Then one day during mid-1981 Ellen called him. “Mitty I have to see you. Lunch today. Our bench in Totem.”

When Mitch saw her she ran across the shopping centre at him and flung her arms around him crying, “Oh Mitty, I love you! I love you so much! I need you! Don’t ever leave me!”

Fantastic! he thought. It’s all on again. He was so happy.

It lasted about three meetings, then she was colder than ice again.

Throughout 1981 this happened about four times. On again, off again. She was stuffing Mitchell’s head around in shovel loads, but he was content to be always the one she turned to when others had apparently used her then finished with her.

But around August her moments of “on again” just stopped. Mitchell continued to send her roses and cards, poems and songs, but she was Miss Frigid 1981.

In December he took her for a spin in his new sports car, down to a nearby park. She loved the car. “Mitty this is you. This is much more you than that old Holden.”

“And it’s you, too, Els. I would be so proud to be driving you around in it.”

And he kissed her — or tried to. She pushed him away. Mitchell tried to hug her but she wouldn’t have it.

“I have to go back to the bank.”

“Let me drive you.”

“No! I have to walk. My legs have gone all wobbly.”

And with that she threw open the door and fled across the park, taking a hanky out of her pocket as she ran.

In early January Mitchell saw her again for lunch and it seemed she just said this name over and over again. “Richard and I did this. Richard and I did that. Richard and I went grass-skiing at Kensington. Richard and I went to the George Benson concert. Richard and I! Richard and I! Richard and I!”

To this day, every time Mitchell hears Benson’s “On Broadway” he wants to vomit.

How could this bank accountant Richard Hero-God-Almighty, possibly be this interesting?

Mitch was cool as a reptile on the outside but underneath he was raging with jealousy, but she just couldn’t see, or didn’t care, what she was doing to him.

Finally, Mitchell let his distaste show, with a suitably caustic question.

“So is Richard as good in bed as I was?”

Ellen looked Mitchell straight in the eye without flinching and said, “I wouldn’t know.”

“Ellen, I know you. And if you’re not careful you’re going to get pregnant again and you’ll be facing all that shit all over. Please be careful.”

Mitch was really thinking, “Ellen please don’t sleep with him! It’ll be the end of us.” He wasn’t being noble. They were only a couple of months from her twentieth birthday.

She was obviously getting serious, so it had to be said.

“Ellen,” Mitch was almost whispering. “Do you want your bracelet back?”

She hardly hesitated. “Yes, Mitty. I do.”

This wasn’t the way he had ever imagined her saying, “I do.”

Mitchell took the chain off his wrist and placed it in her hand. He felt naked without it. He’d worn it constantly for three years. It had become part of his flesh.

He hung his face in his hands as was his habit, and Ellen left without a word.

Mitchell sat there on the bench listening. And he could hear the pins going down in the alleys downstairs. It had started and finished in the same place. There Mitchell sat above the Totem Bowling Alley where Ellen and he had had their first date almost four years earlier.

As he walked home Mitchell stopped and looked in the door at the bowlers. "I miss her so much already," he said to a passing stray canine.

The next day they met again and Mitchell gave Ellen back all her photos, her letters, her gifts. He just couldn't stand to have them around the house anymore.

She handed him the State Championship cutlery set.

"Els, I won it for you. You keep it. I don't want it."

"Please take it back, Mitty."

She placed it on his lap. "I don't want it" and he threw it in the bin.

She took it out and more tenderly than she had been for nearly two years she said, "Please. Please take it, Punk."

"God! I wish you hadn't called me that". And Mitchell flung the trophy on the ground, fracturing all the pieces inside.

Ellen took it with her.

Mitch decided to leave her alone. Maybe this new relationship would blow over. "We should keep in touch" was what she said as she left that day and he wanted so much to believe her.

By August 1982 Mitchell had had enough waiting so he called the bank.

"Could I speak to Ellen Walsh please?"

"I'm sorry. Ellen doesn't work here anymore."

"Can you tell me where she's gone?"

"Ellen's on maternity leave."

Mitchell fainted but forgot to fall down.

He shook his head then jumped into his car and sped off to the Headland. What the hell's going on? he thought. Has the same thing happened again and this time she's kept the baby? I don't care whose kid it is! I'll marry you and look after you.

Mitch arrived at the house and looked in Ellen's room. His birthday clown was gone. The curtains were different. All the furniture moved around. She was clearly not living there anymore.

That night he phoned Julia.

“Julia, Mitchell here. Is Ellen married?”

There was some hesitation. “Yes Mitch. She is.”

She told him the story. It seemed Ellen had made good her threats to her mother as Rebecca entered the world. Ellen never repeated the words, but she’d followed through in the most powerful of statements: seven-months pregnant when she married in May at St Keiran's on Condamine Street, Manly Vale. Mitchell realised, she must have known in January. “She just lied in my face.” He was amazed at her effrontery.

Her father had gone berserk again, but this time Ellen had planned it meticulously to her advantage. Lionel had no real choice but to abandon his idealism of Ellen and stooped in resignation, walking his obviously expectant daughter down the aisle. What delicious shame she injected into her father’s veins that day, in front of his entire parish. In retaliation, Lionel refused to attend the reception and forbade Lynette the privilege. Julia was a bridesmaid, and Ellen wore pink.

“Is Richard a nice guy?”

“He’s ok. He’s very quiet.”

She had always just wanted the quiet life.

“And what did Ellen have?”

“She had a baby girl, Mitch.”

Mitchell was genuinely happy for her.

“What did they name her?”

“Anna-lee.”

He was so glad they hadn’t named her Rebecca. There was only one Rebecca. There IS only one Rebecca.

But Anna-lee was Rebecca’s echo.

As Julia spoke, Mitchell couldn’t help thinking about the final scene in *The Graduate* — the film Ellen and he went to see at Macquarie Uni the night they gave each other their virginities. Dustin Hoffman gate-crashes his girlfriend’s wedding to steal the bride. And the Oscar for best use of a crucifix in a fight scene goes to ...

Perhaps Ellen had thought of that too and that’s why she didn’t tell me, Mitchell mused.

A couple of Sundays later, Mitchell was driving up Condamine Street on his way home from early morning touch football, when he nearly wrapped the car around a telegraph pole. Across the road was Ellen walking to the church.

He spread rubber all over three lanes, threw the car across the median strip and drag-raced up to St Keiran's.

Ellen had recognised the car and quick-marched into the congregation.

Mitch drove up the first two steps of the church sending parishioners diving for cover, leapt out leaving the door open and the keys in the ignition, then ran the steps about four at a time.

He was covered in mud and sweat and dirt in his boots much to the tykes' disgust. Mitchell loved it. A hapless deacon offered him a prayer book but Mitch figured he'd seen enough of those for one lifetime.

Right under the apex of the church roof Ellen was just taking her seat and pulling out her crochet hooks.

Mitchell jogged down the aisle leaving a muddy trail, slid up the pew on his butt and like Sylvester's "Hello breakfast" to Tweety, said, "Howdy Punk."

She just stared straight ahead. "Hello."

"You recognised the car didn't you?"

"I thought it might have been you."

Mitchell forced a smile at her. "Ellen I just want you to know I'm really happy for you. I hope you'll always be happy. I hope he always treats you well. After all you've been through, you deserve the very, very best life."

She smiled shyly, not at Mitch but with him.

"Just wish you'd told me, that's all. It was a little hard to take finding out that way." Her smile waned a little, just the same as that day in the car when he'd found out she was carrying Beckie.

"Ellen, I just want you to know something. You were wrong. Time will never heal anything. You are part of me even though you're no longer mine. Even if I never see you again, you'll always be the most important person to ever cross my path in this journey of life. You gave birth to my first child and that makes you so special. I'll never get you out of my system, Punk. I'll get on but I'll always regret not growing old with you, and I'll always have only good thoughts for you."

She didn't respond, so Mitchell looked around at this scene. He had always figured they'd be cementing their relationship in a Catholic Church, but here they were saying farewell.

For a few seconds he just stared at her soft freckly face wishing so much to kiss it.

She was still just a little red-headed girl, and to Mitchell, she was still a little red-headed girl's mum.

But now she was someone else's wife.

“Goodbye, Punk.”

“Goodbye, Punk.”

And every April 3rd, Ellen Stenner bakes a cake.

She lights a candle.

Then she blows it out, watching the skinny wisp of smoke rise to the ceiling, and she meditates on this vapour, this relic.

What might have been.

§

As for Mitchell, he quit his beloved squash, university and left home, all in quick succession that year.

He could no longer concentrate on anything. He was always the life of the party, an over-compensation for the depths of depression inside. He no longer had time for people or their problems and he lost all ambition. Without his child and his soulmate what was the point? It would be April 3rd 1990 before Mitchell forced himself to snap out of it: “One day I am going to meet a little red-haired girl. I have to become worthy of the honour.”

There was one communication from the Walsh family — a Chatswood squash junior came back from comp at Queenscliff with a message from Peter Walsh: he was going to find Mitchell one day and beat his head in.

Like father like son, Mitchell thought with glorious irony. I only hope he finishes the job off.

In 1983, The Moody Blues released the song “I Know You're Out There Somewhere”, Mitchell was convinced, just to haunt him. “Yes, my little girl. I know you're out there somewhere. And somehow I will return again to you.”

In 1986, a remarkable young lady named Angelique Tambay performed a feat so daring, so death-defying, so terrifying, that it had never before been attempted in the history of the world — she walked the aisle to the strains of the Berlin Philharmonic's rendition of Bach's "A Mighty Fortress is Our God", augmented by whispers of "poup'ee! poup'ee!" from her family, and she married a Sydney cab driver named Mitchell Hearn.

Part of the package with Angelique were two wonderful in-laws. Somehow that was very important to Mitch.

Angelique and Mitchell made three prenuptial agreements:

1. That they would always treat each other like the king and queen.
2. That the word divorce would never be spoken in their home.
3. That the tragedy of Rebecca Ellen Walsh would be acknowledged, but Mitchell was never to make it the focus of any artistic, legal or career pursuits.

Well as far as marriages go, two out of three ain't bad!

§

And if you were born five years either side of 1980 ...

And you live in Sydney ...

And you're a red-haired female ...

Then it can be guaranteed that at least once over the years, Mitchell Hearn has explored every freckle on your face.

All surrendering mothers know what that means.

Not a day went by, Beckie. Not a day went by.

Part 2

And you know it don't come easy

14

Mitchell stood next to the fax machine watching the page roll out.

First, the date: *29th October 1996*. Then the fax ID: *2MH-Creative*. Followed by the coat of arms for the Minister for Community Services.

When are these morons going to get it right? Mitchell thought. Why do they keep sending news faxes to the Creative Department? Typical parliamentary staff.

But, as the press release headline eked its way from the printer, it quickly arrested his full attention.

Adoption changes allow better information exchanges.

It had been a long time since Mitchell had used the "A" word.

As he read the release, it became clear that adopted children could now access information at age sixteen.

And one other line leapt off the page.

Birth parents will be able to receive information relating to the health and well being of their adopted child while the child is still under eighteen."

All he wanted to know was if she was alive and ok.

Mitchell closed the office door and looked up St Mary of Dolleurs in the phone book.

"I've just received this fax from the Minister which says I can have information even before my daughter is eighteen."

“Oh, not if you’re a father. We don’t know anything about it. Did you sign the consent? Are you on the birth certificate?”

They were not helpful.

He rang the Community Services Department.

“Oh, yes. Well, you’ll have to talk to the Family Information Service.”

He rang the Family Information Service.

“Oh, no, you’ll have to talk to the Adoption Services Branch.

He rang the Adoption Services Branch, was put on hold for ten minutes then told, “You’ll have to find out if you’re on the birth certificate. Phone the adoption agency. They’ll know.”

Back to the adoption agency. “No. No. You better phone the Births, Deaths and Marriages Registry to find out.”

He did.

“You’ll have to speak to our adoptions branch. Here’s the number.”

Dialled again.

“You have reached the Births, Deaths and Marriages Registry, adoptions information branch. Your call is important to us. Please leave your name and number.”

After two hours in a telephone labyrinth, Mitchell had gone nowhere, and now sales reps were screaming for their copy.

He did some actual work for a couple of hours and then ripped into it again. First call: Births, Deaths and Marriages.

“All I want to know is if I’m on the birth certificate?”

Keep it simple, Mitchell thought. Don’t confuse them with two questions at once.

He gave the details to someone who was actually helpful and the next day she rang back.

“No, I’m sorry Mr Hearn. You’re not on Rebecca’s original birth certificate.”

“But that’s preposterous! There was never any doubt I was the father and I saw my name on plenty of forms.”

“But, because you didn’t sign the consent, you’re not acknowledged as the father.”

“How stupid is that! Because I wanted to be the father to the child, I’m not acknowledged as the father.”

“That’s the practice.”

“So how do I get access to information about my daughter?”

“Well, you have to be put on the birth certificate.”

“And how do I do that?”

She gave Mitch a whole list of things to do, a whole list of departments and branches to ring and a whole list of pieces of paper he had to collect.

One of them was a signed statutory declaration from Ellen.

“But that’s not right,” Mitchell protested. “She’s gone on and made a quiet life for herself. She doesn’t want me poking my head back into it and forcing her to revisit all that pain.”

“There’s no other way, Mr Hearn.”

Fortunately Mitchell had quietly kept track of Ellen through the years as Richard had bounced her (and their five girls) from town to town, moving from one country bank posting to another.

He pulled out his address book and turned to the over-scribbled “S” page. So many changes of address.

He dialed the Imperial Bank Jindabyne. “Could I speak to Richard Stenner, please?”

A moment, a terrifyingly long moment, then, “Richard Stenner speaking.”

“Richard, my name is Mitchell Hearn. Do you remember me?”

“No, I’m sorry I don’t.”

This was hard. And surely unnecessary. Obviously Mitchell, Rebecca and the entire 1980 incident had been the great unmentionable in the Stenner household. Mitchell knew that if Ellen had telephoned his wife and identified herself, Angelique would know exactly who Ellen was.

But Richard didn’t remember the name, so Mitchell had to go through the decidedly unpleasant tedium of explaining.

“I was Ellen’s boyfriend before she married you.”

Silence. Did he even know about all this? Why does the system force these things? It is unmerciful to those it is supposed to protect.

“I assume she told you what happened to us?”

Mitchell figured with the circumstances surrounding Ellen and Richard’s marriage, Rebecca’s birth had to have come out.

“Yes.”

“Look, I am really sorry to have to ask you this, but it seems that I was never put on the birth certificate and I need Ellen to acknowledge that I was the father.”

Silence again. Then, “How did you find us?”

“I knew you worked for the bank, so I rang head office and they told me.”

More silence. Then real pain. “Why do you want to go dredging all this up now? After all these years! Why can’t you just forget about it and leave us alone?”

“Well, Richard, it’s just not that simple. The rules have changed and that means that our daughter can access information about us all even now, before she’s eighteen. Now, that birth certificate is going to have the Walshs’ address on it and a space marked ‘Father Unknown’. I don’t want our daughter looking for answers to her past, turning up and getting the treatment from Lionel.”

Mitch was sure Richard could relate to that.

“Please believe me, Richard. I have no interest in stepping back into Ellen’s life, but the system is forcing me to do this. Now, we can do it the nice way, meaning I send you the documents, Ellen signs them, end of story. Or we can do this the nasty way, which means I drive down to Jindabyne, follow you home one night and get the bloody papers signed that way. Which would you prefer?”

Richard Stenner went home that night and told his wife, “I had a phone call today.”

§

It took four months of telephone-tennis with various departments, so much to-ing and fro-ing between Ellen and Births, Deaths and Marriages, dozens of little fees to pay (\$30 here, \$60 there) but finally in February 1997 Rebecca’s original birth certificate arrived, with Mitchell’s name on it.

Despite all that had happened, Mitchell was very proud. But still he thought, if this is what it takes just to get my bloody name in the records, what’s it going to take to find her?

He opened the orange OHMS envelope and had his first clue to what had really happened all those years before.

Mitchell’s name was there but Ellen’s wasn’t!

“Who the bloody hell is ‘Therese Mary Walsh’?” he said out loud.

“How should I know,” replied Angelique.

“Look at this, Ange! It's Rebecca's birth certificate but it doesn't even have Ellen's name right! Why would Ellen get her own name wrong? Why would she use these names? She hated her middle names! And she loved her first name! Who the hell filled out all these forms? It couldn't have been her!”

Mitchell continued to wonder as he went down stairs to the study and stuffed the certificate into his now bulging “Adoption File.”

Why? Why? Why was her name not right? Who filled out those forms and why did they do it incorrectly? Think it through, Mitch.

Only the Catholic names were used. So the forms were completed by Catholic zealots. That's one possibility.

Since Ellen's name is incorrect, it would make her almost impossible to trace, especially once she was married. A total break — no chance of future problems. That's another possibility.

Or maybe the person to whom the name “Ellen” meant so much, didn't want that name tangled up in this scandal.

All three possibilities pointed to one firm conclusion: that Ellen had not filled out the forms: her mother did, under instructions from Lionel N. Walsh.

Was that legal?

Closing the filing cabinet, Mitchell turned and pondered his ‘Rebecca Wall.’ Entering the media in 1991 he'd determined to fill this wall with awards before he went looking for her. He'd been amazed at how quickly he'd done it — a bronze in New York, a Best of Category the following year. Twice-voted Australia's Best Radio Station Creative. Mitchell had been as surprised as anyone; he'd actually found something he was good at. Thirty second commercials suited his short concentration span to a “T”. And every plaque, every medal, every citation dedicated to Beckie, so she could be proud of her heritage when she found it.

Angelique could never understand why Mitchell was so obsessed with awards. He never told her the name he had given to this once blank brick wall.

Now Mitchell had another piece of paper with his name on it.

It was the key to unlock the door to a search, and a most unsavoury mystery.

15

“Sharon Tilley’s your case worker, Mr Hearn. I’ll put you through.”

Pause for chimes.

“Sharon Tilley.”

“It’s Mitchell Hearn here, Sharon. I called you some months ago about getting access to information.”

“Well, you’ll have to get your name on the birth certificate.”

“I’m on the birth certificate now.”

“Ok. Have you got the amended birth certificate?”

“Can I get that yet?”

“When’s your child turn eighteen?”

“April 1998.”

“Well, we can’t give you information until your child turns eighteen.”

“I have this fax from the Department of Community Services which says I can get non-identifying information before she’s eighteen.”

“No, you’re wrong, dear. You’ll have to wait until the eighteenth birthday.”

“Look, it’s very upsetting for me going over all this. Now this fax says, and I have it in front of me, it’s quite clear, that I can get non-identifying information before she’s eighteen, and then identifying information after she’s eighteen.”

“No, that’s definitely not right. Look, I’ll check it out with Community Services for you and phone you back, ok?”

Mitchell waited two months.

Eventually, he had to call.

“Could I speak to Sharon Tilley please?”

Chimes.

“Mitchell! How are you? What can I do for you?”

“You were going to check if I can get non-identifying information before Rebecca turns eighteen.”

“Oh, yes, that's right. Look, I'll phone Family Information and get back to you.”

Mitchell waited two weeks then rang Family Information himself.

“You can get information if you're an acknowledged birth-father.”

“What does that mean?”

“Well, were you put on the birth certificate at the time of the adoption?”

“No, but I — ”

“Well, you'll have to get yourself put on the birth certificate then.”

“I've done that.”

“So you are an acknowledged birth-father then?”

“Yes, if that means I'm on the birth certificate.”

“Why did you say you weren't?”

“I didn't say I wasn't. I said I wasn't put on the birth certificate at the time of the adoption!”

“Well, you *are* an acknowledged birth-father so you can get some information.”

“Like what?”

“Non-identifying prescribed information.”

“Which is?”

“Oh, it's all listed in the regulation.”

“Look, all I want to know is if my daughter is alive and well.”

“Well, we couldn't tell you that.”

“So who can?”

“You'd have to talk to the agency. Do you know who the agency was?”

Bloody hell! Back to the agency.

“Look, Sharon. I spoke to Family Services and — ”

“Mitchell!” she said with her preschool teacher tone. “I said I was going to do that!”

“I’ve been waiting two weeks.”

“These things take time. I’m only part-time here, Mitchell.”

“Anyway, I checked and they said I am entitled to non-identifying prescribed information, so what does that mean?”

“I’ll have to check it out.”

“Look, all I want to know is if my daughter is alive or dead.”

“Well, we couldn’t tell you that. We’ve had no contact with them since the adoption. You can only do a search with Births Deaths and Marriages once she’s turned eighteen.”

“Then what’s this information you *can* give me? This non-identifying prescribed information?”

“I’ll have to check that out. All our information is sent to other agencies.”

“Like?”

“Well, you could try the Family Information Service, the Adoption Information Branch, Freedom of Information, Births Deaths and Marriages, and Community Services.”

“And you don’t have this non-identifying prescribed information?”

“I’d have to check. I can’t think of anything we’d hold that we could possibly give you.”

And so it went on for a full twelve months.

Come February 1998 and Mitchell had familiarised himself with all the adoption “lingo”, so he could now understand the gibberish that the agency and others spoke. It was one small advantage to being flicked from one corner of the adoption industry to another.

He rang Sharon Tilley one more time.

“Look, her eighteenth birthday is getting close and I was wondering if you could make contact with the adoptive family to see if they’re ok with receiving a letter.”

“We do sometimes do advanced contacts, but the last contact we had with them was in 1992. They might have moved since.”

Previously you said you’d had no contact since 1980, Mitchell thought.

“May I ask what that contact was in relation to?” he probed, hoping for a tiny morsel of information.

“It’s confidential,” Sharon answered.

This was no longer professional counseling. It was manipulative torture. Mitchell became determined she wasn't going to win.

"Was that contact to do with Rebecca?"

"It was to do with another adoption."

"Oh! They have two adopted children do they?"

"Yes."

Finally, a straight answer, something concrete.

Mitchell quickly assimilated the morsel in his mind. Must have an older sibling who contacted a natural parent, he thought. Well that's a good sign. Shows they're open.

"They did well to get two children. They nearly didn't get Rebecca," he said.

"Mmm."

"Yeah. I was trying to get my mum to adopt her actually."

"Oh, you didn't have to do that. She was your child!"

"What? Are you saying I could have adopted my own child?"

"No, you didn't have to adopt her at all! She was your daughter!"

Mitchell was absolutely stunned.

Sharon suddenly realised what she had said, and pulled out her standard. "I'm not sure. I'd have to check it out."

But it was too late.

She'd dropped the clanger and there was no taking it back.

The handle had been cranked.

§

The first week in March, Mitchell started a new job at New South Wales Parliament House. He'd grown bored with radio creative and needed a new challenge, although he didn't want to leave the media entirely.

So somehow Mitchell organised the most bizarre work arrangement: two-and-a-half days a week speech writing and researching at parliament, two-and-a-half days freelancing at 2MH.

At the time, the move was just a search for a new direction. Mitchell didn't realise just how significant it would be to his "other" search.

In early March, Mitchell also received a letter from St Mary of Dolleurs. Good news, he thought when he saw the crest on the envelope.

However, when he opened it –

Dear Mr Hearn,

Recently you accessed our counseling service and made some requests re: information and other services in respect of a possible reunion with your adopted child.

These services are provided free of charge.

However the cost to St Mary of Dolleurs in administering these services on your behalf will be around sixty dollars per service.

Any donation from you towards offsetting these costs would be appreciated, since St Mary of Dolleurs is a non-profit organisation.

Mitchell thought they had some audacity, but figured that (a) the reason he had possibly not been well served by them in the past year was because he was "unfinancial" and (b) he was going to need their help to find Beckie and get information, so keeping them happy with a "donation" should surely help his cause — a case of "before your coin hits the box your sins are forgiven."

Mitchell wrote out a cheque, he hoped, to appease the agency and be in line for a few favours. But how wrong he was.

§

It was the last week in March, and Parliament House had been at him to take a tour of the library.

Most people do that on their first day but Mitchell had been too busy. Finally on 28 March he took the tour.

"And over here we have all our Parliamentary Hansard Records, and over here are the fiche files, over there is government legislation, over here we have all the electoral rolls and over here –"

Mitchell's eyes dropped out of his head. The electoral rolls! The bloody electoral rolls were right under his feet! He stayed there to genuflect at these most hallowed of papers, while the tour moved on.

Mitchell stood with his back to the legal section of the library, a position he would not hold for long.

§

Eighteen years is a long time to wait.

Eight o'clock in the morning of Friday 3 April 1998, Mitchell had his nose pressed against the sliding doors of Births Deaths and Marriages. Forms in hand. Signed. Rebecca's original birth certificate carefully stored in its plastic keeper.

The doors opened and he was racing. Handed his papers proudly to the teller. Mitch had sixty dollars and change in his wallet — Sharon had told him it would be thirty-five dollars so he should have plenty.

No one had mentioned ID but he'd brought all he had to be on the safe side.

"Everything seems to be here, Mr Hearn. All I need is three forms of ID."

He pulled out his driver's licence. Fine.

His birth certificate. Fine.

He pulled out his passport.

"I'm sorry. This has expired. We can't accept it."

"But it's a photo ID. You can see it's me!"

"Sorry."

He pulled out his Parliament House photo ID.

"Sorry."

"Do you know what sort of security checks you have to go through to get one of these?" Mitchell argued. "It's government-issued! You must be able to accept that!"

Blank faced. "Sorry."

Mitchell flicked through his wallet. Medicare card, Media Alliance membership card, McHappy Breakfast card? He was growing frantic! After eighteen excruciating years, Mitchell wasn't going to walk out of that office without putting the wheels in motion.

“What's that?” she asked.

“What?”

“That! In the front of your wallet?”

“It's a concession travel pass.” He'd become eligible since he was now freelancing and not in full-time employment.

“We can accept that.”

He couldn't believe it! All the photo IDs he had, all the government issue cards he had — but Mitchell wasn't going to argue.

He waited while it was all being processed.

“Well, Mr Hearn, normally it's one-hundred and twenty dollars — ”

Mitchell freaked!

“ ... but since you have the concession card it'll be sixty-five dollars.”

He frantically started praying silently, Oh my God! Please please please! he begged the Almighty. Not the most eloquent supplication in the world but it seemed to work as he poured his change onto the counter.

Sixty dollars in notes. Six-fifty in change. Someone up there was looking after him.

Mitch even had enough to buy a celebratory chocolate on the way out!

When he arrived home that afternoon, he noticed the avocado tree, planted when he and Angelique moved in eight years earlier, was bearing its first fruit.

§

On Friday 17 April at six-thirty in the evening, Mitchell walked up the stairs to the kitchen where the daily mail always sat patiently waiting for his return home.

Another big orange OHMS envelope.

As usual, Caleb and Jessica were prancing around his knees asking questions, recounting exciting moments from school and preschool, competing to tell all about Babar's latest adventure. Mitch kissed Angelique and she watched him open the envelope.

"I wanted to open it all day, but I knew I had to leave it for you."

He had to act calmly because the kids were so excited that dad was home for the weekend, but internally, he was going berserk.

The blue form slid easily out of its orange captor.

And Mitchell drank in a name: *Decker. Annalee Julie.*

He stared at it, and meditated on it. A name. I have a name, he kept thinking.

It took only split seconds to assimilate so much information. How marvelous is the working of the human mind.

He realised with a jolt, My God! She has the same name as Ellen and Richard's daughter!

Then disappointment. No "Rebecca". Not even as a second name. That's a shame.

Then came anger. What's this Oberon stuff? And a cattle grazier! They said they would find someone like me and Els, he griped to himself. He racked his brain, trying to think of the common link between the northern beaches of Sydney and a mid-western cattle farm. The agency's lackadaisical approach to placements was stark.

Then at the bottom of the page: *Lawrence and Roslyn Decker. Married 1968. Jindabyne.*

This is freaky! Mitchell thought. Her adoptive family lives in the same town as Ellen! They probably all know each other!

One piece of paper, about five seconds of reading and Mitchell could see amazing coincidences, heavy disappointments, and agency lies. But through it all his face didn't crack, for sake of the kids.

There was another slip of paper, probably more important than the birth certificate. Other than the name on top of the blue page, this second slip of paper held possibly the most beautiful words Mitchell had ever read.

"Your certificate is not subject to a contact veto."

The door was open — wide open. After eighteen years I'm finally getting a break in all this, Mitch smiled. Hallelujah!

He returned the certificate into the orange envelope and put it into his briefcase in readiness for Monday. Parliament House library.

It was going to be a very long weekend.

16

By ten o'clock Monday, Mitchell had dozens of names, addresses, phone and mobile numbers, and business names.

He cleared all the electoral and telephone directories off the library floor and marched his information back upstairs.

It had been fortunate that Roslyn's maiden name had such an unusual spelling so Mitchell was able to quickly find a multitude of probable relatives in Jindabyne.

He faxed the list to Sharon with a request to contact one of the most probable relatives to make sure the Lawry and Ros Decker he'd found were the right ones, then followed up with a phone call.

"Sharon's on holidays for two weeks. You'll have to wait 'til she comes back."

"Look, all I want is for someone to make a twenty-second phone call!"

"I'm sorry. Sharon's your case worker. She'll have to deal with it."

Mitchell slammed the phone down, and sat there staring at the list.

"Should I dare?"

He dared. Well, a bit. He rang the first name on the list.

"Beverley speaking."

"Beverley, my name is Mitchell Hearn. I'm a New South Wales Parliamentary Research Officer for the Legislative Council. I was making enquiries regarding a Roslyn and Lawrence Decker. Are they relatives of yours?"

"Yes. Ros is my niece."

“Are they the same Roslyn and Lawrence Decker who own the service station in Main Street Oberon, and formerly of Townwilliam cattle property?”

“Yes. That’s them. May I ask what this is about?”

“I’m making enquiries regarding the adoption of their daughter, Annalee.”

“Oh yes. She turned eighteen just the other week. Yes.”

“I was just wanting to confirm that we had the right people.”

“Oh yes, that’s them.”

“Thank you for your help, Beverley.”

“My pleasure.”

Mitchell hung the phone up and turned to a workmate in the room. “There! That wasn’t so hard, was it? It took fifteen seconds. Why do these agencies employ such obstructive cretins?”

Mitch put his anger at the agency aside, sat there heavy breathing and let this reality hit him.

She’s alive!

He’d never known before that moment. Now he knew. She really was out there somewhere, just like the song said. She existed. Mitchell couldn’t get over it. “She’s actually alive!”

He looked at his list again. He had her address, her phone number, everything. He could pick up that phone and probably talk to her, this very minute!

He had to walk away and think.

Mitchell spent all day in meetings — well his body did! His brain absented itself.

He went home that night and said nothing to Angelique. She had just about had enough of this already. She just wanted her husband back on Planet Earth. All he ever talked about was Rebecca, Annalee, and God forbid if she heard the name again, Ellen Therese bloody Walsh!

Next day Mitch was at 2MH, so he found an empty office and dialed.

“Beverley speaking.”

“Beverley. Mitchell Hearn here. I rang you yesterday. I’m the Parliamentary Research Officer in Sydney.”

“Yes. Yes.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t tell you the whole story yesterday. I’m actually ... I’m ... I’m Annalee Decker’s natural father.”

There was a long pause.

"You're Ann's natural father?"

"Yes. That's right. I was wondering if I could ask you a few questions. Do you have time to talk?"

"Well, yes. I was just doing the ironing. Anything to get away from doing the ironing. So you're Annie's natural father?"

"Yes, I am. And I just want to know if she's alive and well and healthy."

"Oh, yes, she certainly is. She's a real live wire, not that I've actually seen her for ten years, but my grandson sees her. They hang around together a bit so I hear what she's up to."

"Look, I know I might have a few strange questions."

"Fire away, dear. You're handling it beautifully."

"Yeah, I'm quite surprised I haven't collapsed into a blubbing mess."

"Well, don't you start because I'll go to pieces!"

"Does Annalee have red hair?"

"Boy! Does she have red hair! Real fiery red. Flamey, you know?"

"And does she have a big nose or a small button nose?"

"Oh, smallish."

"What colour are her eyes?"

"Ooh, you have me there."

And so Beverley filled in a few details. The Deckers sounded nice. Cattle people until 1995 when they sold the property and bought the business in town. They seemed to have plenty of money after the property sale. The details were sketchy but one thing stood out, much to Mitchell's chagrin. They'd sent her (and her adopted brother) to boarding school. Why bother adopting kids if you're going to send them to boarding school? he thought and then checked himself. He was in no position to criticise. There was a third child. A natural-born surprise packet, a girl, still at home. How had Annalee handled that? Mitch wondered.

He asked Beverley if she knew Richard Stenner, the manager of Imperial Bank at Jindabyne. She did. Her nephews had had their property loans foreclosed by Richard. She did not have a nice word for him. "He left the bank around January last year."

Interesting, Mitchell thought. Richard and Ellen had moved from Jindabyne about a month after he had spoken to him. Maybe it was just a coincidence. You're not that important, Mitch, he

thought to himself. Either way he'd find them. There's an early federal election rumoured, he thought. I'll know where she is soon enough.

Beverley continued, "I never heard anyone in the town have a bad word for his wife. Or their children. Quite a lovely family, I've heard. In fact, some of my nephews played squash with her. I've heard she's a lovely lady."

"She certainly is," Mitch told her, "she's Annalee's natural mother!"

"Well, isn't that amazing!" she exclaimed. "All this time! If only we'd known! Ros and Lawry often used to say they wished they'd been able to have some contact with her, and she was so close all the time! Hah!"

This all sounded positive to Mitchell with his desire for contact.

After forty-five minutes he bade Beverley goodbye and ran back to the Creative office perched on the twelfth floor of 80 Berry Street, North Sydney, overlooking the Pacific Highway.

He was mumbling to himself. "Monte St Angelo School. I wonder where that is?" He'd utterly forgotten the knowledge he once had as a Sydney cabbie.

He rested the street directory on the window sill and flicked efficiently through it. Then he nearly fell over. He checked the map, and then he looked out the window.

"Well, I'll be a turkey's toenail!" Of all the schools in the whole country, she was going to the one that was literally right under Mitchell's nose. If the window could have opened he could have hit her on the head with a good throw of a tennis ball.

He ran down the hallway shouting, "Quick. Has anybody got a pair of binoculars? I want to look at the girls' school across the road!"

Then he stopped and listened to what he was saying. Not a good look. He tried to fix it. "I just want to see one of the year twelve girls over there!"

This was not sounding any better.

Finally Mitchell's producer put him out of his misery. "It's school holidays, stupid!"

§

Andrew left the girls watching "Oprah" (he had no real emotional attachment to this Garth Brooks interview) and went to collect the mail.

He brought it in, handed the envelopes to Ros then went into the kitchen to grab a drink.

Ros Decker recited the letters under her breath. "Telstra, electricity, rates ..." then a bright-red envelope. Blood red. She turned it over. "Mitchell Hearn? We don't know any Mitchell Hearn," said Ros, but the name went straight through Annalee Decker like an arrow. Suddenly she flashed back to her thirteenth birthday when she was sitting with Andrew on her bed discussing the adoption information sheets they'd both just been given. His was overloaded with intimate information, expressions of love and well wishes. Deeply personal. Hers contained nothing but sparse, clinical details. Heights, weights, a few physical attributes of her natural mother, a seventeen-year-old girl named Ellen. At least they said she was "pretty". But there was only a one-word description of her natural father. *Excitable*. It meant nothing to her and compared to the flowing letter Andrew had in his hand, she was profoundly disappointed. But the lack of detail enabled her to burn the names onto her brain.

And now, five years later, on the last day of school holidays, "Excitable" had sent a letter. She knew it was from him. It had to be. A red envelope itself was just so ... so ... excitable.

She jolted back to 1998 and looked grimly wide-eyed at Andrew. He hadn't caught the significance of his mother's comment until he saw Anna's face.

With her gran buzzing around, Annalee couldn't answer her mother's question with her thoughts, and so Ros took all the mail into the office during the commercial break.

Annalee plotted. If she doesn't say anything, I'll wait until she goes to her dental appointment, then I'll raid the office desk and read it.

No need for plots. Her mum returned after the commercial break with tearful pressure mounting behind her glasses.

She looked at Anna and nodded. Andrew read the body language.

Anna had only one question in her mind: Who am I?

§

Eight days went by. Mitchell was definitely taking a salary on false pretences. He couldn't think of anything, except: Where's the reply? Where's the reply?

He figured her parents would write back saying, *Not now. Wait until after the HSC.*

On Thursday, the last day of April, Angelique phoned 2MH.

“Mitch, we have a letter. From Annalee! Do you want me to open it?”

“Do I want you to open it?”

Ange started reading.

Dear Mitchell,

Thanks for the bloody red hair!”

Interesting opening gambit, Mitchell thought, we have a feisty one here!

But the letter was beautiful from there on. Only a page-and-a-bit long but Angelique and Mitchell were swimming in tears well before it finished.

Curse these glass offices. And Mitchell’s was strategically placed on the main thoroughfare from production to sales to on-air. Everyone was having a sideways glance.

“She seems to have had such a good life, Mitch.”

Even if Mitchell had had something to say he wouldn’t have been able.

Mitch spent the whole day running back and forth to the WC trying to compose himself. His eyes looked like red road maps.

And 2MH’s play list didn’t help. Richard Marx’s “Right Here Waiting” had Mitchell reaching for the tissues. The Beatles “Long and Winding Road”. Oops! Powder nose time! And Gloria Estefan’s “Don’t Want to Lose You Now”.

But then again, they could have played “Pop Goes the Weasel” and Mitchell would have fallen apart.

Everyone who used the little room that day must have wondered what Mitchell had stuck up his nose, he was in there blowing it so much.

When Mitchell wasn’t in the toilet he was staring out the window, looking for a glint of orange, now that school holidays were over.

All the time humming a Moody Blues tune.

It was the day Mitchell stopped biting his fingernails for good.

During Friday morning's outdoor assembly, sitting cross-legged with Belinda and Georgie, Annalee felt a tap on the shoulder. It was Mr Tslakos. "This just arrived for you."

He dropped into her lap a large manila envelope with a huge address sticker, covered in the corporate logo of 2MH. No stamp.

"Miss Excitable" leapt to her feet and chased Mr Tslakos. "Where did this come from? Who delivered it? What did he look like?"

From Annalee's reaction, Tslakos figured it must have been from her boyfriend so he decided to have a bit of fun. "Oh, he was weird-looking. Skinny as a stick but with a huge pot belly. Real old guy. He had this huge wart on the end of his nose, you just couldn't take your eyes off it. He was just a little bit taller than your regular dwarf."

Bel and Georgie had followed her to keep up with Year 12's latest and greatest gossip. "It's from her natural father," Georgie let the joke hit him in the face.

Tslakos felt about as big as a pea. "Oh, look, err, it was delivered by a cab driver. I'm sorry. I didn't mean ..."

The girls fell about laughing and returned to assembly to read. Annalee knew she had Tslakos wrapped around her finger for the rest of the day. Since returning from holidays, her news had made her the flavour of the moment among the other Year 12 girls and the boarding supervisors. This was great.

And this letter was cause for celebration. *Anytime you want to phone, you just phone*, read Georgie. "You gotta do it tomorrow, Ann. Phone him at home about lunchtime on the weekend! He's sure to be there!"

"Ok! Ok! Let's do it. Midday tomorrow!"

The PA reverberated around the playground: "I would appreciate the Year 12 girls at the back of assembly paying attention. You're supposed to be setting an example. Especially you as the school's Vice Captain, Belinda Fragar!"

Hand-hidden sniggers from the back of assembly.

“I don’t think we should tell them yet,” Angelique protested. “They’re too young to deal with these issues. They just think that when two people love each other, God gives them a baby. They’re not going to understand. I don’t want to have to explain all the facts of life to them yet. Caleb’s only eight.”

“Ange, we have a letter from her. She could ring anytime. Do you want to wait until she comes knocking on the door or something? We have to tell them now.”

“But it’s going to change so much for them. Cal suddenly becomes number two. And Jessie’s no longer your only little girl. How do you think that’s going to hit them?”

“Ange, we can’t have family secrets. Now they already know something’s going on. They’ve heard us talking about it. There are probably much worse things going through their minds. To tell them the truth would most likely be a bit of a relief for them.”

Ange knew Mitchell was right but she just didn’t like the way this was intruding into her family. She’d survived her husband’s long periods of unemployment. She’d endured the constant spectre of Ellen in her life. Now it was becoming far too real and she doubted her ability to live with it in such concrete form. She’d supported the first letter but now her husband was becoming obsessive. Why couldn’t he just enjoy his own kids? The ones she’d given him? Why did he feel the need to chase after this person who, let’s face it, belonged to someone else now?

It was Saturday after lunch, two o’clock. Mitch set it up just as he had envisaged it. The kids on the lounge and him sitting on the coffee table facing them.

“It’s a special occasion, so I’m allowed to sit on the coffee table, ok?” he said trying to lighten the moment.

They laughed, and so Mitchell told them the whole story.

Jessica giggled hard and whispered to Caleb, “Daddy had a girlfriend. Oo-oo!”

But, by the end, Caleb was in tears. So was daddy. Jessica jumped off the lounge and went to play skip-rope.

“That’s so sad, dad,” Caleb said. “You know why I cried? Because I’ve never seen you cry before.” How ironic. Up until that week, the only time Mitchell had cried in the previous seventeen years was when Caleb was born.

“Oh, you’ve seen me cry before,” Mitch said hugging his only son. “You just don’t remember.”

For Jessica, the idea of another girl in the family took some time to compute. It wasn't until Mitch went to exchange videos an hour later that it all started to sink in for Jessica. She just burst into the kitchen, hugged Angelique's leg and said, "Mummy, I feel very sad." But she couldn't explain why. Then when her dad returned from the video store she just blurted out a dismembered phrase, "You didn't even know the little baby's name, dad."

That afternoon Mitchell looked through some ancient tax boxes and found his 1980 diary and four letters written to him by Ellen's school friends, one of which had a note from Els.

Mitch sat there with them on the desk in the office, the kids playing computer games, when the phone rang right in front of him. Before he'd even answered Angelique called the kids upstairs. "Give dad a little privacy."

Mitchell picked up the phone and stated his name. Silence. Then the loveliest sound in the world. A teenage voice saying, "Umm ... "

Mitchell was torn between saying, "I know it's you, Anna" and just listening for her to say something more. Fortunately she broke the silence. "It's Anna here."

Contact!

Mitchell suddenly became unbelievably nervous. Eighteen-year-old girls had never been his strong suit, even when he was eighteen. "So what does a girl do in a boarding school on a wet Saturday afternoon?"

He had visited this moment a billion times over the eighteen years but all his brilliant one-liners deserted him. He couldn't believe he was talking to her about the weather.

"Oh, we just finished watching *Austin Powers*."

Curses, Mitch thought. The guys at 2MH were always at him to see that movie and he had never bothered. Bugger! Wait a minute! That's rated M isn't it? What are they doing showing an M-movie to impressionable Catholic school girls? Leave it alone, Mitch!

"We watched a bit of the footie, too."

Ah! Footie! Now this girl knew how to keep a conversation going!

"You are an unbelievably brave young lady doing this."

"I had a bet with my best friend and I had to do it before she got back with her parents at four-thirty. I've actually been too scared to ring all day."

"What colour are your eyes?"

“You guess.”

“Brown?” Ellen’s.

“No.”

“Well, they must be blue!”

“Yep!”

“Wow! That’s my colour! Blue eyes and red hair! What a combo!”

“Hmm. The red hair ... ”

“You won’t believe what I was just reading. Some old letters.”

“Hey, I’ve just booked my end of school bash at Terrigal!”

“You’ll have to come and visit us when you’re here!”

“For sure!”

And so it went — for two hours! Not a tear, not a crack in the voice. Both of them just sailed through.

Finally, Mitchell heard a call from upstairs. “It’s almost six-thirty! Are you having dinner with us or what?”

“I have to go and get my dinner, too,” Anna said.

In all this, Mitchell had six ambitions, four were messages he was desperate to get to her. The first, “not a day went by”, had brought tears to Ros Decker’s eyes in his first letter.

Now he couldn’t let this opportunity pass by without delivering the second. “Anna, before you go, there’s one thing I really want you to know.”

“Yes?”

“Anna, I want you to know that you were born of a very beautiful relationship.” Suddenly Mitchell was getting extremely misty. “I want you to know that I loved your mother so very, very much.” He was almost choked but pressed on. “I wanted to marry her. I was absolutely besotted by her. You were not conceived in some nasty one-night stand or anything like that. We were committed to each other and really in love. I just want you to know that.”

There was a slight pause. Then a small voice said, “Thank you. Thank you for telling me that. Thank you so much.” Another pause. “Thank you.” Again a pause, a breath, then a very confident young voice continued. “Where was I conceived?”

Rebecca's Law

Now that was a question Mitchell wasn't expecting, and the answer wasn't all that flattering. There were two options: in his bedroom in his house at Mona Vale, or more probably, in the back seat of his '67 Premier swaying to the sound of the waves at Narrabeen Beach car park.

The latter was a little too sordid, so he opted for the former. A few months later when Mitchell read page 168 of her HSC text *Looking for Alibrandi* he wished he'd told her the truth.

17

Mitchell found Annalee's second letter just as emotional as the first. She had sent him a lock of her hair.

She had said that her hair colour hadn't changed since birth. Mitch didn't believe her. Not that he thought she was lying, it's just that people don't notice subtle changes.

But, when he opened the letter Mitchell saw she was absolutely right. That hair was so familiar.

He stroked it. Amazing how a person can remember a touch. He rolled it between his fingers. He rubbed it against his cheek and yes, he held it to his nose and even smelled it. Everything about that little cut of hair was so familiar. How does the human brain store that sort of information? So abstract and yet so powerful. So evocative.

That week Belinda, as school Vice Captain, toured Parliament House with the school captain.

She made a point of finding Mitchell and Mitchell made a point of being found. "I see what Anna means about the uniform! Daggy!"

The girls laughed, and checked Mitchell out intently. He felt like apologising for not being tall enough, cool enough, young enough. He wasn't sure, but he almost faked "confident enough".

"Anna asked me to give you this." Another letter.

"Yeah, I have one for her, too. And I want to show you something." Mitchell had surveyed his entire extended family and found just one rather poor, out-of-focus photograph of a seventeen-year-old Ellen. Caroline had it — it was taken at Chris's fourth birthday party.

"Does Anna look anything like this?" They tossed it back and forth. "Not really. She actually has your eyes."

My eyes, thought Mitchell. Of my three children, she's the only one.

§

Over the following week, the exchange of letters and phone calls was mutually pleasant. Annalee was very eager to take a tour with her natural father around the northern beaches to all the places Ellen and Mitchell used to frequent eighteen years before. She liked the idea of taking the occasional Saturday to do something outrageous together — day trip on a Harley, or a mystery flight, or “hanging out” at Darling Harbour. It was nice. She was keen to get acquainted.

The following Saturday, Mitchell was doing a seminar, teaching young singing hopefuls what they could expect in a jingle session. Surprisingly, Channel 9 turned up to film it.

“I'm gonna be on TV, Ann,” he told her on their tenth phone call in ten days. “It'll be on the ‘Today’ show, probably on Thursday. If it comes out ok, I'll send you a tape.”

“No, I can record it here.”

As each day passed, Mitchell was less and less happy about her seeing him on TV, worried that he would look less than movie-star perfect.

The segment failed to appear on Thursday. Good! he thought. Maybe they've cancelled it. But then, if they don't show it, I'll look like a big poser, saying I'll be on TV when I wasn't.

Four days later it was broadcast — the following Tuesday. No one would tape a show for four days would they?

On Tuesday afternoon, the Monte Year 12 girls speed-searched the tape.

“Stop!” squealed Belinda. “I think that was him!”

They crowded around the TV set.

“That's him! That's him Ann! Doesn't he look like you?”

“Look at the eyes, Ann!” said Georgie. “Just like you! What do you reckon?”

There was fuss. There were giggles. There was pointing and all sorts of girlie carry-on. But none of it from Annalee Decker.

“I can't see any resemblance.”

She walked out of the boarder's common room back to her own dorm and laid on her bed, staring at the ceiling.

This couldn't be him, she mourned. He's so ordinary. Where's the handsome prince? He's actually a bit ugly. So old. So creased. She had only ever had two images of her natural parents. "And if he's not the knight in shining armour," she said out loud, "then he must be ..."

Georgie came in to see her. "You cool?"

Anna sat up. "Yeah. Just a bit of a shock. He looks like a deviate."

"Oh Anna! He's not that bad! Bit strange-looking, but, you know. He's got two arms, two legs. His letters are funny."

"Are they? I don't know anymore. Strange-looking, eh? And he looks like me. Thanks, Georgie."

"Oh I didn't mean that. You're heaps prettier than him!"

"You're not helping me here, Georgie."

"So he's no Mel Gibson. What were you expecting?"

"Mel Gibson. At least a guy handsome enough to get someone pregnant. I mean, how desperate was my mother? No, this is so embarrassing, George. I've told everyone. I've put him on the phone with the supervisors. Maria reckons I flirt with him on the phone! Bull! But he turns out to look like the elephant man! Gross! I can't believe I used all this in my *Alibrandi* speech."

"That was the best speech Two Unit English ever heard Ann! Don't knock it. How many girls get a standing ovation for a bloody English speech? But you did because you shared something of yourself."

"Yeah, well I was wrong. Mitchell Hearn is no 'Michael Andretti'."

"How do you know?"

"Well, look at him. Mitchell Hearn is a dag. Michael Andretti is suave and handsome and rich. Any 'Josephine' would be proud to find out their father was Michael Andretti."

"Gee, I didn't read Michael Andretti as that great. Bit of a wanker, I thought."

"But, I'm 'Josephine' stuck with Herman Munster! That's about the only film star I can think of that looks like him!"

"He looks a bit like Robin Williams I reckon."

"Oh great. I'm going to grow up looking like Mrs Doubtfire! Why couldn't he be Michael Andretti?"

"You're not living in a book, Ann. This is real life out here!"

"*Looking for Alibrandi* is real life, George. It's Marchetta's life. She just changed the names. Boy, am I glad I'm a Decker. Thank God I was rescued from that creep."

"Thought you hated religion?"

"Well, I must've prayed hard when I was born, 'cause God rescued me." She paused. "Well, really, my foster parents rescued me, then mum and dad."

They both sat there staring at the clock.

"Oh, no, Georgie! I've just remembered!"

"What?"

"I've gotta meet him Sunday week!"

"You'll handle it."

"But he says he wants to hug me! Oh, puke! I don't want him touching me. He probably wants to get into my pants!"

"Well, just wear your school uniform — that'd turn anyone off."

"That'd probably turn him on. Little girlie in a school dress. Serious, Georgie. What if he tries something?"

"Don't be stupid, Ann. He's married. He's bringing his wife with him. As if he's going to try anything."

"Oh, Georgie, it's all they think about. Is there anyway I can back out? He asked for you to come too."

"Yeah, I'll go."

"No, I'll take Andrew. So if there's anything weird, Andrew can look after me. Oh, this is so off, Georgie. Let's hope he just drops dead in the meantime."

§

"The green shirt?"

"Great, Mitch!" Angelique was fed up. "What are you trying to do? Make yourself look stupid?"

"Ok. The sports suit and tie. That's kind of fatherly, isn't it?"

"Just be yourself."

"I can't go in shorts, long socks and thongs."

“Just wear neat casual clothes.”

“Like what? I want to look rich. I want to look in command. I want to look friendly, yet confident.”

“Well, you can’t because (a) you’re not rich, and (b) you’re not in command! You’re falling to pieces. Now get a grip.”

“I know! Jeans and denim jacket. You can’t go wrong with denim. It’s always in fashion.”

“There are few things more pathetic than a forty-year-old man trying to look young in jeans.”

“Well, I’m not forty yet, so I should be right. Now, what about my hair? Comb it back or forwards?”

“I’ve never seen you like this, Mitch. You never care what you look like.”

“Ange!”

She came rushing into the bathroom.

“Look at my crow’s feet, Angie! What have you got for crows feet?”

“Any chance I can get near the mirror this morning? Go and check if the kids are ready.”

The children were delighted to be off to Wonderland with grandma for the day, leaving Angelique and Mitchell to wind their way down Jefferies Street Kirribilli to the chosen meeting place, the triangular park under the Sydney Harbour Bridge in Olympic Drive.

Mitchell spotted the glint of gold from the top of the street, standing next to a tall, blond sixteen-year-old-boy. “There she is.”

“Where?” Angelique was short-sighted.

“There!” Mitch pointed.

As they pulled up, Andrew looked across at Mitch’s aqua Suzuki Cino but Anna stared across the harbour.

Angelique and Mitchell went to the boot to get the photo albums and as he closed the hatchback he looked Angelique square in the eye holding her shoulders gently.

“Angie, you know how much I want to get across there and hug my daughter. But I want to pause right here and give you my whole attention, just to let you know that you are number one in my life. No Ellen. No Annalee. You are more important to me than any other person on this Earth. You understand that?” She nodded then smiled a broad French grin. “Get over there, you actor!”

Mitchell paused for a moment and looked around at a few of the reasons he had chosen this spot. Not only was it a backdrop to die for, but he also had great memories of the vicinity. Four state medals and a state record at North Sydney Pool. Many hours of fairy-floss lunacy with Ellen at Luna Park, so much of his childhood with his mum backstage at the Opera House across the harbour. Even meeting the Queen and Duke at its opening in 1973.

And now to see the face of the one for whom he had pined so long.

Mitchell walked across the grass expecting Anna to look across and come over. It was obvious that Andrew had seen them, but Anna refused to look anywhere but out to sea.

Mitchell was barely six inches away from Anna and she still hadn't turned. Andrew had watched them all the way.

Mitchell had to speak before he literally bumped into her. "Howdy dudes." Angelique rolled her eyes. Anna turned but refused to look Mitchell in the face. Instead she looked him up and down. She couldn't believe how short he was. He'd looked taller on TV. For his part, Mitchell couldn't believe what he was thinking. "Is that all?"

She seemed unwell to him. So thin. Her maroon cords just flapped on her, a baggy rugby jumper hid any semblance of feminine shape, but her hair was magnificent in colour, although tied back so tight Mitchell thought that if even so much as a fly happened to land on her forehead her whole scalp would split in two.

Her half-smile revealed grey, discoloured teeth, a sign Mitchell knew from his days at the Youth Crisis Centre in Kings Cross, and it worried him.

His second thought came. Quick! Get this girl to lunch and put some food into her!

She read his mind. "I had an eating disorder last year."

She maintained her averted eyes, obviously very self-conscious at being looked over.

Mitchell tried not to stare but what was he supposed to do?

He suddenly didn't want to hug her but he had told her he was going to, and if he didn't she might wonder what was wrong with her. So Mitchell opened his arms. She stepped forward. Mitchell always thought he would cry at that moment but he didn't. Andrew and Angelique stood so close staring and smiling, Mitchell dared not get emotional.

For Mitchell, it was like hugging a parking meter. For Anna, it wasn't as revolting as she'd thought it was going to be, but after a polite couple of seconds she had had more than enough of his strongly cologned body near hers, so she actively pushed Mitchell away. He in turn, let go.

As they broke from the clinch the full impact hit Mitch. Anna backed up a pace and her eyes met his. Oh Lord, my eyes! he thought. The same blue. The same deep-set shape. Set atop Ellen's button nose and pretty shaped lips, amid a befreckled, diamond-shaped delicate face.

Her eyes, so like his, but so different. While Mitchell had carried that 'half-a-face' sorrow in his eyes for eighteen years, Annalee's eyes just blazed straight through his head with unbridled anger. Pseudo-lazy eyelids strobed the hatred that pulsed like a laser, her strained smile seemed only to underline this aggression exuding from blue orbs. Disdain, contempt, resentment, all in their purest forms, leapt out of Annalee's eyes and sliced straight through Mitchell's innards, like a spear in the ribs. Each of her eyes was a nail in the wrist and her thoughts an ankle spike. For her part, Annalee Decker just wanted to kick this guy right where it hurts, go straight to the source of the problem. To just keep pounding and pounding until she rendered him sterile. Mitchell deserves it, not Lawry, she thought, but all the time she maintained her smile like an angel.

Her unactualised attack was so ferocious that Mitchell staggered one step backwards.

"So this is Andrew," Mitch turned to the youth, releasing himself from Anna's subliminal brutality. "Did you bring the footie to kick around?" Andrew smiled warmly, so Mitchell took his hand and shook it vigorously — a man-to-man message, saying loud and clear, "Save me from her!"

Mitchell looked Andrew in the eye, too. His were filled with mere resignation. Mitchell didn't understand why, but he wanted to hug Andrew more than he wanted to hug Anna. Mitchell just looked at him and thought, I know what it's like to be a sixteen-year-old guy. Hang in there.

Mitchell introduced Angelique and tried to lighten up. "You want to go under the shade or sit on the grass?" he asked.

"Doesn't worry me," came the off-hand, eighteen-year-old's reply. Then she patted her hair. It was tied back so tight there was no chance any of it could be out of place.

As they walked across the grass, Mitchell asked the obvious conversation starter, "Were you waiting long?"

"No, not really. I caught the bus into town to meet Andrew."

“So you didn't use the taxi money I sent you?”

“We caught the taxi here. You can have the money back.” She reached into her bag. Mitchell was deeply insulted. Forget it Mitch, he checked himself. Leave it alone.

It was a beautiful day. The sun warmed their backs as they all dropped onto the grass and exchanged photo albums.

Mitchell brought a few embarrassing ones from his childhood and early teens — blinding examples of early seventies style. Anna barely smiled. The only photo that caught her interest was of Mitchell's mother ballet dancing around age sixteen. “Who's that?”

“Oh, that's my mum.”

“I did ballet when I was young. I was actually mid-western rhythmic gymnastics champion when I was ten.”

“What? With the ribbon and hoops and clubs and so on?”

“Yeah. I was on ‘Wide World of Sports’ and everything!”

Anna was starting to loosen up. This is good, Mitchell smiled. This was going to work. Great.

“So what happened then?”

She retreated instantaneously. “Just dropped it. It didn't seem important.” There was more than a twinge of sadness in her voice.

Mitchell looked at her profile trying to understand. All his life he had battled with how to marry his sporting side with his artistic side and had never been able to — they were still in separate compartments. But, here she was at the age of ten, having found the perfect medium to amalgamate such diverse talents, and doing it very successfully, and she just dropped it? It didn't seem important? It made no sense to Mitchell. It was like a total betrayal of one's own person.

She brightened again as she opened her photo album and placed it in Mitchell's lap.

“This is me with mum the first day I was home.”

That's not how Mitchell saw the photo but he let it pass without comment. He took the album to himself and stared at the picture for a long time while the others talked. He breathed heavily. There she was just as he remembered her — Rebecca, his little eye-chasing beauty. He looked at Anna's eyes side on — he didn't want to risk a full frontal assault again. And then he looked back at the baby in the photo. What the hell happened?

Eventually Mitchell turned the page.

“Oh! Look at this!” she said gleefully. She had no idea what she was about to do to him. “Here! My birth notice in the paper!”

Mitchell read the yellowing strip.

Born 3.4.80.

To Roslyn Decker

A baby girl “Annalee”

First daughter of Lawrence Decker.

Mitchell battled a volcano of anger. He was more furious than he had ever been in his life. Ever. He simply wanted to erupt but he couldn't say a word. Angelique read it and she looked, shocked, into Mitchell's face. Control yourself Mitch. Control yourself, she was saying by almost-audible telepathy.

He wanted to vomit. He wanted to throw that whole photo album straight into the harbour. He wanted to scream right into Anna's face.

She was rabbiting on about something but Mitchell didn't hear a word she said. He read the birth notice over and over, thinking he must have just missed the word “adopted” in there and if he read it enough times it would right itself. But it didn't.

Mitch's thought life ran amok. So what was Ellen then? Just an incubator? Just a slab of dog meat? She was a person! A real person. With real sorrow. Real misery. Real tears. Real grief. Why can't you at least be honest about that? Two people suffered like full-on buggery so you could have “your” kid and you can't even acknowledge that!

Then a prejudice Mitchell thought he had left far behind welled up inside him and he couldn't stop it. Typical bloody Catholic denial, he thought, and almost immediately was ashamed of himself. But Mitchell just couldn't help it. Once it was Lionel, unable to face the truth. Now it was ... well, he didn't know! Whoever wrote this piece of decomposing bilge.

Mitchell decided that both of them had had enough of photograph albums. “I thought we'd go down to the Manly Food and Wine Festival that's on today.”

“Doesn't worry me,” came the sullen reply. That attitude was starting to annoy Mitchell, big time.

They went to the car and Mitchell watched as Anna inspected his late-model Suzuki. Her mouth curled up in derision ever so slightly.

She looked at the number plate as Mitchell and Angelique replaced the albums in the boot. JON 316, she thought. I wonder what that means? Mitchell knew that few people caught the significance of it.

They drove down to the Spit and the bridge was open, so they sat there looking at "Mortgage Hill" — all the mansions clinging to the cliff face with views straight down Middle Harbour.

Mitchell decided to appeal to the obvious snob in her. "So Anna, which one of these houses would you like?"

"Doesn't worry me."

Mitchell felt like slapping her across the face.

Without ceremony he changed plans and pulled out of the stationary traffic into the Yacht Club car park. "Let's eat at the Endeavour Restaurant."

This was a minor triumph for Mitchell. When he had been going out with Ellen, Mitchell worked for a short time at this toffee-nosed establishment as a washing-up boy. It was without doubt the worst job he ever had. Now he was returning, dressed in denim, with two people wearing rugby jumpers, to this overpriced eatery as a paying guest.

"I've never worked a day in my life," Anna said proudly as Mitchell told her the story.

Aint that obvious, thought Mitchell, sharing a knowing look with Angelique. Andrew just looked a little embarrassed at his adoptive sister.

Showing-off, Mitchell ordered the most expensive thing on the menu, lobster mornay. Angelique gave him her "You idiot" eyeball, as he then proceeded to distribute lobster all over the restaurant. Andrew laughed. Angie laughed. Mitchell laughed. But Anna barely smiled, although Mitchell was glad to see her eat so well.

After lunch they went to the Food Festival, were crushed by the crowds and then meandered down the Corso to Manly Wharf.

"Oh, look!" Anna pointed. "Paragliding around the harbour. I've never done that."

Mitchell had been writing ads for Manly Paraglide at 2MH and was due for some freebies.

"I'll bring you down one Saturday and we'll do it, eh?"

"Doesn't worry me."

Angelique grabbed Mitchell's arm to restrain him.

Driving Andrew back to Riverview, Anna oscillated between almost uncontrolled chatter to long periods of silence. A most inconsistent conversation.

They drove through Neutral Bay where Mitchell had spent a generous lunch hour (and a half) that Thursday, trying to find a trendy gift for her.

Anna was talking twenty-to-the-dozen, when she suddenly stopped mid-sentence and exclaimed, "Wow! A teddy-bear shop! A whole store full of teddy-bears! Far out!"

Mitchell had forgotten it was there but he was now grinning like a Cheshire cat.

Angelique nonchalantly asked her, "Oh you like teddy-bears, do you?"

Anna retreated again. "Oh, yeah. They're ok."

Too late to go hiding now, babe, Mitchell thought, metaphorically high-fiving everyone in the car. Anna went quiet again.

They dropped Andrew off at Riverview and Mitchell turned to Anna. "We have to pick up the kids. Do you want to come with us and meet them?"

Anna went ghostly white. "Oh, no. No. Look, I'll get out here. I'll catch a bus back!"

"That's ok. I'll drop you back to school. I just thought you might like to meet Caleb and Jes. But if you don't, that's cool."

"No, I don't think I could handle it."

Only then did Mitchell realise how much this must have been affecting her. She had been so nonchalant. Breezing through the day. Now she was saying she couldn't handle meeting an eight-year-old and a five-year-old. This must be huge for her, Mitchell thought. For the first time in her life she's connecting with people biologically. That must be tough.

He thought about the big deal he had made over the fact that she had a sixteen-year-old half-sister with exactly the same name. What a devastating piece of information for her and Mitchell just hadn't seen it. What else had he said insensitively which might have scored her deeply? Mitchell started to beat himself unmercifully. All the questions that he must raise in her mind but he had hardly noticed. Mitchell felt he had done Anna a great disservice somehow, but that was ok. She would even the score soon enough.

Not a word was spoken from Riverview to Monte. As they pulled into her school courtyard in the half-light of six o'clock it seemed so oppressive. Angelique had escaped the clutches of the

Catholic Church when she converted to Charismatic Protestantism at the age of sixteen. Now they could hear those depressing Gregorian chants coming from the chapel and it put a contrite downer on the end of an already circumspect day.

Anna was visibly shaken when Mitchell pulled the teddy-bear bag out of the hatchback.

“You shouldn’t have. You didn’t have to.”

“I know. That’s why I did.”

She had no hope of understanding that.

Mitchell had arranged Benson the Teddy to be holding eighteen birthday cards, each contained one line of a poem, the last one saying he would never again be late with her birthday card.

“I only bought these the other day. I haven’t been collecting them over the years.”

Then Anna noticed something pinned to Benson’s chest. It was something very precious. Mitchell’s father had given his mother a set of earrings which matched her engagement ring. She had them made into a second ring and had given them to Mitchell to give to his lost daughter when he found her.

“This is a family heirloom which has been reserved for you since you were about five. It’s a one-off. Totally unique — and worth quite a bit, too.”

Anna reacted like an iceberg. Total shock, Mitchell supposed.

Anna surprised herself and everyone else by hugging Angelique, perhaps out of duty, then Mitchell walked the Year 12 girl to the security door.

“I’ll see you Wednesday for coffee after school?”

She nodded, most shyly. Then he stepped forward and hugged her. Not because he felt he had to. Mitchell really wanted to this time. She was still very cold but he didn’t care. He suddenly felt so protective towards this fragile little pretzel. She again tried to push him away but Mitch held on just a little longer. Somehow he intuitively knew he would not be doing this again for a while and the time had come for his third important message to her. He moved his mouth to her ear and whispered, “Anna, you have always been my inspiration. Everything I have ever done, everything I have achieved in my life, you are the one who has inspired me. Your mere existence makes me complete.”

They stepped apart and Mitchell thought, If she says, “Doesn’t worry me” to that I WILL hit her.

But she didn't. She said nothing. She just looked at his shoes.

Anna passed through the security door and Mitchell watched her silhouette at the top of the stairs glide into the common room.

Home.

§

So that was Sunday, May 31st. The last day of autumn. Somehow that seemed significant to Mitchell. Ellen and he had united in spring, then autumn trial came to convict summer's play. Now autumn had come to an end. Of course, winter would follow. Mitchell could sense that the moment he saw the face of Annalee Decker. She was not Rebecca. But at least autumn had officially ended.

It was months later when he looked back through his diary, that Mitchell discovered May 31 that year was also the Day of Pentecost — the day the Spirit of the Father entered into the infant. An infant born from the sacrifice of Easter. So many spiritual parallels. Maybe I'm just desperate to see some significance, he thought. Or maybe it really was obvious to be seen.

Either way, there had definitely been an impartation that day. And Annalee Decker didn't like it one bit.

18

“Which coffee shop should we go to?”

“Doesn't worry me.”

Flames flashed out of Mitchell's nostrils.

Both coffee dates turned out to be monosyllabic events.

Conversation reached the heights of trivia. All Anna could find to talk about was booze, how she and her schoolie mates would go up to Hampton Court in Kings Cross and flirt with the low-life to scam free drinks. She didn't know why, it just dribbled out of her mouth. Mitchell found it mildly interesting for all the wrong reasons.

“We'll have to go up there and play pool one day,” Mitchell asked, with a hidden purpose.

Her mind worked overtime. “Oh, you wouldn't like it. It's very smoky.”

Purpose fulfilled. He knew from his days at the Kings Cross Youth Crisis Centre that Hampton Court was the centre for all drug deals in the area. Barbs, pheds and smack were the go in the early eighties. Mitchell wondered just what had replaced the old-style hit these days, and why, with such an idyllic upbringing Anna was into this self-destructive behaviour. Why did she need all this anaesthetic?

She tried to change the subject without changing the subject. “And what are you? A red-wine man or a white-wine man?”

“Well, actually, I don't drink at all.”

Across her forehead were written the words, Bloody hell! I'm talking to an alien! This just did not compute! An Australian guy over the age of eighteen, and he doesn't drink? What a sideshow freak!

At the first coffee date Mitchell gave her his twelfth letter, and in this one he crossed the line: he finally used the big four-letter word. His fourth important message to her. At the parting of the excruciatingly difficult second coffee meeting Mitchell decided he had to say it to her face to face.

She stopped in the school courtyard and they both said, "See you later." Mitchell faked to walk away then called her back.

"Oh! By the way," he had her full attention, eye to eye, "I love you, Annalee Decker."

Mitchell nearly didn't get it out as an unexpected wave of emotion hit him. At first her eyes grew large in horror then she looked straight to the ground and silently shook her head, pivoting slowly on her heels and walking without any turning, hastily to the security door.

Again Mitchell watched her silhouette glide from the top of the stairs to the common room.

"I just had to let you know, Ann. It couldn't wait any longer."

§

Struggling to maintain her robotic best, Annalee nonchalantly knocked the cue ball around the table, but Belinda and Georgie could see that she wasn't her usual, sharp self.

"Come on, Anna! That's a set up. Hit it gently and you can't miss."

Anna pulled the cue back then drove it into the white ball with such ferocity it rocketed across the common room, almost hitting the TV screen flush, with striped and numbered balls flying in all directions. She smashed the cue down onto the table and headed for the door.

"Steady on, Anna!" said Belinda. "You'll break all the balls."

"I'd like to break HIS balls," she screamed down the hallway. She slammed her room door behind her and fell to the bed, on her back. Through gritted teeth she started spitting at the ceiling, "I can't believe he said that! Just straight out said it!"

She fumed another second or two. "This is a nightmare! A horror movie — 'Boris Karloff french's Sweet Orphan Annie.' He's ugly, he's boring, he's old, he's sickening! He's gotta go!"

She listened to the deep sound of her own breathing. "How dare he toss me in the grundy-bin and then eighteen years later expect to claim me. What a bloody hide! The creepy, slimy, disgusting, putrid ..." She stopped herself before she started sounding like a thesaurus.

"I know!" she brightened. "*They'll* know how to get rid of him. Just gotta give them the right impression. Shouldn't be hard. Like how smart do you have to be to get a pathetic social work diploma, anyway?" She rummaged around her desk drawer for her telephone numbers book and a handful of change, then purposefully opened the door and headed for the payphone. "Yeah, shouldn't be real hard at all," she smiled.

§

"Sharon Tilley speaking."

"Umm, I want to speak to someone about my natural father."

"Your *birth*-father. Yes, dear. You're Annalee Decker."

"That's right."

"Yes, I'm your case worker. What can I do for you?"

"Well, I've recently met my nat — err, my birth-father — and it's kind of confusing me. I just need to talk to someone. Is it normal to be confused?"

"Very normal, dear. It can be very threatening."

"I don't know if it's just that I'm stressed out with the HSC or what, but I just don't understand him at all."

"Yes, well, I've had a number of conversations on the phone with him and he is a little weird," Sharon chuckled.

"Oh so you know Mitchell?"

"Oh, yes. I've been dealing with him for eighteen months now."

"You must know him pretty well, then?"

"Well, what's your concern? Let's see if I can help."

"He's doing all this stuff I can't handle. Like he's sending me these mushy letters and he had a schmaltzy song played for me on the radio and now he's saying he loves me! To my face!"

"Well, it's not uncommon for birth-fathers to be sexually attracted to their birth-daughters."

“What?”

“Oh, yes. You girls remind them of the old girlfriend. And you’re young and pretty. You take them back to their youth. It’s very normal for men meeting their birth-daughters. Very normal. They even sometimes think it’s their right.”

“Does it ever get out of hand?”

“Oh, sometimes. If you’re not careful.”

“Gross city! No wonder he’s chatting up all my school friends!”

“Well, these men do have a history with teenage girls, I suppose.”

“I knew he was a deviate. What should I do? He’s writing to me and wants to take me out on dates! Just the two of us! Alone!”

“Well, it’s up to you, dear. You’re an adult now. You have rights. Do what you feel you should do.”

“I just want to avoid him. Get this slimy derro out of my life.”

“Well, as I said, it’s up to you. I can’t make those sorts of decisions for you.”

“Yeah, ok. Alright. I just wanted to talk it through with someone.”

“Look, anytime you want to talk these issues out, you just call me. I know your case, I have your full history here, including what Mitchell was like when you were adopted.”

“What? Is there something weird there?”

“Oh, look, Anna, that’s confidential.”

Anna’s skin was crawling. “Ok, thanks for the advice.”

“I didn’t give you any advice, dear. You simply formed your own conclusions. I’m just an impartial sounding board.”

Sharon hung up the phone after a job well done. “I’m definitely worth more money.”

§

For seven weeks, Mitchell wrote to her but she never replied. He’d phone but she was never available to talk.

Mitchell’s bouts of depression were uncontrollable. Before meeting Anna he’d think about her once or twice a day. Now it was once or twice a minute.

Obviously this is falling apart, he worried. Maybe we were wrong to do this in an HSC year.

Everyone's advice was that he had approached her too young. Ironically, Mitchell's cousin met her surrendered daughter at around the same time and, hers being twenty-four years old, had her first question ready. "Why didn't you come and find me sooner?" Having watched Mitchell's reunion from the sideline, his cousin had her answer tailor-made. Her daughter laughed and replied, "Yeah. You wouldn't have liked me as an eighteen-year-old."

But, if the truth were told, Mitchell couldn't have waited another day to tell his lost daughter he cared. Now it was going terribly wrong and she seemed determined to not give him any clues as to why.

Mitchell realised he had delivered to her nearly all the messages he wanted her to know. One remained: to tell her as best he knew, the truth of her birth and adoption. So he wrote it out. Twenty pages of it. Dredging up all that grief was an intense emotional strain and while he didn't tell Angelique what he was doing, she did not enjoy living with an inconsolably preoccupied husband. The whole subject was now off limits, which left Mitchell with no one to share the load. Counselling services were hopelessly inadequate for men. It seemed that every counsellor he contacted felt that because Mitchell hadn't carried Rebecca for nine months, he was not entitled to feel.

The process of writing the story though triggered his curiosity. Mitchell suddenly realised that even he didn't know what really happened.

He recontacted Julia to fill in some blanks. "You and Ellen were given no choice, Mitch. If you ask me, that child was stolen from you."

He'd never looked at it that way. He had always thought that he had just played a game that was lost — the opposition was just better at the game than he was.

Mitchell's mother read the story. "Mitch, you never had a chance." He wasn't quite sure what she meant.

Mitchell sent Ros and Lawry early drafts of the story so that they could vet anything they thought inappropriate, then he called them to check on their progress. It was in one of those conversations, that Ros dropped the bombshell from a great height.

"It's very well written," she said.

"Did you find it revealing or distressing?"

“Not really. We actually knew a lot of this, anyway.”

They knew? Ros and Lawry knew this story?

“How did you know?”

“The agency told us.”

The agency knew? They knew about Ellen’s father bouncing her around the hospital ward?

“How much did you know?”

“Oh, Maureen Dyson told us most of this. When we went to pick Anna up, Maureen told us that it was a very nasty adoption. ‘A very nasty thing’ she called it. A fair bit of aggro involved.”

Mitchell’s mind couldn’t get past the phrasing: “A very nasty thing.” He couldn’t believe that the agency knew and never protected Ellen. He had always thought they had been unaware of the duress under which Ellen had been placed. Ellen in the end blamed Mitch for her decision to sign so he had never entertained the thought that the agency had allowed unquestionable coercion.

“Who’s Maureen Dyson? I only ever dealt with a Heather Merken.”

“Oh, we only ever dealt with Maureen Dyson.”

The questions were too numerous. Why did two different social workers effect this adoption? Why had the assaults been allowed? And above all, what had been Ellen’s state of mind when she signed the consent? She had left Mitch believing that it was her intense disappointment in him that convinced her to sign, but having just reviewed the whole story and now finding out that the agency was fully aware of what was going on, his role in the whole affair suddenly seemed almost incidental.

Another stark reality came into full focus. Mitchell had been trying to access documents from the agency now for almost eighteen months and, despite the fact that his daughter had turned eighteen, he had not seen one word out of the *Walsh* file. Mitchell suddenly remembered Ellen’s name not being correct on the birth certificate.

Why?

What did the agency have to hide?

One last try, Mitchell thought. He had commandeered a private room in Parliament House and sat listening to the Monte St Angelo dorm telephone ringing.

For the first time ever, it was answered by a voice he recognised. When Mitchell identified himself he could almost hear Anna sweating.

“How was your holiday?”

She was quite upbeat. “Oh, really good. I had a great holiday!”

“What did you get up to?” She retreated immediately. He’s getting friendly, she thought. “Oh nothing much.”

“Look, Ann. Obviously there’s something upsetting you. So it’s probably a good idea for us to take a break until after the HSC.”

“I think permanently.”

It was a rocket but Mitchell stayed calm. “Anna, when I first contacted you, I left it entirely up to you. You decided to follow through and get in touch with me. Now, you didn’t come with a rule book. No one gave me any advice about what to do and what not to do, outside of ‘don’t buy her flowers, jewellery or chocolates’. You’ve given me absolutely no feedback on what was bugging you. I think you’re judging me very unfairly.”

“You think I’m being unfair? You’ve turned my life into a circus! You don’t understand that this is a posh private school and anyone who has something weird in their life like this, just becomes a leper. You’ve destroyed all my friendships. You’ve made me look like a freak!”

“Excuse me? I wasn’t the one who stood up in front of the entire class and used this in their *Alibrandi* speech. A speech which I might remind you, gave you a lot of kudos among your friends. I wasn’t the one who blabbed all this to all your teachers and your supervisors. I was very surprised the way you didn’t seem to want to keep this a bit private. I wasn’t the one who sent your friends looking for me at Parliament House. I took all my cues from you.”

“Well, I don’t appreciate walking into my geography class and having my entire life bagged out.”

“What?”

“When you chatted up those girls at the school gate.”

“Woh! Hang on! I was walking out the school gate and they just about trod on my foot. We had a laugh about it. I saw they were wearing the senior uniform so I asked if they knew you. One of

them made a snide remark about you and the other one asked who I was. I told them. They looked embarrassed 'cause they'd not been too kind to you. End of story. If they've gone on with it in class, well, I'm sorry, but that has nothing to do with me."

"It's everything to do with you! Everything about you is just an embarrassment!"

"I'm a parent! I'm supposed to be embarrassing!"

"Yeah, but not like this! All my friends reckon your letters are sickening! They make me want to puke! All this mushy, schmaltzy, urrgh! Just talking about it makes me want to vomit! I'm just not an emotional type of person at all!" she screamed in anger.

"Well, if it's just schmaltzy letters, that's easily fixed."

"Oh, that's what you say, but I don't reckon you could stop yourself. Like that pukey bloody song on the radio."

"It was brilliant radio!"

"The song was just schmaltzy, sickening, revolting. Oh! I'm going to spew just thinking about it!"

"Gloria Estefan! 'Don't Wanna Lose You Now'? It was perfect!"

"It stunk like skidmarks!"

"Well, Anna, it could have been worse! I could have played The Supremes' 'Love Child'."

"You're such a smartarse."

"And you're a real charmer, I suppose. Anything else?"

"It's like you're always spying on me."

What's this? he thought. Guilty conscience? A paternal paranoia she'd inherited from Ellen? Or was it that the ghost now had three very real dimensions?

Strangely, Mitchell had had the same feelings, that Anna was constantly watching him.

"Look, Anna, I'm a busy man. I live up on the Central Coast. I travel four hours a day to and from work. I haven't the time to be buzzing around checking up on you. Really, I haven't been anywhere near you except for the coffees after school and once when I dropped off a card at lunch time. There's no secret about that. I really have better things to do. Now is there anything else?"

"Nuh."

"Well, if that's it I still say you've judged me completely unfairly."

"I don't like you talking to my sister!" This carried real venom.

Mitchell stopped for a moment. Her younger sister Katherine had answered the phone once and he'd merely chatted about swimming with her briefly. Was this sibling protection or jealousy?

Mitchell resisted the temptation to cut Anna too severely. This was obviously a deeper problem than just a few trivial incidents at school. The mere fact that he was still breathing had cracked open Anna's total perception of reality. It challenged all her lifelong loyalties.

"Anna, I was just making conversation. Being civil. If I'm going to get to know — "

"You're not going to get to know anybody. I forbid you to speak to anyone in my family. My brother. My mother — "

"Anna, I told you I was going to speak with your parents. There should be no problem there. And when I spoke to Andrew, well you were already pissed off with me. I was actually trying to reach you. Now, be fair."

"I just want you to go away."

Mitchell was now talking to an emotional five year old, with fourteen year old attitudes. The only thing eighteen about her was a birth certificate, and that didn't even have her current name on it. That was the thing that really scared her.

Then Annalee let another cat leap out of the bag. "And besides, the agency thinks you're weird too."

Here was this bloody agency again. "What did they say?"

"They just said you're weird and I'm normal."

"Weird, eh? Well, I'm going out there tomorrow to talk about documents, so I might talk to them about 'weird' too. Look Anna, through all this I just thought that it was very important that you knew I cared. That's all. Now you know that."

"Hmm."

"Anna, I want you to know that my door will always be open to you." Somehow these words seemed hauntingly familiar to Mitchell.

"It will never close, Anna. As long as I'm alive, I'll always welcome any contact from you."

"Hmm."

"I didn't get to say goodbye the first time so you hang up when you feel like it but I just want to— "

It sounded like her hand piece hit the telephone cradle from one-hundred metres away.

Mitchell sat there looking at his hand piece. “Well, she certainly inherited Lionel’s forgiving nature.”

Obviously it was too much of an affront to her equilibrium to think of her natural father as anything but low life. Being in any way acceptable would upset her entire notion of what her life was really all about — that she had been hand-rescued by God Himself from a life of squalor to live in perfect luxury with a sinless family.

Mitchell recalled the last words he had said to her face to face: “I love you, Annalee Decker.”

He guessed she never gave it a second thought, but at least he had the small satisfaction that such words would stand as their epitaph.

He sat there reflecting. Mitchell had spent a total of about nine hours with her, had probably fifteen telephone calls but he had never heard her laugh. He’d hardly spoken to anyone else in her adoptive family — her adoptive brother, father, mother and sister — yet he had had a good chortle with each one of them. But not her.

To have heard her laugh. That would have been nice.

But really, all Mitchell ever wanted to do was buy her an ice-cream.

§

He returned to his desk, where the *Legislative Council Newsletter* awaited. And for once, its contents grabbed Mitchell by the throat.

Standing Committee on Social Issues.

Inquiry into Past Adoption Practices: 1950s to present.

The committee has been receiving hundreds of submissions from natural mothers of adopted children, claiming their children were stolen by a conspiracy of coercion between hospitals and adoption agencies. Some submissions claim that the practice is still widespread.

The Committee will be commencing public hearings in September.

Adoption practitioners, doctors, adoptees and birth-mothers are expected to give evidence.”

Mothers. Always the mothers. But apart from gender, Mitchell could see a definite picture emerging.

“I am not alone.”

19

The next morning at four o'clock, Mitchell was wrestling with "Part of Me".

He lay there in bed, composing this song, which had come to him in the night. Lyrics, melody, the whole thing complete.

"Should I go down stairs to the office and record it or trust myself to remember it when I wake up?"

After an hour of staring at the ceiling there was no debate. Mitchell realised he had to get it down in hard copy.

Without even the ceremony of a dressing gown Mitchell tip-toed to the office, mid-winter goosebumps and all, to whisper-sing the song into his hand-held journalist's cassette player.

Part of Me

*And to think, she's part of me,
An apricot grafted to a berry tree,
And every time I look in her eyes
I see me,
Oh, she's part of me.*

*And I have a need,
Just to see her grow from this tiny seed,*

Rebecca's Law

*A tender bud to a slender reed,
'Though she's not like her sister and brother,
And she's certainly not like her mother,
No, she's way too much like her father,
That I can see,
Oh, she's part of me.*

*Well, you can take your words
And run me through,
And sometimes, girl
That's just what you do,
But there's no way you could ever stop me loving you,
Because you see,
Nothing can change the fact you're part of me.*

*And I have a need,
Just to see her grow from this tiny seed,
A tender bud to a slender reed,
And one day it might be that she'd rather
Come to see eye to eye with her mother,
But for now it's enough that her father
Sat under the tree,
That grew from the seed,
And oh, she's just like me.*

Mitchell returned to bed for a final couple of hours before a big day — into the legal section of the Parliamentary Library, then out to his appointment with Sharon Tilley.

He could hear the school-marmie-sing-song from the reception area. “Mitchell Hearn!” Sharon greeted him like a day-care teacher talking to first-day pupils.

Mitchell decided to play the game. “Sharon, good to meet you at last,” he beamed, his theatrical background coming in handy again. “This is going to be fun,” he muttered quietly to himself.

They entered Sharon’s office, and the door closed behind them. “Mitchell, take a seat. So how has it all been going?”

“Great! Great! We’re getting on just great, Anna and I — ”

Sharon made a note: *Unrealistic appraisal.*

As a journalist Mitchell had trained himself to read documents upside down.

“I’ve been meeting her for coffees after school. She goes to Monte St Angelo.”

“Monte!” exclaimed Tilley. “That’s very posh. We did do well, didn’t we?”

“Money isn’t everything,” he replied.

The ensuing silence from Mitchell gave Sharon the opportunity to wrest control of the conversation.

“Mitchell, have you thought about what you want out of this reunion? You’re never going to be her father, you know.”

“To be honest, Sharon, I just want her to become whole.”

“Whole?” Sharon didn’t have a clue what he was talking about.

“Yes, whole. Integrated. I just want to see her totally healed.”

The answer disarmed Sharon. “Healed? Why? Is she sick? Does she have a disease or something?”

You ignorant bitch, thought Mitchell.

“Well, I don’t know, Sharon. She’s awfully thin. She’s had an eating disorder. I’m just concerned that if being adopted has affected her, that she can grow into a complete personality.”

Mitchell felt uncomfortable with his answer. It seemed way too psychoanalytical, bordering on metaphysic.

“Oh, I’m sure it’s just teenage stuff, Mitchell. Don’t worry about it. She’s been given a wonderful home, her parents are wealthy and loving. What else does she need? Don’t take it all so seriously. She received the very best placement. You can put your mind at rest there.”

“Well, since you raised the subject of her placement,” Mitchell tried to wrest the conversation back to his agenda, “Actually I wanted to ask you something first, while I remember. When we talked in February you said I had a right of veto over the adoption eighteen years ago. Is that right?”

“Oh, I actually checked that out. No you didn't.”

“Are you sure?”

“Oh, yes. I checked it out with Community Services. I thought I better find out since I actually end up dealing with a lot of the cases that involve the birth-fathers. So yes, I found out definitely. The men had no say at all. In fact, they still don't.”

“Hardly seems fair.”

“That's the law regarding guardianship. Only the birth-mother is deemed by the law to be a guardian unless the couple is married. Even then the woman can sign an adoption consent without the father's approval. So, how are you and Annalee getting along?”

“We've been going out for coffees and exchanging plenty of telephone calls and letters. Yeah, there's no problems there. She flirts a bit, but that's pretty typical, I suppose.”

Sharon's eyes lit up. “Oh? And how do you handle that?”

“Well, to be honest, I don't actually notice. Everyone around me notices. My wife tells me. Her teachers say things, but I'm pretty hopeless at picking those things up.”

“Mitchell, don't take me the wrong way here — what I'm going to say — but you're not sexually attracted to her, are you?”

“Not in the slightest. She's nothing like Ellen. She has none of the features I like in women at all. No. Never.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, I'm sure. I suppose that sexual attraction must happen sometimes.”

“Often,” said Sharon, trying to promote this conversation.

She asked this same question in different forms three more times. After the fourth time, Mitchell had had more than enough.

“Look, really, I can't put it any more plainly. I find her physically quite unattractive. If you think I'm sexually attracted to her then you obviously haven't met her.”

Sharon made a note: *Mitchell shows aggression re: sexual attraction to daughter.*

Mitchell decided to drop some acid on her. “Why? Have you heard something?” he asked.

“Oh, this sexual attraction just happens sometimes, that’s all. Can’t be too careful.”

“I actually came out to talk to you about something else. Accessing the file on Anna’s adoption.”

Another note: *Evasive.*

“Well, Mitch, I’m afraid that’s not possible.”

“Why not? She’s eighteen. And remember that fax I sent you from the Minister? It said I could access information *before* she was eighteen. I never got it then, so I’m wanting it now.”

“But you’ve found Anna now. The information’s just to help you locate her.”

“Sharon look,” Mitchell was nice as pie, “I just want to refresh my memory about a few things so I can answer some of Anna’s questions. She seems keen to know the whole story.”

“Well, I’m sorry, to tell you Mitchell that I’ve checked it out. You’re not entitled to any information unless you signed the consent form.”

“But that just doesn’t seem right. I’m acknowledged as the father. There are things I’d like to know. In fact, those documents must mention me and I want to know if they’re accurate.”

“I’m sorry, Mitchell, but according to the *Adoption Information Regulation 1990*, only the person who signed the consent can access those documents. Why don’t you contact Ellen?”

“Oh, I can’t do that. It would be very upsetting for her. It was hard enough for her when I made contact to have my name put on the birth certificate.”

“Well, I’m sorry Mitchell, but my hands are tied. It’s the law. Now about you and Annalee. Have you noticed her being nervous or anything like that?”

“Look, Sharon, before we go to that, I really want to clear up this document business. I really don’t want to contact Ellen. It’s not right to invade her privacy. Can’t you just do us a little favour?”

“It’s the law, Mitchell. You get the law changed and I’ll gladly open the file. I think the law is unfair, too.”

“Do you?”

“Yes I do. Grossly unfair to you men.”

“Well, that’s really good, Sharon.” Mitchell opened his brief case, “because I happen to have a copy of the *Adoption Information Regulation 1996* here. It’s been amended. And nowhere does it

make any distinction between natural mothers or natural fathers in their rights to have access to information.”

He threw it on the table. She looked stony. “Where did you get that from?”

“Never mind where I got it from. Just mind what it says.”

“Well, all adoption workers have always interpreted it to mean that only the birth-mother or the person who signed the consent can have access to the information.”

“Then all adoption workers are ignorant of the law.”

“It’s always been done that way.”

“Well, it’s always been done wrong.”

“Those documents belong to the person who signed them.”

Mitchell tapped his finger on the Regulation. “Section and clause, please.”

“Well I’ll have to check those amendments.”

“Actually, the amendments don’t make any difference.” He pulled from his brief case a copy of the *1990 Regulation* and compared it to the 1996 version. “According to this, there has never been any distinction between the consenting and non-consenting natural parent. And my information is that adoption agencies regularly withhold documents from mothers as well, so don’t give me any of your discriminatory crap. You just get to work and put together all the documents listed in these regulations as my entitlement. You understand me?”

“Mitchell, it is highly irregular. I’ll have to check it out.”

“Well, you check it out quick smart. And while you’re there, I’ll get you to check out something else. I have asked you twice now if I had any right of veto over the adoption in 1980. Each time you’ve given me a different answer. Now I’m asking you again, did I or did I not have a right to veto the adoption or to adopt the child myself, back in 1980?”

She looked flustered.

“I’m not sure. I’ll — ”

He said it with her, “ — have to check it out.”

“Yes,” Mitchell said. “But you just told me a minute ago, that you *had* checked it out. Now what does the law say? Did I have the right of veto or did I not?”

“I don’t know.”

“Right! Some honesty at last.”

She visibly shuddered.

Mitchell pulled the *Adoption of Children Act 1965* out of his bag followed by the *Children (Equality of Status) Act 1976*, and threw them both on the table. “Well Mssssss Tilley,” he said with volcanic sarcasm, “You have a bit of reading to do.”

“Do you work for a law firm or something?”

“Oh, no, Ms Tilley,” this was Mitch’s moment, “I work as a Parliamentary Research Officer for the New South Wales Legislative Council for half the week — ”

“Oh!” she laughed, attempting to maintain command of the interview. “The Inquiry!”

He just barreled on: “ — and the other half of the week I work for the media. Be afraid, Ms Tilley. Be very afraid. I am your worst nightmare.”

Ok, so Mitchell mixed his movie quotes. At this stage Mitchell wasn’t as worried about what he was saying, as she was. “Now, you get those bloody documents to me pronto, or you WILL be hearing from my solicitors.”

She laughed again in a high-pitched shrill. “Oh, Mr Hearn, I’ve never seen such behaviour!”

She put on a brave face but she was highly nervous, so Mitchell pressed on. “I don’t think I’m the one in this room pretending, Sharon. I’m not a twenty-year-old know-nothing these days. Eighteen years ago I had about two weeks to sort it all out, so your predecessors got me. But I’m on no time limit these days. If it takes the next forty years then I will take the next forty years. So don’t stuff me around. Believe me, it is in your best interests just to give me what I want.”

“Bye-bye Mr Hearn,” she said with her pseudo-bravado.

Mitchell stood to leave, picking up the legislation. “These are my copies. Get your own. Oh and by the way, exactly where do you get off telling Anna that I’m weird? When were you going to tell me that little detail? Until today you had never even met me. What gives you the right to put those sorts of thoughts into my daughter’s head?”

“Mitchell, I have always stressed to Anna just how normal your reactions are.”

“Well, in the light of your obvious incompetence regarding the legislation and other aspects of your job, I think that if you have any more contact with Anna, the only ethical course of action would be to refer her to Sarah at Post Adoption Resource Centre, without saying another word. Do you understand? And if I hear that you have in any way further interfered with my relationship to

my daughter then I will talk personally with Father John Exadate. Now, get those documents to my home address post-haste.”

Tilley watched through her office window as Mitchell strode down the path of the convent. “Dear Mr Hearn,” she muttered with a grim smile, “She’ll never want to see you again.”

Mitchell walked out the front gate of St Mary of Dolleurs Inner West Mission building. He was angry. He was in pain. But he was with purpose.

For the first time in eighteen years, Mitchell was awake.

§

Two weeks later, he received a phone call from Tilley. “Your documents are ready. There’s not much there.”

Before picking them up, Mitchell wrote Sharon a letter listing all the things in the Regulation which she had left out.

As predicted, her documentation was pathetic. Nine lines of typed information he already had, the name of Anna’s family, their weight, eye-colour, an address from eighteen years ago. It even listed Anna’s “*last known name: Rebecca Decker.*” This was a farce.

Mitchell’s solicitor sent a first letter of demand. Magically, a few medical reports on “Rebecca” surfaced almost immediately.

The solicitor sent a second letter with a specific shopping list — the same list as was in the Regulation.

Again Tilley responded with a few tidbits of (seemingly) little significance, accompanied by a letter stating that the Supreme Court (no less) would not allow the release of the rest of the documents to anyone except the consenting birth-parent.

This was trash and Mitchell and his solicitor knew it.

Time to stop playing games.

Mitchell organised a barrage of questions in Parliament, to be asked by a number of cross-benchers, to the Attorney-General. Parliamentary Hansard recorded the exchanges.

Does the Minister agree that the Adoption Information Act of 1996 makes no distinction between consenting birth-parents and non-consenting birth-parents in respect to their rights to information regarding their relinquished children?

The Minister agreed.

Is the Minister aware that the Department of Community Services has been advising the adoption industry to make such a distinction?"

He was not aware. He would refer it to the Minister for Community Services. Her written reply was emphatic.

***Both** birth parents are equally entitled to adoption information prescribed under the Act ... This **does not** require the father to have given consent to the adoption ... A birth father is entitled to **all** the provisions of the legislation ... **all** birth parents are entitled to the listed prescribed information ...*

And so it went on.

Armed with the Hansard, the letter from the Minister and the legislation, Mitchell's solicitor sent a third letter of demand, this time to Tilley's superior.

In return came a few more documents, but still in defiance even of the Minister's statement, St Mary of Dolleurs refused to release *Form 9 (Request to Make Arrangements for the Adoption)*, Ellen's medical reports and most importantly, the actual consent form itself.

Next stop, the Supreme Court.

The clerk at the adoption counter fed him the same line. "Only the person who signed the consent can access the —"

Before the sentence had even trickled from her lips, Mitchell had the legislation, the Minister's letter and the Hansard spread across the counter. "I would like to speak to the registrar, thanks."

He came to the counter only because Mitchell was wearing his Parliamentary ID. He conceded, "Hmm. Looks like you're right. We'll consider your application on Thursday. Just pay your thirty dollars upstairs at the cashier."

A week later, the Supreme Court sent the consent form, the memorandum and a letter stating Mitchell was right and the adoption industry was wrong. Now armed with the Supreme Court's ruling, an ultimatum was sent to St Mary of Dolleurs: hand over everything you have or else.

Of most interest to Mitchell were the case notes taken by Heather Merken. They would show without any doubt that he had asked to adopt Rebecca himself, or to in some way veto the adoption.

By strange co-incidence, these notes had disappeared. The agency had case notes from interviews with Ellen, which they kept as 'confidential', but the frantic notes that Merken had taken when Mitchell had spoken to her face to face on 3 March 1980 had evaporated.

It had taken him two years of inordinate pressure. Pressure he could apply due only to the nature of his employment, and still Mitchell was denied what he really sought. What chance did other searchers have of cracking this covenant of secrecy?

§

With the scant documentation collected, Mitchell pored over exactly what he had.

Numerous derogatory statements about him and his father, his upbringing and his presence at the hospital. By cross-matching, Mitchell found all these negative notations were in Merken's hand.

Medical examinations of "baby Walsh". "My God! She was still in the hospital up to April 22nd! They told me she was gone on the tenth!"

Mitchell was deeply shocked. "My poor little pixie. Those lying bloody snakes! They left her alone in the hospital for two bloody weeks! That was two-thirds of her entire life! Those thieving bitches!" Mitchell stared at the revelatory medical report on "Rebecca Ellen Walsh", grieving over just how desperately he and Ellen had ached to hold their baby, to kiss her, change her, bathe her, to unify with her, during those two weeks.

He lamented over how utterly senseless it was that Rebecca's true parents were burning to even run their fingers through her golden hair, while she languished with no-one to cuddle her.

The medical reports showed “Rebecca” had become constipated on the hospital baby food formula. “Babies don’t get constipation on mother’s breast milk,” he fumed.

Mitchell couldn’t help but ponder the futility of this whole system, surely a crime against humanity. “My poor little pixie,” he cried over and over as he forced himself to survey other documentation.

There were obvious signs of duress in Ellen’s writing as well. Why would she answer “No” to the question, “*Does baby’s father keep in touch?*” He noted her signature on the consent: sloppy and through the line.

And just four words to describe Mitchell: “*Writes poems and songs.*”

These words touched him to the marrow.

She knew me. She really knew me, he reflected.

Over the years Mitchell had had many doubts about Ellen’s love, but these four words wiped away all disbelief. Eighteen years before, his life had revolved around sport. Ellen met Mitch through sport, socialised with him around sport, followed him to tournament after tournament, boasted of his employment in sport; yet, when put under pressure to describe her lover, utmost in her mind was his artistic side, the side which won out in the end.

How had she known what Mitchell would become — a writer of ads, jingles, books, speeches, poems? She was only seventeen, he was only twenty, but she saw him so clearly.

The tragedy of what had happened to them now became unbearably large to Mitchell.

And there, immediately under Ellen’s chubby script, Merken’s angular scrawl signed the consent-taker’s death warrant: “*Mitchell wanted Ellen to keep the baby.*”

20

Of course with any awakening comes a return to reality, and for Mitchell, this reality brought with it a total revisiting of grief.

Bad as the original trauma had been, in many ways Mitchell found this worse. Eighteen years before, he had no real commitments or responsibilities, so he could grieve when grief arose.

Now grief would come at the most inappropriate times, the smallest things would set him off. On a train. In board meetings. On the floor of Parliament. At his desk. In the studios at 2MH. With Caleb and Jessica. Worst of all, with Angelique.

Even Cirque du Soleil's extraordinary gymnastic theatre, *Saltimbanco*, provided no distraction as Mitchell continually warred within over how much he would have enjoyed sharing this experience with she who had once been the gymnast. Yet, the ultimate cruelty in the rules of this reunion game was that Mitchell was forbidden from even telling Annalee how much she would have liked it.

For months Mitchell battled every minute of every day to hold at bay his emotional geyser. Flashbacks to Ellen's formal photo made him physically retch at the thought of what happened to that pretty teenage girl. He lost twenty per cent of his body weight in the four months after meeting Annalee. He thought he had bowel cancer. It turned out to be "only" stress. Sleep was a premium. Tearful arguments with Angelique were common when they had never been before.

She also suffered physical symptoms. She didn't have a period for three months after meeting Annalee, then six months later she bled continuously for five weeks. Test after test, ultrasound, internal examinations all revealed nothing but emotional tension. The doctor prescribed Valium—thanks but no thanks.

Frequently, the perceptivity of five-year-old Jessica would bore a hole straight through Mitchell's stomach. She never stopped wondering about her "big sister".

"Daddy, are we strange?" she blurted out one dinner time.

"No stranger than anybody else, Jes," Mitchell replied.

"Then why doesn't Anna want to see us?"

He retreated to the office and left Angelique to explain.

For twelve months almost every night Jessica would have the same nightmare, that someone was stealing her from bed as she slept. No amount of comfort would quell her distress. Night after night it would play on her mind, draining Angelique and Mitchell of precious rest.

One lunch time, Caleb proposed that someone should make a movie about his dad's life. Then Jes proposed the title, *The man whose children are not his own*. Somehow, despite all the clear explanations they had given her, her five-year-old logic had interpreted Annalee's existence to mean that she herself was illegitimate.

This explained Jessica's sudden ultra-defiance, her out-of-character stealing at school and her brooding introspections: she was a child of no one, so no one had the right to tell her what to do, least of all this "stranger" she called daddy.

On one occasion, the Hearn's attended a wedding and Angelique, when explaining proceedings to Jessica, mentioned that the father of the bride "gave his daughter away". Jes started screaming uncontrollably right there in the middle of the service that she never wanted daddy to give her away.

Another time, Mitchell had met a woman whose relinquished son had been fathered by a well-known songwriter, a bit of a hero for Mitchell.

While Jes bathed that night, Mitchell sat on the bathroom floor with her towel singing her one of his hero's songs:

"You're loving me, I'll be thinking of you ... "

Jessica replied, "We love you daddy, but all you ever think about is Annalee."

It was true, way too true. But Mitchell couldn't deny the truth to himself – that his own flesh and blood had been stolen and become so many things he disliked in a human being: selfish, materialistic, outwardly shallow but, he suspected, with a very deep and dangerous psychology. Mitchell was convinced though, that it had nothing to do with Anna's upbringing. From what he could see, the Deckers had been duded by the system just as much as he had. They'd been handed a deliberately fractured ego and as a result had been slow to challenge it with "tough" love.

By Anna's own admission she was spoilt rotten. Equally, the natural temperament Anna had obviously inherited from Mitchell and his mother's family was very peculiar, needing peculiar discipline. It was the same temperament in Jessica. Fiercely independent, volatile, indefatigable, gung-ho in everything. It had to be tamed at an early age to be harnessed. Mitchell could see Anna struggling with her identity: a lateral, city-driven radical waging an internal war within a lay-back, rural-friendly environment.

Perhaps boarding school in the big smoke was a relief for her. Still, Mitchell agonised with her inner turmoil every second of the day, wanting so much to help her but unable to. Each was isolated from the other by the unspoken, unwritten restrictions of reunion, which dictate that the natural parent should gush and the pseudo-abandoned child should recoil. Each subconsciously created a false incompatibility, an inevitable result of having been so belatedly thrust together.

§

During the empty months following their last phone call, Mitchell grew to despise everything about Annalee Decker. Her rejection made her so ugly to him, but for every minute that he was separated from her Mitchell grew more and more depressed. He couldn't believe he had lost her twice in one lifetime.

As much as Mitchell disliked her, he longed for her as well. Every time the phone rang, he hoped it would be her. Every letter that he picked up on arrival home each night, he wanted to be from her. Every e-mail and fax that came to the office, he willed to be from her. The Chinese water torture could not have been worse than living like this. "Just to have a red-headed friend," he would cry into his pillow night after night, Angelique oblivious to his sorrow as she nursed her own loneliness.

Each lunchtime, Mitchell would stare at every red head in Martin Plaza, fantasizing it was a chance meeting with Anna. Mitchell was so obsessed he was convinced someone would have him arrested for stalking.

“They have stolen my entire life,” he would mutter like a vagrant. His daughter seemed even less his daughter now that he had actually met her. And to complete his depression, Mitchell mourned for Ellen all over again. All that emotional ballast came to the surface and often he would spend weekends driving in circles around the Central Coast screaming guttural laments reliving the loss of his soulmate. Anguish spilled out of him in a repetitive theme. “Ellen, how could you choose that self-righteous despot over me? Over us?”

So it was with such madness having soaked into his spirit that Mitchell found himself standing on the Parliament House balcony overlooking the Domain. Surveying the day meditating on each lungful of dirty, city air. Was the cost of breathing worth the price?

To his left, carefree sailboats drifted on the harbour. Below him, joggers. To his right, the spot where he had last seen Ellen in 1985 — he had been waiting for the Symphony in the Park to start when she walked past with Richard and their Anna-lee. Mitchell remembered how he had watched them for a full fifteen minutes as they meandered towards the Art Gallery.

He lifted his eyes, and from his twelfth floor vantage point directly at eye level he could see the Catholic girls’ school at Potts Point, a stark reminder of the two Catholic girls he craved for, but was forbidden to see.

Mitchell looked at the footpath below. In seconds, this misery could be all over. He could make the ultimate statement; send the ultimate message to that stuck-up eighteen-year-old. He leaned over the edge and watched his body flying majestically to its broken end. He imagined all the joggers stopping in their tracks. The diners in the ground-floor cafeteria recoiling in shock. He thought of the headline in tomorrow’s paper. *Parliamentary staffer leaps to his death. Premier calls for inquiry.* But would there even be a headline? What did his life matter? His existence served as nothing but a proverb of warning.

Children, don’t you do as I have done,

I couldn’t walk and I tried to run.

So I, I just gotta tell you

Goodbye.

Goodbye.

Mitchell closed his eyes in readiness of this, his final descent, but then suddenly, something like a huge hand pushing on his chest forced him to fall a step backwards, away from the railing.

“What was that?” It wasn’t the breeze. The air was still, silent.

He really didn’t know how it would help but he ran to the lift, rode to the sixth-floor library and looked up Anna’s name in the electoral rolls. And there it was. The first time he had ever seen it in print. She’d told him it was so; he hadn’t believed her. It hadn’t appeared on her amended birth certificate but here it was on an official form: *Decker, Annalee Julie Rebecca*.

REBECCA! It sprang off the page at him. For the first time in nearly two decades Mitchell felt like he existed. He really was attached to her life. They had used the name — his name. It had been with her all along, from before she left the womb. Her parents had been open enough to include it. She had actually written it down on her electoral forms. She didn’t need to since it wasn’t on her birth certificate, but she’d used the name he had given her anyway, voluntarily.

The librarians thought he was a little insane splotching tears onto an electoral roll, but in the significance of the moment he didn’t care about his standing with the librarians. All that mattered to Mitchell was that he was travelling with her and always had. “Too much.”

Mitchell thought of another name he should find on the recently updated roll: *Stenner, Ellen Therese Mary*. He found it fascinating. A university town. Now wouldn’t that be funny ...

To allay his many frustrations, Mitchell the next day bought a big clear plastic box and started putting *objet de sa vie* (objects of his life) in it for Anna, in case he died before he ever saw her again. Writing awards. Swimming medals. His curriculum vitae. Copies of their letters. All her documents as they came in. A replacement Benson Teddy — he assumed she had ripped the head off the first one. It was his way of having a conversation with her even though she wasn’t there.

And then there was Father’s Day. Mitch didn’t expect anything from her, although he would have cherished it, if it had come.

But again, it proved to be a church service that would wound him unknowingly. There was a special presentation, a film of different fathers in the congregation with their children. He was cool. At his detached best, until the shots of the pastor playing frisbee on the beach with his adopted

daughter. The image was just too powerful and Mitchell could do nothing but bury his face into Angelique's shoulder and sob pitifully.

Everyone else saw a father fulfilled, but Mitchell could only see a father and a mother denied.

It was all bound to catch up with him, and at one of the public hearings for the Inquiry, it did.

§

Mitchell knew he should have stayed away, but the Inquiry's Speaker List was too captivating. *Ms Maureen Dyson, former Chief Executive Officer of St Mary of Dolleurs Adoption Branch 1975 to 1987. Thirty years adoption worker and counselor.*

Yeah, right, he thought derisively as he read the notice. Let's hear you explain yourself, vulture.

The majority of her testimony was disappointing. Like her current progeny at St Mary of Dolleurs, Dyson was masterful at dodging questions and changing the subject. The gallery was particularly vocal however. When she explained some of her actions away as simply "the social beliefs of the time" there was public eruption — one of the few male voices in the gallery yelling, "It was only 1980, woman!"

She divulged that she was writing a book on the history of adoption in this country. None of the hundreds of natural mothers in the gallery could believe the bare-faced arrogance of this woman audaciously rewriting history to make herself look like a hero. The scorn was palpable.

"What are you going to call it? 'My Putrid Career'?" called the male voice again. "More like 'In Cold Blood-lust'," called a mother, whose "consent" had been extracted by Dyson herself.

"A little courtesy!" instructed the Inquiry Chair, but it was hardly enough to quell tempers.

Dyson's brazen temerity was again highlighted in her answer to the very last question.

"Ms Dyson, what about the men in all this. What rights did the birth-fathers have to veto the adoptions or to adopt the child themselves?"

Mitchell had fed this question to the Committee — an open bear-trap, and Dyson stepped right on it.

"None. No rights at all. The boys, the men, had no rights at all. In fact they still don't."

Again a single male voice behind the Committee could not be contained. "Got you, you bloody witch."

She had given the same answer as Tilley had given, almost word for word. Now it was on public record. Obviously this had been unofficial policy at St Mary of Dolleurs Adoption Branch for years — at best a systematic and deliberate ignorance of the law; at worst a willing defiance of the blatant clauses in the legislation.

Dyson finished her testimony and with such unspeakable effrontery, sat down amongst a group of birth-mothers, about two seats away from Mitchell! With the *Adoption Act* in hand, he could resist no longer and leapt to his feet waving it in her face. “You’re supposed to be a professional and you don’t even know the most basic clauses governing what you’re supposed to be doing! Look! Look at this! Clause 20: *The Court shall not make an order for the adoption of a child in favour of a person who has not attained the age of twenty-one years, unless the applicant is a natural parent or relative of the child.* Quite clearly either myself or my mother could have adopted the child!”

Dyson protested, “Oh that was sorted out by Professor Handley at the Law Reform Commission in 1993.”

“His name is Professor Hambly,” Mitchell retorted, highlighting her incompetence, “and I’ve read every word he had to say on the subject. You’re not standing over a frightened little fifteen-year-old Catholic school girlie, now!”

There was a call for order and Mitchell backed off before he accosted her with section 23 and section 26, or the *Equality of Status Act* clause six. He had shot his weakest legislative bullet at Dyson, but it was enough to put deep cracks of shock in her ashen face, so he quickly pressed the advantage to the floor.

“And how could you say what you said to the adoptive parents?” he continued. “How you could hand my child to them and say that this adoption was ‘horrible’ and ‘nasty’ and ‘pretty awful’? How could you say that? If you knew! If you knew what Ellen had gone through, and you as the Executive Officer just stood by watching, and did absolutely nothing!”

With the next witness ready to testify, the Committee members were now forcefully calling for quiet in the gallery, threatening to eject Mitchell if he didn’t back away from the cowering Dyson.

“If you knew!” Mitchell repeated, pointing his index finger in Dyson’s face. She defiantly eyeballed him for several seconds, the rhino versus the mule. Finally, she looked away.

A number of people behind Dyson gave Mitchell the “thumbs up”. One male adoptee beamed at him, “Good onya mate” and surrendering mothers smiled warmly quietly clapping in Mitch’s direction.

But he’d made one mistake — he’d forgotten to remove his Parliamentary ID.

§

Immediately after the hearings finished, Maureen Dyson sped out to St Mary of Dolleurs.

“I’ve just been attacked at the Inquiry by some deranged birth-father. He was wearing a Parliamentary badge. Anyone have any clues?”

Sharon looked knowingly. “Oh yeah. We know who that is.”

After five minutes talking to Tilley, Dyson asked the most expedient question. “Do we still have a shredder?”

She muttered to herself as yet another file buzzed through the electronic guillotines, emerging as confetti.

“Everything was fine until these bloody birth-parents stuck their stupid noses into it! The children were happy. The parents were happy. The industry was just fine! Why can’t these interfering nobodies get on with their lives and leave everybody else to theirs?”

§

Next morning was a busy one for Maureen Dyson. She had three telephone calls to make.

“Standing Committee.”

“Yes, it’s Maureen Dyson here. I gave evidence at the Inquiry yesterday and I wish to make a formal complaint about one of your staff members. In fact, I believe he should be removed from his position.”

The second call. “Roslyn Decker speaking.”

“Ros! Hello, it’s Maureen Dyson here! How are you?”

“Maureen! Long time!”

“So, what’s the latest?”

“Well Anna met her birth-father earlier this year.”

“Oh, yes. I think I met him, too — yesterday at Parliament House.”

“That’s right. He works at Parliament. What were you doing in there?”

“Oh, a bit of research for the book. Yes. He’s a bit weird, this character. You want to be careful with Anna.”

“Someone else said that to her, too. She’s got plenty to keep herself out of trouble at the moment with the HSC.”

“HSC! Doesn’t time fly!”

And then the third call. “Mitchell Hearn speaking.”

“Yes, Mr Hearn. My name is Maureen Dyson. We met yesterday at the Inquiry.”

“I am well aware of who you are, Ms Dyson.”

“I was wondering if you’d be interested in having your story represented in my book.”

Misrepresented, more like it, Mitchell thought. He was absolutely stunned at the sheer unsullied cheek of this woman. “No, I don’t think so Ms Dyson. Goodbye.”

He hung up and immediately wished he hadn’t. “How on Earth did she get my name?”

He walked down to the Social Committee’s office and asked to speak to the Head Clerk.

“Oh, yes, Mr Hearn we’ve been wanting to speak with you.”

Mitchell went into her office. “Look, I’ve just had a call from Maureen Dyson. I’m just wondering how she got my name and number? Did anyone here give it to her?”

“Well, I had a call from her this morning, too, and she already had your name.”

“Must have been the agency.”

The Head Clerk then ripped into Mitchell for his performance at the Inquiry, for which he apologised profusely. At the next public meeting, he caught the Head Clerk’s eye and did a zipper motion across his mouth. She laughed — everything seemed to be ok.

But Mitchell was starting to realise just how unscrupulous the people were who had been running the adoption industry. For Maureen Dyson to have Mitchell’s employment threatened, and then to still believe she had any call to “represent” his story, to Mitchell seemed unconscionable. What sort of pathology was this? It seemed Dyson and her ilk could not see natural parents of adopted children as anything more than automatons in a production line. Eighteen years ago the

end product was a child. Now it was Dyson's pustulous book, but whatever the product, surrendering parents were to be no more than simply inanimate cogs in a conveyor belt.

Someone had to bring the Dysons and Merkens of this world to heel. Mitchell had the laws. He had the evidence. He had a willing set of legal minds. Just one thing stood in his way.

§

How anyone could live far from the ocean Mitchell had no idea. One of the things that most upset him about Annalee's placement was that she was so far from the beach. "Just like Ellen and Mitch" they had promised. Of all the lies, to Mitchell this was the one that cut the deepest.

Mitchell was sure towns like Oberon, were all pretty places in their own right. And that the people who live there love their locale dearly. In fact, Anna had asked him how anyone could have neighbours closer than ten acres!

But as for Mitchell, he couldn't understand how anyone who had lived near the beach even for one day, could move so far away from it.

The surrounds of Wamberal were particularly significant to him, mostly for tragic reasons. From the shoreline where he strolled slowly hand in hand with Angelique, while Caleb and Jes dodged the waves and scared seagulls, Mitchell could see the place where his producer Scott had hit the sand, dead at twenty-three from a heart attack. Mitchell could see the house of his best friend, whose most beautiful wife died in childbirth aged just thirty-nine. This friend had never been the same since. Now, as Mitchell approached his thirty-ninth birthday it seemed utterly wrong in the scheme of the world that he should ever have outlived her. Mitchell would sometimes try to explain it to himself. "I guess God was just in a heavenly hurry for her company."

And there was Terrigal Skillion behind Mitchell, where very soon his first born would walk in celebration of her end of school. She would be closer to Mitchell geographically than she had ever been for most of eighteen years, and yet she was emotionally further away than when she was born. Just a few days earlier she had sent back the "Best wishes, good luck" card Mitchell had sent her for the HSC. It had been opened, so at least the message got through. And both Angelique and Mitch were impressed with her homemade return envelope. But it was an obvious message: "Get lost." What was going on in her mind?

She was still the only thing going on in Mitchell's mind. She and the events of eighteen years before. Even just this act of walking a beach hand-in-hand with a beautiful woman was awkwardly reminiscent of his teenage days at Dee Why and Queenscliff.

However, Mitchell's mission this day was not so carefree. He stopped Ange on the sand dunes and asked her without flinching, "How would you feel if I sued the adoption agency for ten million dollars?"

She was calm. But it would still be an emotional response. "Mitch, I am really tired. Wrung out. All this has been too much. I feel you tossing and turning every night. I see you moping around the house. You're so melancholy these days. Nothing makes you happy. The kids know it too. Can't you move on? Can't you please leave Anna be? Forget about her. She doesn't want to know you. You have two children who just idolise you. Isn't that enough? Can't you accept what you have? You're risking it all. Including me. You know, all my married life I have lived in Ellen's shadow. Everything I have ever done for you, was to prove to you that I am better than Ellen. When Caleb was born I was so disappointed at first that it was a son, and not a replacement for Rebecca. But then I thought, 'Well, I've given Mitch something that Ellen never gave him.' But I still didn't feel I was better than her in your eyes. Then along came Jes. And I thought, Great! A daughter! Now he can forget about Ellen and Rebecca.

"Do you remember what I said to you when Jes was born?"

"Of course. You handed her to me and said, 'There's your little girl'."

"So why do I still feel like second best? I've done everything I can Mitch. I supported you meeting Anna. But none of it has made you happy. In fact, you're pretty boring to live with now. All your sense of humour is gone. You're never here. You're always with Annalee Decker. I know. It's written all over you."

"Ange, you just don't know what it's like. Imagine your first born. Imagine if someone took Caleb, completely against your will. Just took him and hid him for eighteen years. Would you ever forget? Even if you had other children?"

"Wouldn't you want to find him the first moment you could? And what if you found him and he had been turned into everything you couldn't stand? What if he had been taught subconsciously to hate you, to think you rejected him or left him on a doorstep somewhere? You'd want to do everything in your power to put the record straight, wouldn't you? Ange, you just don't know what

it's like to have your own flesh and blood call someone else 'mum and dad.' And then to have her hate you for them to have the privilege."

"Mitch, I just want this to finish so I can have my husband back."

"Look, if I could wave a magic wand and make Annalee Decker the natural-born child of Ros and Lawry I'd do it today. I can live without this pain. And, let's face it, that's what she really wants. But, we have to live in the real world. You knew all about this long before we were married. It's not like I sucked you into this blind."

"But no one told me it would be like this."

"No one told anyone. Let's face it, I'm in the same boat, Ellen's in the same boat, so are the Deckers for that matter. We've all been lied to by these baby-stealing parasites. They have to be stopped. There are thousands of people hurting just like we are because these scavengers of human flesh decided they were above the law, and they're still doing it!"

"Well, they'll get theirs from someone else. I just don't think this family would survive if you were the one to sue. The stakes are just too high. You're already falling to bits. How much worse are you going to be, getting through a court case?"

"To be really honest Mitch, if you'd told me thirteen years ago that it was all going to be this bad, I never would have married you."

"I'm sorry Ange, but my sanity depends on exposing the truth."

"Mitch, everyone else's sanity depends on maintaining the lie."

"Everyone except me and Anna."

"No! Everyone! Especially Anna! Don't ever think that she wants what you want out of all this!"

"I take it then Angie, that this is *el negativo* to the law suit?"

§

It's good to have connections in the radio industry sometimes. Mitchell sent the advanced tickets for the Shania Twain concert up to the Deckers while the HSC was on. Coincidentally, it was his thirty-ninth birthday when Ros called him in the evening.

"Mitchell, this is a very nice gesture. Four tickets like this but I'm sorry we just can't accept it."

“What? Why not? It's a simple Christmas present for Anna, that's all.”

“Look Mitchell, we've made a big mistake allowing Anna to make contact with you. I'm sorry, but please don't ever contact us again. Or Anna.”

“What is going on, Ros? Last time we spoke in July you were very receptive. Very open. You agreed that Anna was being unfair. You agreed she'd probably calm down with time, once the HSC was over. All I want is for you all to go out and enjoy the evening at the concert. I haven't booked the two seats next to you, if that's what you're thinking. I won't be there. It's totally above board.”

“I'm sorry, Mitchell, but we're just protecting Ann. We can't allow her to be associated with someone like you.”

“What are you talking about, ‘someone like me’?” Then he twigged. “Has Anna still been talking to Sharon at the agency?”

“Well, yes, but it's not just Sharon.”

“Who else? What's going on Ros?”

“Look Mitchell, we have a very dear friend who has known us for a long time and we trust her. Now she knew you eighteen years ago and she tells us — ”

“Maureen Dyson!”

“Mitchell, we know all about you.”

“What do you mean you know all about me? There's nothing to know!”

“Well Maureen says you attacked her at Parliament House. She says there was an AVO taken out on you when Anna was born. That's why they wouldn't allow you to adopt her. And Sharon says you're unstable.”

Mitchell was fuming but he had to remain calm. “Ros. Ros, please stop and think about this. Please! These people that have been telling you and Anna that I'm some sort of nutcase. Look at this logically. Do you think I could hold down a responsible parliamentary job if I was a loonie? If that AVO was in any way valid I wouldn't be allowed through the front door, let alone on the floor of the House! And how long do you think I'd last in the pressure cooker of Sydney radio as a Creative Director if I was mentally unstable? I certainly wouldn't be an award-winner or a sought-after freelancer, would I?”

“And, furthermore, just how much do you think these people have Anna’s best interests at heart, telling her that her genetic heritage is tarred by insanity? These people saying these things — I’ve only ever met them once!”

“Obviously they’re getting a very bad first impression!”

“Oh, these things were being said to Anna before I’d even met Sharon Tilley!

“Please Ros, think this through. When you told me what Maureen Dyson said to you the day they handed Annalee over, there was more than a twinge of apprehension in your voice. You know what’s going on, Ros. You’re too smart to bury your head in the sand forever.”

“I don’t know what you’re up to Mitchell, but I just don’t want Anna to get hurt.”

“She’s already hurting big ones, Ros. This is killing her. At the moment I’m not up to anything really. But 1999 is going to be a very hard year for adoptees, natural parents and adopted parents, so we’re all going to have to work towards looking after her. I’m just trying to show her I’m not a total bozo, you know. I realise I made mistakes earlier this year, but I’m just going to chip away at it. See what happens.”

“What do you mean next year is going to be a hard year for everyone?”

“Well the Inquiry. They’re really going to be digging up plenty of dirt next year after the State election. They’ve just been surface-trawling so far. In fact, I wouldn’t be surprised if Maureen gets called back in.”

“What Inquiry? Maureen never said anything about an Inquiry.”

“What do you think she was doing in Parliament House? She’d been called before the Upper House Inquiry into Adoption Practices to explain herself. That’s how I met her. I went to hear her testimony and was so incensed at her lies, I gave her a quick lesson in clause 20 of the *Adoption Act*.”

“What Inquiry is this? Mitchell, what’s going on?”

“Well, Ros, it seems there have been many, many ‘nasty things’ going on in the distribution of children for adoption. I thought everyone knew this. It’s been in all the papers, on the TV and everything.”

“I thought I saw something, but isn’t it just about the Fifties, when they’d drug the girls and suffocate them with pillows or told them the child had died?”

“Yes, well that’s what the agencies want everyone to believe. Ros, I’m sorry to tell you, but these illegal adoptions are still going on. Dozens and dozens of laws have been violated with every single adoption in the past thirty years ... ” The words escaped the prison of Mitchell’s mouth before he realised what he’d said. This was a woman who had benefited from two such adoptions.

“But ours were legal. I know.”

“Ros,” Mitchell sighed, not knowing which way to jump, “just take the Shania Twain tickets and have great night, all of you.

“Nothing is going to happen. Nothing will change the fact that you and Lawry are Anna’s parents. You will always be. I just want you to know that in all this I have always tried to act with integrity and fairness. I’m not a loonie. I’m not violent or dangerous. I mean really, Ros, I’ve worked for six months in a building which overlooks Anna’s school playground. How hard do you think that is? But I’ve avoided going near the school so I wouldn’t freak Anna out. And it hasn’t been easy. When I play squash at North Sydney courts at lunchtime I have to walk an extra block just to avoid being seen from the school. My highest interest is Anna’s well being. Please believe me on that, Ros.”

There was a moment’s silence. “Mitch, you just do what you have to do.”

Angelique’s face throughout the entire phone call was one of intense concern. She couldn’t wait for her husband to hang up.

“What on Earth was all that about?”

“Oh, those turds at the agency have told the Deckers I’m mentally unstable.”

“They what!”

“That bloody Maureen Dyson! On the same day she asked me to help her with her bloody book, she rings Ros and defames me. And that idiot Sharon Tilley has been counselling Anna that I’m a nutter. That is just totally unethical. I’ll get one of the parliamentarians to approach Father Exadate about this. It’s disgusting!”

Mitchell sat down next to Angie and patted her thigh. She was fuming.

“Don’t worry about it, babe,” he said. “They’ll get theirs.”

She was silently furious for almost half an hour. She went to the refrigerator, opened it then stopped.

“How much did you say you were going to sue them for?” she asked.

“Ten mil.”

She took the iced water and poured, but she couldn't drink. She stood face to face with her husband's torment, and couldn't stand to see him unable to resolve it, so she steeled herself with a deep breath, and stoically said to him, “Well double it.”

It was Mitchell's thirty-ninth birthday and Hurricane Mitch had ripped through Central America.

A portent. Now across the Pacific, another Hurricane Mitch was about to rip into the New South Wales adoption industry.

21

At one-thirty in the morning on the first Saturday in December, a frantic Ros Decker called. "Mitch, we need your help."

Anna had spent her end-of-school breakout week at the Holiday Inn Terrigal as planned (Lawry had paid for the accommodation), but on the last Saturday night she'd apparently been picked up in possession of weed and smack, about two-thousand dollars in street value.

"She insists it was planted on her at a party. She was leaving the party early when the police stopped her on the footpath outside. It must have been planted. She wouldn't have that much money on her. She's at Gosford Police Station. Can you bail her out? She knows you're coming to see her."

"How is she on that score?"

"She's ok about it. She just doesn't want to spend the night in the lock-up."

"How much is bail?"

"She didn't know. We talked to an officer there and she said it would probably be only a few thousand dollars."

"A few thousand dollars! It's Saturday night, Ros! I don't have a few thousand dollars just hanging around the house!"

"They'll take a cheque."

"I don't have a few thousand dollars sitting idle in my cheque account either!"

Mitchell had just received a six-thousand-dollar tax return, but it was already earmarked for renovations.

“Mitch, please, you’re the only person we know up there. Just give them the cheque and we’ll repay it when we arrive tomorrow night.”

As he walked into Gosford Police Station Mitchell was greeted by a voice he knew. “Giddy, Mitch, what you in here for? Writing bad radio ads without a licence?”

“Yeah, well, you don’t get more criminal than that, Adam. No, I’m here to bail out my daughter.”

Adam looked totally confused. “Jes been riding her tricycle under the influence?”

“I have a renegade eighteen-year-old, Adam.”

“Really? Is she in Campus Life? Do I know her?”

“No, Adam. Even I don’t know her. It’s a long story.”

“Which one is she? I’ll look after it for you.”

“Annalee Decker.”

“Oh, right. Yeah, the red-head. She’s been pretty quiet. First offender. Got her undercover on a rave party sting in Erina.”

“What’s the story?”

“Sold about five-hundred bucks’ worth of grass to one of our girls out the back of the party. Then she left early. We grabbed her on the footpath outside. Emptied her pockets. Found her with about two grands worth of junk.”

“Was she alone? Were other’s caught?”

“Oh yeah! One guy had about twenty-five grands worth in the boot of his car! He was obviously the main man for the night! We know him from priors. That’s why we were there. Little red was just a bit of a bonus. She wasn’t real smart. First-timer if you ask me.”

“And how much is bail?”

“Five thousand.”

“Strike a light, Adam!”

“Sorry, Mitch. That’s standard. Couldn’t have helped you even if I’d known.”

“Right. Can I see her?”

“Yeah. Just wait here. I’ll organise an interview room and a police woman.”

Adam led Mitchell through a maze of offices, lock-ups and stationery cupboards to a rear room.

Mitch stepped through the door and there Annalee sat at a table, clicking her long, painted nails. At least she's not a nail biter, he thought.

She looked quite cute — full make-up but still the baggy shirt and neat jeans. Black smudges on the tip of each finger.

“First time I've ever seen you with your hair out, Ann,” Mitchell opened. “Looks nice.”

“Hmm.” She just looked at the desktop, contrite, chastened. Mitchell sensed a touch of theatre in it, but it seemed genuine enough.

“So, what's the story?”

“I was at this party. Some guy got busted for drugs on the street outside. Someone panicked and slipped a wad into my jacket without me knowing. It was really crowded, and when I went to go back to Terrigal, the cops grabbed me outside and found it. The only reason I was caught was 'cause I had a headache and left early. I was going back to the hotel to sleep.”

“And that's the truth, is it? The full story?”

She looked up square into his face. “Yep.”

She could lie just like Ellen. He could see she'd been crying.

“Anna,” Mitchell remained the epitome of calm. He could afford to be in his local police station. “Let me tell you something about your situation. You're not in Oberon now. You're not in your dorm at Monte. You're on my turf now. And I know these people. I know them personally and have done for quite a long time. The cop who showed me through, Adam, we go to church together. I made a video with him about street kids a few years ago. The officer who charged you, Joel, speaks to my son's school about road safety, he runs a youth group next door to here. His father and I have the same circle of friends.

“And the girl at the party, the one you sold five-hundred dollars' worth of grass to, teaches Jes Sunday school. So do you want to change your story a little?”

She fidgeted. The façade was cracking, but as an actress she was good. “I'm sorry.”

“Anna, all I want is the truth. I know you think I'm a total moron but I can put two and two together. The discolouration in your teeth, Hampton Court, your obsession with the piss, your smoker's cough, *Copperhead Road*. Your 'smart as' attitude. I know you're smoking Anna. Now just give me some truth.” Mitchell mused on his last line. One day I'll realise John Lennon is dead, he thought.

“Don’t tell my parents, ok?”

Mitchell pulled back in his seat and gave her a “don’t be stupid” look. “And what am I? A chocolate truffle?”

It was cat and mouse. Mitchell could say anything he liked and she had to maintain the act to placate him, so she was effectively gagged. He could make his points about their true relationship and she was defenceless.

“Anna, it’s almost a quarter-to-three in the morning. All I want to do is go back to bed. Now, either you tell me the truth and I bail you out, or you spend the night in the lock-up and your parents — your other parents — will come and get you tomorrow afternoon.”

She decided to confess.

“I was the designated buyer. We put all our money together. We knew we could score at this party. I went in, bought three-thousand bucks worth from this guy. Grass, tabs and a couple of sachets of hammer. I’d made a good deal on the grass and I couldn’t carry it all in my pockets, so I sold off some to the copper, to make a bit for myself, to pay for my weed. Left the party. Got busted. The end.”

“The end.” Mitchell deep-breathed.

She could see he was expecting more. “Look, I’m sorry. I made a mistake. I don’t want to spend the night in the lock-up.”

She was now the scared little child. She could run the full gamut.

“So, you’re buying and selling drugs now, Anna?”

“Yeah, well, pharmacy’s in my heritage.”

It was the cheekiest grin Mitchell had ever seen.

“Please!” he grinned back, “Don’t remind me!”

They looked at each other smiling. Mitchell knew Anna was acting but it still drew him in. Her comic timing was impeccable. *And to think she’s part of me.*

Mitchell scratched out the cheque and gave it to Adam, who gave her his unimpressed cop look, as he went through her bail instructions. “We’ll notify you about the court date. Conditions of bail are that you stay with Mitchell until your adoptive parents arrive. You report here with them before you go back to Oberon and you report to Oberon police when you get there. Is that understood, Anna?”

She nodded repentantly.

It was now ten-past-three in the morning. It only cost five thousand dollars, but at last Jes is going to meet her big sister, Mitchell thought.

Too soon. Anna and Mitchell passed through the automatic sliding glass doors of the police station and into the humid summer darkness. Anna actually started skipping down the pathway. Then Mitchell realised that Annalee's sudden gaiety had nothing to do with him. A tall, dark-haired scruff leaned against a white early-model BMW across the road and from photos Anna had shown him, Mitchell recognised Georgie sitting in the back seat of the car.

Anna walked straight up to the scruff and they immediately exchanged tongues.

As Mitchell approached they unlocked their faces.

"Anna will see you some other time," Mitchell said grabbing her arm. She shook it loose and without a word from either of them she ran around the car and jumped in the passenger side.

"Hey, Anna, is that Captain Lovie-duv?" Georgie laughed.

The two girls squeezed their heads out through the sunroof as the Beemer took a U-turn across the double lines outside the police station.

"See you later, dickhead," yelled Anna.

"Hey, you schmaltzy prick," called Georgie as they both swayed their arms back and forth over their heads singing, "Don't wanna lose you now, Gonna get through somehow, Don't wanna lose you now or ever ..."

They both fell back into the car laughing.

Mitchell stood there like a half-sucked dummy.

He'd been hustled by a performance that would have done his mother proud, and that's saying something — his mum had sung *Butterfly* for the Australian Opera.

Mitchell took a note of the car's number plate. It was the same car he'd seen doing donuts on his corner the weekend before.

He now had two choices. He could march back into the police station and declare Anna AWOL, which would cost him \$5000, or he could chase after her, which he quickly calculated would cost him a lot more.

The cops had her back in the lock-up within fifteen minutes, around the time Lawry answered the phone.

Mitchell had not built up any rapport with Lawry. It had always been Ros. Mitchell had had one very uneasy phone conversation with Lawry. Mitchell didn't know if Lawry felt threatened or if he was just a quiet kind of guy, but the awkward circumstances of this phone call were not going to endear them to each other.

Lawry was unimpressed. "What do you mean, it'll cost me another five thousand tomorrow? I haven't got ten grand just hanging around!"

"Sell your speed boat." Three-thirty in the morning seemed the perfect time for Mitchell's sarcasm.

"You lost her, buddy. I'm not responsible for you letting her go! Look, as it is I have to pay a small fortune to a stand-in business manager for the servo while we're up there sorting this out. I have to pay for our accommodation at the Holiday Inn with Anna. I've already paid for her holiday. What do you think, we're made of money?"

"No, I don't, but Anna does."

"You little smart-arse. You think we've done such a bad job!"

"Lawry, don't go there!"

"You have her for two minutes and she's made you look like a dickhead!"

"Funny, that's just what Anna said! I can see where she gets it from."

"Yeah. And I can see where she gets her criminal behaviour from 'Mr AVO'."

"Look, Lawry, it's nearly four in the morning. We're both tired, under stress. We both just want the best for Anna, and I don't think it's in her best interests if we're throwing insults at each other. Now, I'm sorry if I've said a few stupid things — "

"Yeah, me too, Mitchell."

"Let's just get some sleep. At least we all know where she is, right? We know she's out of harm's way. You bail her out tomorrow. Have a bloody good talk to her. Take her back to Oberon. Keep an eye on her. Maybe a night in the lock up will scare some sense into her."

"Yeah, sorry mate. We're just a bit ... you know ... "

"Good onya, Lawry. Give us a call if I can help out."

Mitchell's big problem now was explaining the loss of five-thousand dollars to Angelique. Looked like the gutters were going to leak, the fence was going to lean, the paint was going to peel and the carpet would continue to fade until next year's tax return.

When he went back to bed, Angelique lay perfectly still with her back to him. Later Mitchell heard her crying into her pillow. There was no consoling her.

On Christmas eve Mitch received an envelope addressed in Anna's handwriting.

Inside were the four Shania Twain tickets, ripped into a thousand pieces.

Thankfully, Adam handed him another envelope the following weekend with something else in it ripped into a few hundred pieces — Mitchell's cheque.

§

Friday the 22nd January 1999 was the one bright light, but again a light that had to remain under a bushel.

Although it was a day off for Mitchell, he was still up at six o'clock — the papers were to print all university placements from the 1998 HSC.

Not having any clue as to how she had fared, Mitchell's eyes searched frantically through the "D"s, and spontaneously his hands started trembling. Decker, Annalee Julie, had scored better than ninety-five per cent gaining her first-choice university entrance mark for speech therapy.

Mitchell was absolutely ecstatic for both of them. For her because she had put the trauma of reunion behind her to perform so amazingly well, and for himself because no one could blame him for upsetting her HSC year.

But, with whom could he share this joyous news? Angelique had blood tests that day and through her worry wasn't interested in anything to do with Miss Decker. On the contrary, it had become obvious that she had grown uncomplicatedly jealous of Annalee.

Mitchell looked up Anna's phone number wanting desperately to call her and congratulate her, but he dared not.

He even found Ellen's phone number; but no, it would be way too much for both of them as a first contact in sixteen years.

Mitchell pulled out the congratulations card he had bought for Anna in August but the nerves in his hand made it impossible to write anything on it.

So he turned on the computer and wrote her a note, then sealed it with the card in the envelope, addressed it, and put it straight into the "Annalee" box — cut out the middle man.

The internal contradiction was unbearable. Mitchell was so happy at Anna's success but yet so melancholy that he was disqualified from sharing this moment with her. And he certainly wasn't permitted to feel proud.

Mitchell thought of all the pats on the back that Ros and Lawry would receive. They deserved them. It seemed their schooling decision was right, as much as it irked him to concede it.

But, Mitchell had the satisfaction of knowing one thing — that every textbook he still had from his time in psychology 101, told him that intelligence is one-hundred per cent hereditary. He always knew she had geniuses for grandparents.

Part 3

Bring your lawyer, I'll bring mine

22

Their witness list wasn't perfect, but it wasn't bad.

Caroline couldn't wait to tell how she had organised the baby clothes.

Mitchell's mum was willing to say what she knew, especially how she had asked to adopt the child herself. His dad was gone. Mitchell missed his dad now, but his second step-mum Sally remembered clearly how they set up the back room for baby.

And Mitchell lunched with Julia. "Yeah Mitch, I remember you were very determined to keep your child. In fact, when I saw what happened to you guys, I went straight on the pill. I mean, Mitch, if you weren't able to keep your kid then no one was safe!"

She had a few other insights as well. "Mitch, you can be thankful in some ways. Imagine having the Walshes as in-laws!"

"That was in my mind at the time. Them sniping away at our marriage for the rest of our lives."

"Oh, yeah, they were weird, Mitch. Remember those super-bad dresses Ellen always wore? The ones her mother used to make for her? So out of fashion."

"Well, being out of fashion was probably not such a bad thing in the Seventies!"

S'pose so. But, Mitch, really, her whole family was such a joke."

"Steady on," Mitchell said. "You're talking about the girl I love!" He checked himself for a moment, amazed that he'd put that statement in the present tense.

Julia continued, "And the biggest laugh was Lionel. He used to sit there with his beer in one hand and in his baggy shorts, legs spread wide open with his balls hanging out!" She laughed in raucous reminiscence. "Every time any of us went 'round, you know, all her friends from school —

teenage girls, Mitch — and he'd just sit there with his horrible, hairy bloody testicles staring at us. It was so embarrassing. Poor Ellen. I felt sorry for her.”

Somehow Mitchell didn't find it funny. His daughter and the love of his life had been sacrificed for this man's standing in the community and what did people remember? The wealthy pharmacist? The holy Catholic? The backbone of the parish? No. Just a cranky old man who couldn't tuck in his gonads. The loss of Rebecca seemed even more pointless than ever.

Mitchell marvelled at how everyone's recollections were so amazingly clear. They really did care enough to remember. Yes, it was a good list of witnesses, but it had one big hole in it.

§

“It's the biggest weakness in our case,” said his solicitor Justin. “Without her it just comes down to your word against Merken's.”

“Strange how they have copies of every case note ever written, except the ones Merken took at that meeting. I mean how convenient is that?”

“Well, we can still bring that out in court, but Mitch, we really need another witness to that meeting.”

“Can we get her to just send an affidavit or something?”

“Yes, we can, but it wouldn't be as powerful as putting Ellen on the stand.”

“I doubt if she'll be receptive.”

“We can only ask.”

It was agreed to put Ellen on the witness list and if she came, she came.

§

If anyone could win this case Justin Karamarnis could. The legal profession was still dumbfounded at how he'd won his last murder trial after the accused had walked into Gosford Police Station and confessed, “I killed him in cold blood.” This guy didn't serve a day in prison, while his co-accused, who just happened to be at the scene, got twelve years.

But, four years earlier, Justin had been unable to save Mitchell's driver's licence after a speed-dangerous charge. The difference was that Justin believed Mitchell didn't deserve to keep it. That was Justin. If he believed in a cause he'd win it, and he didn't go much for baby-stealing. Justin was a rare breed — a lawyer with a conscience.

Mitchell shook his hand as he left. "Oh, by the way," Justin said catching Mitchell before he opened the door. "My partner Jana was up at the courthouse this morning. Your little girl got a good-behaviour bond. First offence plea."

"Good behaviour, huh? That won't last long."

§

Mitchell stepped out of Justin's office and walked up towards the railway station to catch the bus. As usual he glanced casually at the musical instruments in the pawn shop. But this morning the jewellery caught his eye. "Mum's engagement ring!"

It sparkled in the window for \$2500. So, that's how the little brat sourced the money. She didn't pool everyone's cash! She hocked his mother's ring to buy drugs for herself and her mates! Trying to big note herself. Mitchell went into the store, put down a deposit and immediately rang his mother to instigate a rescue package. She nagged him, "How could you give her the ring, blah, blah, blah," but even at two-and-a-half grand the buy-back was a bargain. Mitchell was amazed no one had snapped it up.

The ring went straight from the pawn shop into Justin's safe.

Mitchell pondered the methods of the red-headed vixen. Why pawn the ring here? On the main street of the town he lived in? Where he had a very good chance of finding out? She'd planned it — to bring the ring on holidays with her. To pawn it in a most obvious place. Mitchell thought of the ripped-up concert tickets. The returned HSC card. The performance the night he bailed her out. Of course, it was all negative, but ...

It was as if she was being driven to communicate with her natural father, and just couldn't bring herself to be friendly for fear of cutting across other ties. Obviously something was touching her. I just have to be patient, Mitchell thought.

§

As her nineteenth birthday approached, Mitchell rang Ros to find out where he could send a card.

“Just send it here,” said Ros. “We’ll mail it on to her.”

“Just tell me which uni she’s gone to and I’ll post it direct.”

“She expressly asked us not to tell you. In fact, she chose this particular university, she said, to get as far away from you as possible. To stay away from the universities in Sydney.”

“Oh, ok. Her usual charming self. Just tell me this, Ros. Has she gone to New England Uni? In Armidale?”

There was a very dramatic pause. “How did you know?”

Mitchell laughed for four days. There is a God in heaven and he is hilarious!

Annalee my dear, he thought. The faster you try to run away from this, the harder you’re going to run into it.

And that’s precisely what he put on the birthday card. It was sent back, opened but intact, so he put it in Annalee’s “when-I’m-dead” box.

Still Mitchell couldn’t help but picture the scene: two red-heads coming face to face at an Armidale supermarket check-out. As it eventually turned out, it would be three red-heads.

§

Justin and Mitchell together devised a straightforward plan. Prove a case of kidnapping and adoption by deception and duress against Merken. As a criminal case, Mitchell’s legal team wouldn’t have to argue against the statute of limitations, a ridiculous three years in these cases. With criminality proven, Justin could then proceed to civil damages — ten million dollars against St Mary of Dolleurs. They’d probably go for an out of court settlement but at least Mitchell would have exposed the adoption industry for what it was and hopefully the press would do the rest.

Magistrate Reid presiding. The committal hearing was all legal argument.

“The *Adoption Act 1965*, as it stood in 1980, is clear,” proclaimed Justin in his opening address. “Section 20: *The court shall not make an order for the adoption of a child in favour of a person who has not attained the age of twenty-one unless the applicant is a natural parent of the child.*”

“Obviously, there must exist a mechanism by which a biological father, being a natural parent, can make application to adopt his own child.”

Stafford, Merken’s lawyer, stood to his feet. “Your Honour, as reflected in the *Law Reform Commission’s Report on Adoption 1993*, this clause refers to situations where a natural parent has entered into a new marriage and the two parties wish to adopt the child into that union. It does not refer to the rights of a father of an ex-nuptial child.”

Justin replied, “Your Honour, nowhere in the *Adoption Act* is that argument stated. Like so many of these interpretations, it came from within the adoption industry and was not stipulated in the Act at all. This is the crux of our case: that adoption practices were not in accordance with the law or the intent of the law, but only in accordance with a convenience devised by consent takers and their superiors.”

Round one to Justin.

“We move to clause 23 of the *Adoption Act*,” continued Justin. “Here the rights of biological fathers in these cases are even more clear. Clause 23 spells out their right to oppose the adoption: *The court may permit such persons as the court thinks fit to be parties to the proceedings for an adoption order for the purposes of opposing the application.*”

“Clause 23 makes it abundantly clear that *anyone* who has an interest in the welfare of the child can be added to the proceedings of an adoption for the expressed purpose of opposing the adoption. There can be no two ways to interpret that. Whether the applicant is a natural father or a grandmother or any other person — the foster parents perhaps, or the paternal auntie twice removed! Anyone, Your Honour, could apply to the Supreme Court to oppose the adoption. My client expressly asked if he had that right and was denied.”

Stafford: “Whether or not your client asked is yet to be proved. The Law Reform Commission interpreted clause 23 to be primarily concerned with the adoption of a child into a new marriage union by a non-biological parent.”

“The LRC may have said ‘primarily,’” interrupted Justin, “but not exclusively. Our interpretation is equally valid.”

“If the good counsel would let me finish,” returned Stafford, “clause 23 clearly states it is the court who decides if a person is to be added to proceedings and it is the court which decides who is

a proper person to be involved in the adoption process. Ms Merken was not the person to decide that at all.”

“Mr Stafford,” interrupted Justin, “Your client was the person given the obligation of informing Mr Hearn of his rights. She was specifically asked by Mr Hearn for her professional interpretation of the *Adoption Act*. Under clause 23 he clearly had a right to apply to the Supreme Court to be added to the proceedings. The advice he was given by Ms Merken denied him that obvious right.”

Stafford retorted, “Your Honour, whichever way Mr Karamarnis may interpret clause 23, since Mr Hearn asked the advice of my client prior to the consent being signed and not during the thirty day revocation period, your appeal to clause 23 of the *Adoption Act* is totally invalid.”

Mitchell was momentarily devastated, thinking his whole case had just gone out the window, but Justin slowly smiled. “So glad you mentioned it, Reg.”

Justin opened his folder and pulled out a large, stapled photocopy of not one but two pieces of legislation.

“You must have been pretty desperate to pull that one, Reg,” triumphed Justin.

Reid interpolated, “Counsel will confine his remarks to a more legal and less personal nature.”

“My apologies, Your Honour.” Justin turned to Stafford. “Herein lies the essence of our case. Mr Stafford is right. Until the consent is signed, the *Adoption Act* does not apply.

“Notwithstanding that, we still assert that Ms Merken should have advised Mr Hearn of his rights to oppose the adoption under clause 23. We contend that despite being asked, she refused, constituting an intent to defraud Mr Hearn of his rights and ultimately his child.

“But Mr Stafford has put his finger on the very centre of the entire debate. There can be no doubt that adoption practitioners have absolutely no jurisdiction over the relationship between any child or any parent until after the consent is signed. So, for an adoption worker to deny the fatherhood of a male parent of an ex-nuptial child is expressly against the law.

“This is as a result of these two documents.” He placed them on the table in front of him. “The *Family Law Act 1975* and the *Children Equality of Status Act 1976*. Both proclaimed and in fact preceded in this area of the rights of ex-nuptial fathers well before 1980.”

Stafford interjected, “Your Honour, clearly neither of these pieces of legislation impact on this case for two reasons. Firstly, the *Family Law Act* is a Federal Act while Ms Merken operated under State legislation.

Secondly, the *Children Equality of Status Act* was concerned with inheritance rights and paternal identification. It had no impact on a father's adoption veto rights. In fact, to quote Richard Chisholm, Professor of Law at New South Wales University, in his December 1980 submission to the Legal Services Bulletin: *Under the Children Equality of Status Act 1976 there is great uncertainty whether a father is a guardian of an ex-nuptial child. It may not be possible for example, for him to put himself in a position that his consent is required for the child's adoption.*"

Justin replied, "I am glad that my colleague has directed the court to that particular submission by Richard Chisholm. Let me make a few observations.

"Firstly, Mr Hearn never asked if he was required to sign an adoption consent. He consistently asked if he had rights of custody. Adoption consent and custody rights are two different issues governed by two different laws. The real question in this committal hearing is, did Mr Hearn have the right to apply for custody of his own flesh and blood?

"The non-requirement of a father's signature for an adoption consent was not placed in the *Adoption Act* to deny a father's rights of custody. It was quite clearly intended to work in tandem with clause 23 and other custody laws. It is our contention that Ms Merken has deliberately misinterpreted the consent provision over and above clause 23, to deny Mr Hearn his obvious parental rights.

"Secondly, the article to which Mr Stafford refers was not written by anyone likely to make a determination of the law. So, while being an interesting opinion, it is not an authoritative opinion.

"Thirdly, even in the quote presented by Mr Stafford, the language is highly equivocal. Richard Chisholm made no firm determination about the operation of the *Children Equality of Status Act*. He was merely trying to predict how the cards might fall in a court of law.

"Fourthly, the case to which Chisholm referred involved disputed custody of an ex-nuptial child living with its natural mother. It was a case of a father's right to custody over and above a mother's right to custody. It was not a case involving the removal of a child from both its natural parents against their will.

"Lastly, Chisholm's article in fact states the various rights fathers had in respect to an ex-nuptial child which include the options of applying for custody or seeking to be appointed guardian by the court.

“In the end however, Chisholm’s conclusion, as stated by Mr Stafford, was wrong. In the 1981 precedent, *Youngman v. Lawson*, the judge ruled that under the *Children Equality of Status Act*, the father of an ex-nuptial newborn child is regarded as a guardian of that child and is therefore a person who would have veto rights over an adoption according to both clause 23 and clause 26 of the *Adoption Act*.

“Furthermore, in two pre-1980 cases, this determination had also been made. Justice Kaye in his 1977 ruling of *G v. P* stated, *A child’s rights are the same irrespective of whether he was born in wedlock or out of it. As a consequence a putative father occupies the same position in law in relation to his natural child as he does to his child born in wedlock.*

“Justice Hutley in *Gorey v. Griffith* 1978 stated: *What this section does, in my opinion, is to abolish the doctrine that a child born out of wedlock is ‘filius nullius’ — a child of no one — and replaces it by the contrary doctrine that in law it is the child of its natural parents.*

“Both judgements relied on the *Children Equality of Status Act* section 6: *... whenever the relationship of a child with his father falls to be determined under the laws of New South Wales, that relationship shall be determined irrespective of whether the father and mother of the child are, or have ever been married.*

“In other words, Your Honour, once that law was proclaimed in 1977, it meant that every single father of every single newborn child, whether in wedlock or out of it, was regarded as a legal guardian of that child, just as a father married to the mother was recognised as such by the *Family Law Act* clauses 5(b) and (c).

Now, if we return to the *Adoption Act* clause 26, we will note that a guardian was required to give consent to an adoption. The only exception was if the guardian could not be found. Since Mr Hearn was in full contact with both the accused and the mother of the child throughout the entire proceedings of this adoption, it is quite clear that my client has been denied his legal guardianship. I contend, Your Honour, that since there is sufficient doubt surrounding the legality of this adoption, this case should proceed.”

Stafford responded. “Your Honour, the question is one of kidnapping — a ridiculous charge! Clearly there was great confusion, even among those of high legal standing, as to whether or not Mr Hearn had the rights he was seeking in this matter. My client acted in good faith and adhered to the standard industry interpretations of the *Adoption Act*.

“My client further contends that she was not asked by Mr Hearn about custody rights, only about his right to oppose the signing of the consent. My client answered with reference to the act that applied to the question, the *Adoption Act*, and not the *Children Equality of Status Act* or the *Family Law Act*.

“We ask therefore that Your Honour dismisses this case on the grounds that there is sufficient reasonable doubt that anything relating to the charges has taken place.”

Reid took no time. “I believe the accused has a case to answer regarding the charge of procuring an illegal adoption by duress and deception. The defence appeals to a question of doubt over semantics — what nature Mr Hearn’s inquiries took. Clearly, in whatever semantic nature Mr Hearn put the question to Ms Merken, he was obviously asking for the opportunity to oppose the adoption and gain custody of the child. There is evidence that he was refused that right by the actions of Ms Merken.

“Since the relevant Act governing his inquiry, the *Children Equality of Status Act*, had been in force for over three years before the events of 1980, and since precedents on the question had been set well before 1980, Ms Merken had ample time to avail herself of the operation of this law. Her confusion or anyone else’s is entirely irrelevant. The *Children Equality of Status Act* was legislated specifically to end discrimination against ex-nuptial children. Since Ms Merken’s entire career-path revolved around the placement of ex-nuptial children, she had a definite duty to educate herself in the subtleties of this Act. Failing to do so left her liable to procure an illegal adoption.

“The *Children Equality of Status Act* conferred guardian status on the fathers of ex-nuptials. The *Adoption of Children Act* conferred the right to appeal against the adoption procedure. Ms Merken’s ignorance is not a defence.

“I commit these proceedings to trial.”

§

“What in the name of dog shit do you think you’re doing?”

“Oh! Hello, Annalee. So nice to hear your voice again.”

The evening news story was finished for barely thirty seconds.

“You think you can just go to court and get me back now! You must be thicker than even I thought you were! My parents are Ros and Lawry Decker and I'm glad they are, you hear me? I'll never be anything to you! You're just the derro sperm donor and don't you ever forget that!

“I have one brother, my adopted brother Andrew! Your children are not my brother and sister. They can take 40,000 volts for all I care! Are you reading me loud and clear?”

“Oh, I know exactly what I'm hearing, Anna.”

It was uncanny how expertly she could push Mitchell's buttons, so he pushed one or two in return. “I notice you didn't mention Katherine?”

“She's more my sister than I am your daughter!”

“Dare you to take a DNA test.”

“It takes more than DNA to be related pus-head. Just piss off out of my life and go jump straight off a cliff somewhere!”

“You really are a piece of work, aren't you? So much for ‘Little Miss Posh Private Schoolgirl’! This is the way they teach you to win friends at your million-dollar-a-day up-yourself convent, is it? The nuns would be hitting the communion wine for a lifetime if they heard this from their prized little student.”

“Oh, drop dead. You have no right to tell me how to talk and how not to talk. You're not my father and you never have been — ever! So stop pretending you are!”

“You're wrong, Anna. It doesn't matter what you say or think. The simple truth is I was the first person on this Earth to be your father. You were the first person ever on this Earth to be my daughter. Nothing will ever change that.”

“Oh, here we go! All this bullshit in that story you sent my parents. So some baby's eyes chased you 'round the room. So you changed a poeey nappy. So you stuck a bottle in my mouth.”

“Whose mouth, Anna?”

“Don't play that sort of crap game with me. ‘In Rebecca's mouth’ then, if you're so smart. Well, Rebecca's dead. Get over it!”

“I don't think I'm the one who needs to get over it, Anna.”

There was a long silence. “I'm running out of coins.”

Mitchell wondered why she just didn't say her piece and hang up. She expected something from him but he didn't have a clue. “Anna, what do you really want?”

“Why are you doing this to me?”

“Doing what?”

“This court case! Trying to get me back! It’s mad!”

“Anna, you don’t know the first thing about the law, do you? I can never get you back. Even if they declare your adoption illegal, you’ll never be recognised as anything but the child of Ros and Lawry Decker. Once you turned twelve no one could adopt you without your consent. Once you turned eighteen no-one could adopt you at all, even if you consented. This court case actually has nothing to do with you, or your parents or Ellen for that matter.

“It has to do with stopping other beautiful young girls like Ellen having to go through what she went through. It has to do with bringing something out into the open which is going to help heal the pain of thousands of women who were damaged beyond repair when they were young girls.

“It has to do with the truth, Anna. And despite what you might think of me, I deserve at least that. I know you judge me for what happened. You probably judge Ellen, too. But now I’ve seen enough documentation to know we weren’t to blame, I just need to prove that to myself, perhaps to Ellen as well.”

“And what about me?”

Mitchell misunderstood the question. “It’s nothing to do with a girl named Decker. Your name isn’t even being mentioned. Neither are your adoptive parents. You won’t be identified. Only you can identify yourself as the child at the centre of all this.”

“Well, it’s a pain in the backside!”

Mitch was running out of ideas, options and opportunity just as fast as she was running out of coins, so he decided to appeal to the only thing he knew for sure about her. “Anna, if I win this case, I’ll be possibly ten-million dollars richer. Now that’s surely to your advantage.”

“Oh, come on,” she said with a laugh, “it’s not the money. I couldn’t care less about the money. I just want to be left alone.”

Pause.

“How much did you say?”

23

“Please, Mr Karamarnis, leave me alone. It was hard enough doing your affidavit. I want to leave it behind me. I have a new life now and all this is not a part of it.”

“This could be worth a lot of money to you, Ellen. I know Mitchell is wanting to give a large slice of the compensation pay-out to you. All we need is for you to corroborate that meeting with Merken and we’ve nailed her.”

“I really don’t care, Mr Karamarnis. Just writing that affidavit has upset my whole life. I’ve been moody with my kids. I can’t relate to my husband and he’s insanely jealous about the whole thing. We just want to be left to our quiet life. I’m really annoyed with Mitchell. If he wants lots of money then it really is his business, not mine. Now, please don’t phone me again or I’ll complain to the Law Society.” She slammed down the phone. Mitchell leaned across Justin’s desk hopefully. “Any luck?”

Justin did a double-take at Mitchell and just sniggered.

“Told you it’d be pissing in the wind,” Mitchell retorted.

§

Six degrees of separation strikes a person unannounced, but it’s curiosity that kills the polecat.

On Saturday August 21 it was open day at New England University. Living on campus, Annalee and Georgie wanted to check out next year’s intake, to see if there was any worthwhile “talent” among the “freshies”.

Hanging out in the psychology booth next door to the politics stand seemed the logical thing for a speech therapy major to do, especially when, truth be told, she had a schoolgirl crush on the politics lecturer, not that she'd ever tell her.

Georgie actually heard it first.

“Anna! Anna-lee, over here!”

Georgie looked up from the booth into a face she very vaguely recognised. A photograph eighteen months ago. But then the girl running across the quadrangle in response to the call, well, it could have been Anna's twin.

Annalee Decker heard the name casually but then took one look at the girl and retreated against the science block wall in shock. The woman with the familiar face noticed Annalee's reaction but turned to her charge. “You'll have to do psychology for your Dip. Ed, Ann. Ask these girls what it's like.”

Annalee Decker wanted to climb backwards up the wall. She was trapped in the booth. There was no escape short of tipping over every booth on the quad and making a run for it. All of a sudden she was monstrously self-conscious of her over-zealously pierced face. One in each eyebrow. At least a dozen in each ear. Nose ring, lip stud, one through her tongue. Just as well this woman couldn't see where else she had them. Her number-three haircut hid it's true colour although tufts of orange still showed.

Georgie couldn't ignore the similarity between the enquiry-girl and Anna. “Hey, Ann! She looks just like you did last year when you had hair!”

Little Miss Decker smiled weakly. Georgie continued, oblivious to her mate's discomfort. “Hah! She's even got the same name as you!”

Yeah, that's not all she has the same as me, Annalee thought, and she noticed that the woman had started to stare at her.

Annalee Decker tried not to look at the woman but found herself staring at the other Anna. “Oh look, George,” she said weakly, “She has light-brown eyes. I've got blue.”

Ann Stenner looked up. “Yeah, you do look like me, except for the studs! Don't you reckon, mum?”

But “mum” didn’t hear. At the mention of the blue eyes she had an awesome flashback — blue eyes on a beach somewhere. She raised her hand to her mouth. Tears welled in her eyes. Annalee Decker mirrored her every move. Same nose. Same mouth. Same freckles. Same tears.

“Georgie! Open the hatch, I’ve gotta go to the toilet!”

“Oh just wait a second!” Georgie replied in annoyance.

“No! I gotta go now.” Annalee leapt over the counter and all the booths shuddered as she pushed off the benchtop and bolted across the quadrangle.

“You incontinent or something? God she’s a pest sometimes,” complained Georgie to Ann Stenner. “Look! She’s mucked up all my writing!”

Ellen watched every slightest motion of the girl running — her gait, the way she held her head, her slender arms with tight fists. Ellen tried vainly not to lose her in the crowd.

She turned back to Georgie who was making a second attempt at filling out a form with Ann Stenner. Like a mouse Ellen asked Georgie, “Are you her friend?”

“Oh, yeah, we’ve known each other for nearly four years. We boarded at school together. She’s a pain in the butt!”

Ellen had to press it now. “Do you know if she’s adopted?”

Georgie looked up at the woman, then shuddered and dropped her pen. She looked wide-mouthed at the girl. Then again at the mother. “Well, roll me in flour and call me a finger bun!”

§

Ellen spent the rest of open day wandering in circles with her second-born, her mind glazed, her eyes focussed for any sudden glint of golden hair though the tears. She forced some control on herself for the sake of her unknowing daughter. At least Ellen thought she was unknowing.

“What’s going on, mum? Who was that girl? Do you know her? Is she my cousin or something?”

“No, she’s not your cousin, darling.” Ellen continued searching frantically. “But she’s certainly something.”

“Who is she mum? Tell me!”

“Have you found the education booth?”

Ellen felt her daughter swing in front of her and block her path. “Mum, tell me what I already know.”

Ellen was silent, her hand across her mouth, her lips quaking.

“Does dad know?”

Ellen smiled, almost chuckling. “Oh yes, dad knows.”

Anna-lee gleaned a slightly wrong impression from the answer. “Why didn’t the two of you ever tell us? Mum, how have you carried this by yourself all this time?”

Ellen was surprised by her daughter’s compassion. “I never thought ... Oh, look, we’re being silly. It’s probably not her. I mean, what are the chances that you and she would have the same ...” Ellen was beginning to crack and she didn’t like it, least of all right here on the university grounds, where someone from town might see her. “We better get back home, Ann.”

But Ann had one more question. “Mum, did you name me after her?”

Through her obvious sorrow, Ellen smiled. “No pet. That is just an unbelievably strange coincidence.”

“What did you name her?”

Ellen hadn’t said the name to anyone for almost eighteen years. The last time she had said it was to her squash coach whom she had loved almost as much as she loved this diminutive interrogator, for whom she now opened the car door.

She walked around to the other side. Ann had unlocked it. Symbolic of a greater unlocking. So Ellen returned the favour.

“Rebecca,” she said semi-smiling. “Rebecca Ellen Walsh.”

“Big sister to Anna-lee Ellen Stenner.”

“Half-sister.”

“So dad wasn’t her father?”

“No.”

Ann rested her head against the car seat. “What was he like, mum?”

“Who?”

“That girl’s father. Was he like dad?”

Ellen laughed at the idea. “Oh, no, Ann! He was ... he was ... different. Very different,” Ellen mused.

“Did you love him?”

Ellen went silent at the possibilities.

“You must have been very young, mum,” reflected Anna-lee.

“Yes, I was very young. I was also very different.”

“So, did you love him? I want to know, mum. You didn't sleep around, did you? I know you better than that, don't I?”

Ellen could see why her daughter wanted to know, but did she love him? It wasn't a question Ellen had considered for many years.

She was almost ashamed that she even had to think about it.

If I really loved him, she pondered, I wouldn't hesitate. But then was that really me?

It would be a monumental admission for a relinquishing mum.

“Yes, of course I loved him. I loved him very, very much. It just wasn't to be.”

Ann Stenner felt the sadness in her mother's voice. It was a mix of emotions far too complex for the seventeen-year old to properly grasp, so she changed her angle of thought and started to rehearse her arrival home, contemplating how she would divulge this awesome news to her four younger sisters. She couldn't get past the first two words, which circumnavigated her brain all the way to the hobby-farm. When the car pulled into the garage she leapt out and bounded through the door, blurting out her favourite conversation-starter, “Guess what!”

§

Annalee Decker sat hyperventilating on the toilet. It was the only way she could stop herself from vomiting.

Beyond the stall she heard the outer door to the girl's room open.

“Anna? You in here?” echoed around the tiles.

“Yeah, Georgie,” came the choked reply. “In here.”

Annalee watched as a hand reached under the stall door. It had a card in it. She took it tentatively and turned it over. Name. Address. Phone number. She just stared at it.

“We can take a drive out there tomorrow if you like,” Georgie offered.

“Dunno,” came the muted response.

“We can just drive past. See how big her house is. How rich she is. See what you might be able to get out of her.”

“Why does everybody think I’m just out for money?”

“Cause you are!”

“Bitch,” chortled the whisper-thin voice over the stall.

Anna flushed the toilet for no reason, then snapped the bolt across and emerged red-eyed.

“What am I going to do, George?”

Georgie smile and shrugged. “Well, it seems you can’t hide from it.”

“Hmm. That’s what Mitchell said ... Wait a sec!” Annalee flashed back to the words Mitchell had written on her birthday card. “That sneaky little skunk knew!”

She shook her head and laughed. “He bloody-well knew all the time!”

§

It was Thursday the 28th of October and the court date had finally rolled around.

Justice Hallanon presiding.

Justin Karamarnis and Reg Stafford eliminated jury candidates.

The first witness was Dr Julian Richardson, a consultant psychiatrist for thirty years with twenty years of research experience into the effects of adoption.

“Can you give the court a brief history of adoption in this country?” opened Justin.

“The adoption of newborns was virtually unheard of before the Second World War. Before 1939, the adoption of an infant into a completely unrelated family happened only in instances where the child was orphaned. There were very occasional open adoptions, usually within the extended biological family. In fact even with orphans, all attempts were made to keep the child within the biological circle.”

“But the closed adoption of newborns is such accepted practice now. It’s hard to believe that it was once frowned upon.”

“Well, the social belief before the war was the ‘bad blood’ theory: that a child born out of wedlock was tainted with some sort of bad character inherited from a sexually insatiable mother or father.”

“So, Dr Richardson, where did the practice of adopting newborns into biologically-separate family units come from?”

“Well, it actually had its roots in the bonded servitude of the late nineteenth century.”

“Slavery!” Justin interjected.

“Yes, that’s right,” said Richardson. “Orphans and street kids usually. Real Charles Dickens stuff. But by the end of the 1930s, the psychological community was right in the middle of the ‘nature versus nurture’ debate. The new theory was that it didn’t matter what genetic heritage a child brought with it into the world. A child could be put into any good family and the upbringing would ensure the child’s perfect adjustment. The adoption of newborns was basically a way of testing this new theory.”

So you’re saying that the adoption of newborn babies was a psychological experiment?”

“Yes. Exactly. That was its major purpose. To settle the ‘nature versus nurture’ debate. It’s nothing unusual. The psychological community conducts these sorts of experiments on society as a matter of course. Always has, since the inception of the discipline.”

“For example?”

“Oh, the methadone program, whole-language reading methods, laissez-faire child rearing, deep-sleep therapy, electroshock therapy, psychedelic medication: they were all experiments. The only way to get data was to run the experiment large-scale across the entire population. The adoption of newborns was exactly the same.”

Mitchell sat listening in abject disgust. He suddenly saw his life, Ellen’s life, Rebecca’s life, reduced to nothing more than a mere school science project. Richardson’s blase attitude to it all had Justin shaking his head in controlled disbelief, as he continued.

“I suppose the obvious question then is, how successful was the experiment?”

“Every academic paper written on the subject shows it was a complete and utter disaster. And let me say first, that up until around the mid-1970s, I was very much a firm believer that the effects of adoption were minimal.”

“How quickly did the effects of adoption start showing up in the research?”

“By 1943, the academic papers were starting to warn against the practice.”

“1943! And here we are, discussing cases that occurred forty years later?” Justin was flabbergasted.

“That’s right, yes,” replied Richardson. “In 1943 Florence Clothier published in the *National Committee for Mental Health Journal on Mental Hygiene* a paper entitled ‘The Psychology of the Adopted Child’, in which she described the trauma of separation from the natural mother, as *irreparable damage* and that no matter how early the adoption occurred, there was *no substitute possible* for connection to the biological family.”

“And this is only a few years into the experiment!”

“That’s right, yes.”

“Any other research papers?”

“There’s Viola Bernard’s 1956 paper which sites the horrendous psychological results on married women who gave children up for adoption. Bernard calls for the practice to be discouraged. However she doesn’t apply the same arguments to unmarried mothers for some unknown reason.

“Povl Toussieng, a psychiatrist at the Menninger Clinic in Kansas, noted in 1958, that while adoptees made up only about one or two per cent of the population, they made up one-third of all clients coming to the clinic. In his 1962 paper, he found strong evidence to suggest that adoptees were far more prone to emotional disturbances, than non-adoptees. In fact, he quotes a figure of sixty-one per cent of adoptees who are an only child, as being particularly prone to emotional problems.

“Pam Roberts who was a social-work policy maker in the 1960s and 1970s admitted that the harmful psychological results of adoption were well known in 1968.

“Pannor, Bar and Sorosky’s 1978 study in *Family Process*, documents the trauma of adoption on both adoptees and ‘first mothers’.”

Richardson continued to quoted verbatim from at least fifteen pre-1979 scientific studies, which clearly demonstrated the deleterious effects of adoption on children and at least twelve that concentrated on the impact to surrendering mothers. Harper and Williams 1976. Cain and Cain 1964. Bremner 1951. The 1977 South Australian Commission. Every head in the court room began to spin with information overload.

“I think the title of Joss Shawyer’s 1979 study says it all,” Richardson concluded. “*Death by Adoption.*”

Justin tried to bring Richardson’s professorial exuberance back to ground zero.

“Dr Richardson, do you believe that as a practising adoption professional, Ms Merken would have known about this research?”

“Objection!” squealed Stafford. “Utter speculation.”

“Sustained.”

Justin rephrased. “Was this research common knowledge among social working professionals at the time of the adoption in question?”

“It’s impossible to think that the results of all these studies and many others I haven’t mentioned, didn’t filter down to the profession. A social worker has a duty to keep up to date. There may have been some lag in knowledge but certainly by the early seventies adoption workers must have known about the research.”

“If the research then was so scathing about the effects of newborn adoption, why wasn’t the practice stopped?”

“The psychological community was hardly likely to wear the mistake on its sleeve by advertising it in the general community, so the ‘nurture’ belief was never publicly challenged. The demand for adoptable newborns was never curbed — in fact the demand grew!”

“How was that?”

“After the War there was a burst of sexual activity. This resulted in three things. First, a spread of STDs, which rendered large numbers of women infertile. Second, there was a large number of botched abortions which motivated various lobby groups to promote adoption. And third, it resulted in the post-war baby boom, which meant that, as those boomers came to their teens in the Sixties and early Seventies, there would be an increase in the numbers of illegitimate births and a corresponding increase in the numbers of infertile couples.

“As long as those two figures were in balance, no one bothered to think about the effects of adoption.”

“Which were?”

“Both adoptees and surrendering mothers are vastly over-represented in figures for suicide, homicide, parricide, violent crime, sexual dysfunction, anorexia, alcoholism, substance abuse; in fact, the full range of psychological disorders.”

“So how would you reconcile the act of adoption with the clause in the *Adoption Act* which says *the interests of the child shall be paramount?* ”

“I believe that clause makes the *Adoption Act* self-contradictory. I have never seen an adoption where the interests of the child were paramount. It was always in the interests of someone else. The adoptive parents, the agency, the ego of the social worker; on extremely rare occasions, the first-mother. But never, ever was the complete removal of the child away from the extended biological family in the child’s best interest at all. It is devastating on a child’s psyche to be cut off from their biological narrative. And there’s rarely any need for it! There’s always someone among the biological kin who is willing to care for the child, and capable of doing so.”

Justin paused to allow the jury a moment to assimilate this information.

“All this is perfectly interesting, Dr Richardson, but how does it relate to the case before the court?”

“In 1973, the supply of adoptable newborns vanished overnight. By 1980 there were very few newborns available, but infertile couples were still exerting enormous demand.”

“How do you mean the supply vanished?”

“The Whitlam Government promoted single-mothers’ entitlements and the adoption industry was astounded by the number of girls who kept their babies. At the same time, the illegality of abortion was lifted. Of the three options presented to a pregnant woman — adoption, abortion or motherhood — adoption was considered far and away the worst.”

“Even over abortion?”

“You haven’t read the surveys, have you, Mr Karamarnis? Every single study ever done on the issue shows that women prefer abortion to adoption by a country mile.”

This really assaulted Justin’s and Mitchell’s pro-life position. “You’re telling me that a woman would prefer to kill her own child than give it to someone else to raise?”

“I’m not telling you — the surveys are. That’s how devastating adoption is to a woman. The complete removal of a child from its natural parents to be raised by strangers in total secrecy, is probably the most catastrophic thing that can happen to any woman. Recall to mind the *James Sette* case earlier this year - and the *Julie Kay McKinley* case.”

“Refresh the court’s memory, Dr Richardson,” asked the judge.

“In the case of James Sette, he was a little boy who had been adopted by a couple. Usual thing, at thirty days old. The impact on the natural mother was such that she made contact with the boy, gained access visits, then a few weeks before the adoption order went through the Supreme Court

she completely cracked and stabbed the child to death rather than allow the adoption. What I want to know is, how was a consent taken from this woman when it obviously wasn't her desire to relinquish her child? Why didn't one of these so-called 'social workers' realise that the adoption decision wasn't given by the natural mother freely and without any coercion? Everyone wanted to paint this surrendering mother as a monster. Now, I'm not condoning what she did, but clearly someone placed immense pressure on this woman to consent to adoption when she didn't want to have her child adopted at all. In fact, the strength of her desire was so great that she preferred literally to kill the child rather than let the child go to persons outside the extended biological family — just as the surveys keep telling us. Actually, in this case, the consent-taker failed to notify anyone in the extended biological family of the pregnancy. This included baby James's natural father! The adoption industry is clearly still acting outside the law as far as the fathers of these ex-nuptial children are concerned, but it seems that adoption practitioners are very skilled at deflecting attention away from these breaches of the law! This woman is not the monster. The adoption industry is."

"Objection," yelled Stafford. "The witness is clearly making value-judgements which are outside his area of expertise."

"Sustained," replied Hallanon. "The jury will ignore those last statements from the witness."

Justin was only slightly annoyed. He knew how impossible it was for a jury to ignore something they had heard with their own ears. He pressed on well satisfied with the outcome so far.

"And what was the other case you mentioned, the *Julie Kay McKinley* case?"

Stafford was getting agitated. "Your Honour, is this really relevant to the case being heard?"

"I'll allow it as background," responded Hallanon. Richardson continued his testimony.

"This particular case history is probably *more* pertinent to the case before the court. Julie Kay McKinley had been forced to relinquish her child by her overbearing father when she fell pregnant as a teenager. Twenty-two years later, as a middle-aged woman, she had a miscarriage, but concealed it by continuing to dress as if pregnant. At the time she would have been full term, she tracked down a newborn baby, stole it and tried to murder the mother. The psychiatrist in the case told the court that her neurotic behaviour resulted from her unresolved grief over the adoption of her child as a teenager. I'm telling you, these are time bombs just waiting to go off. Not every relinquishing mother will become a Julie McKinley, but every single surrendering mother is going

to have massive unresolved grief problems in mid-life. The bond between the one who gave birth and the one given birth was never meant to be broken.”

“And what about the effects on a surrendering father?”

“Very little study has been done, but I would imagine the effects could be similar, particularly in the post-feminist era of the late Seventies where men have been encouraged to be more involved with their children. From what I’ve read of Mr Hearn’s case, I have to say that all things considered, I admire his sanity. Studies of men who have lost children to abortion show stresses similar to battle fatigue in Vietnam veterans. Since, according to the studies, the stress of adoption is a thousand-times worse, I would imagine that post-adoption stress on a man is incredibly debilitating.”

“But there’s no real research?”

“Very little. The only in-depth study I know of is that by Winkler, Brown, Van Keppel and Blanchare in 1988. The problem is that often the father of the child doesn’t even know about the adoption. The girl is shuffled off into isolation and the father is kept completely in the dark, or he’s threatened with bodily harm if he doesn’t keep away and so on. All of which, of course, is completely illegal. Always has been.”

“Dr Richardson, can you comment on the written case notations made by Ms Merken and others, regarding Ellen and Mitchell’s sanity?”

“The comments made by both the hospital social worker and Ms Merken, in my opinion, are reprehensible. To question Ellen’s sanity because she reacted violently to having her child taken away indicates to me that Ms Merken was completely lacking in sympathy for this young girl. How do you expect a girl to react when someone is stealing her baby?”

“Equally, the repeated comments about Mitchell’s background I think are absolutely disgusting. It’s obvious to me from the notes made in Ms Merken’s handwriting that she was looking for excuses to remove this child from perfectly good young parents.”

“But there are repeated comments that Ellen was incompetent as a parent.”

“If that’s so, why was there no departmental interference in her parenting just two years later when she had her second child? If she was incompetent in 1980, why wasn’t she still incompetent in 1982? I believe the incompetent label was a sham!

“I’d like to also say a thing or two about the role of the doctor, Sussman. As a medical doctor myself, I find Sussman’s role in the whole thing a complete dereliction of duty. To be administering stupefying drugs to a girl who is being asked to sign an adoption consent form, to my mind, implicates Sussman in a conspiracy to gain an adoption consent by fraud. And the same goes for his almost lethal doses of Stilboestrol, the milk stopper. It’s a known carcinogen! That shocked me as much as anything when I saw the medical reports. If Sussman hadn’t died he’d have a case to answer as well.”

“How do you mean?” inquired Justin.

“Stilboestrol was banned in the United States in 1971, then declared an agent of breast cancer in 1978! Its effects were well known! Ellen should be checked every year. The drug replicates the female hormone oestrogen and also transfers to all suckling children. It causes milk to dry up in subsequent pregnancies, disabling the mother from breast feeding her other children. Women who have been administered Stilboestrol are sometimes unable to have hormone replacement therapy during menopause.

“The effects of the drug are also passed on to subsequent children raising their likelihood of genital cancer: vaginal cancer in daughters and particularly testicular problems in grandsons. Cancer of the testes, non-descending testes — it just goes on and on. We’ve had reports of arthritis in Stilboestrol children. Malformed genitalia. All of Ellen’s girls, including ‘Rebecca’, should have regular checks for vaginal cancer. Similarly, testicular cancer for any grandsons they might produce. All this was known in the United States years before Ellen’s confinement. What Sussman did to Ellen was nothing short of medical negligence and assault.”

Richardson’s testimony, while possibly a little technical, was certainly an affront to most of the jury, indoctrinated as all of society had been, by the benign folklore of adoption.

He made one final comment. “In my opinion Merken and others like her acted as consent takers first, protectors of their own careers second, and quite frankly social work didn’t even enter into it. I believe that an adoption consent taker has no right to call herself a social worker.”

The doctor stepped down from the box without cross-examination. Stafford obviously thought he had other fish to fry, without taking on an expert. The memories of the prosecution witnesses to follow would provide softer targets.

§

After a short recess, one by one an increasingly obvious scenario was paraded.

Julia said, “I was in close contact with Ellen and Mitchell for most of the four months leading up to the birth. Not once did I hear either of them talk positively about adoption.”

Julia again: “Mitchell was adamant. He said he was going to find out if he or his mother could adopt the baby. He was devastated when the agency social worker told him he couldn’t.”

The only problem with her testimony was that she had to admit that her contact with Ellen for a month after the birth was minimal so she didn’t know with certainty why Ellen failed to revoke the adoption.

Mitchell’s mother handled cross-examination with typical theatrical flair. “Of course I remember it well! We’re talking about what happened to my first granddaughter! I offered to adopt her myself to try and get around this nonsense that Mitchell couldn’t keep his own child. It was ridiculous. If that’s the law then it’s wrong and should be changed. I was very surprised when the baby was adopted. The idea never seriously entered into Mitchell’s head, or Ellen’s for that matter.”

Sally actually drew a diagram on a white board of exactly how Mitchell and his father had set out the baby’s room. The accuracy of her recollections astounded Mitchell. It annoyed Stafford. “Your memory of these events seems a little too clear, Mrs Hearn. How is it that you can recall so vividly these minute details despite the fact that this was eighteen years ago and the experiences did not directly relate to you?”

“Anything that affected my husband affected me. I lived in that house for many years after the events and that empty back room was a constant reminder. My husband talked about it ‘til the day he died.”

Mitchell had never known that.

Caroline backed Sally’s testimony. Her recollection of sorting the baby gear was produced through tears, and Caroline was a pretty tough nut. Mitchell had never known that these people cared. They had never mentioned it until after his reunion with Annalee. But here they were, and they had stored the pain of accurate memory just as surely as Mitchell had.

Rebecca's Law

And so ended the first day of trial. A little excitement. The press seemed rather disappointed, some leaving before the last testimony. But, for those conscientious enough to turn up for the next two days, the rewards would be bountiful.

24

Mitchell's anticipation of being in the witness stand the next day gave him a greater sense of appreciation for the people who had previously sat there pleading his cause. They had done it willingly and now he was beginning to know the pressure they had placed themselves under.

Mitchell figured as a matter of course that he would hardly sleep, but he did, and he dreamed.

I have spent the night on a display-shelf in a milk-bar near the corner of Mowbray Road and Pacific Highway, Chatswood, about a kilometre from where I worked when Rebecca was born.

I only have a black and red sports bag that Angelique gave me.

However, there are no clothes in it, and I'm wearing only a woman's nightie, which doesn't fit me at all — I'm too big for it and it keeps coming open, exposing me.

I drive to a house which is in Pitt Road, South Curl Curl, about a kilometre from where Ellen lived with her parents.

Annalee is there having a party with her friends. I believe I drove her there.

One room in the house is also an office of the Education Department.

Annalee's friends see me and I am embarrassed because I am dressed so strangely. The girls aren't even interested, although they know who I am. I see Annalee but she doesn't see me. I don't speak to anyone.

Because I work for Parliament everyone thinks I have access to the Education Department's files.

I enter the room which has one filing cabinet.

I find all Ellen's HSC exam papers and read them. One exam question stands out. "What is the worst word in the world?" Ellen's answer reads "Adopion". I think, She couldn't even bring herself to spell it correctly.

I find a box of photographs: family shots of Ellen when she was around ten, eleven, twelve. I recognise Ellen and her brother in the photos, which seem to be a party of kids around the same age. These photos make me intensely sad.

I also look for Annalee's HSC papers. I find some but I don't look at them.

On top of the filing cabinet I find photos of Caleb and Jessica that they sent to Annalee. I think, well at least she didn't throw them away.

I look up from the photos and see Annalee standing less than a metre from me. She gives me a blank defiant stare. She doesn't actually speak, but she seems to be saying to me, "Well? What are you going to do now?" Double-daring me to do something, but I don't know what it is.

§

Day three, Friday, and Mitchell Hearn took the oath. Justin's questioning took Mitchell methodically through his entire story — the day he stopped Ellen signing the consent, Ellen's oscillating moods in the hospital; but mostly, his recollections of the meeting with Merken and Ellen on Friday 3 March 1980 at three o'clock.

Mitchell's 1980 diary was tendered as evidence.

Stafford picked it up as he commenced cross-examination and flicked through the first couple of months.

As he did, Mitchell saw a brown baseball cap bobbing through the back row of the public gallery and finally take a seat. Annalee then fixed her eyes on him in her usual defiance. Mitchell had become accustomed to sitting in the witness box during Justin's friendly questioning. Now he was suddenly nervous.

"Mr Hearn," commenced Stafford. "Are you in the habit of keeping nineteen year old diaries?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact I am. I still have my 1978 and '79 diaries. Also my '81 and '83 diaries. I kept them for tax reasons. I can post them to you if you wish."

“There are a lot of notations in this diary, Mr Hearn. Let’s take a day at random — 15 May 1980 — your diary notes *Williams 2.30. Kilminster 3.00. Harris. 3.30. Working 4.30, arrow*. Do you remember what all that means?”

“Yes. Williams, Kilminster and Harris were squash coaching clients and the last note refers to my shift on the counter at Chatswood Squashlands.”

“And you remember these three individuals do you, Williams, Kilminster and Harris?”

“Well, yes, as a matter of fact I do. Williams was a club member, Kilminster was a good friend, I was actually godfather to one of his children and Harris was a promising junior.”

“So in a sense they were significant people in your life?”

“At the time, yes.”

“And you remember these particular coaching sessions vividly do you?”

“No, of course not.”

“You remember that particular night’s shift do you?”

“Not at all.”

“Strange, Mr Hearn. You’ve just demonstrated to the court that you have such a brilliantly accurate memory!”

“Each meeting with Ms Merken was a significant moment in my life.”

“But you just told us that these people in your diary were significant to you. Now you don’t remember these events at all.”

“That’s because I had multiple meetings with them. After a time many of those events blur into one.”

“Yes Mr Hearn, after a time events tend to blur in the memory. And your meeting with Ms Merken was a long time ago. When you first saw my client at the committal hearing, did you recognise her?”

“Not really. There was a vague recollection.”

“A vague recollection. Just a moment ago you had vivid recollections of Ms Merken, now they’re vague recollections. In fact, Mr Hearn, last year you stood face to face with Heather Merken during a recess in the Parliamentary Inquiry. But you stood there totally oblivious to who she was. Considering your reaction to Ms Dyson a couple of days previous to that, one would have thought you’d have had a bit to say to Ms Merken as well, if you had remembered her.”

“Well, Ms Merken has changed. The events from eighteen years ago haven't.”

“Let's test your memory out, shall we? I have a photograph here of Ms Merken sitting in her office back in 1980. What colour are the walls?”

“A sort of yellowish colour — the colour of a manila folder.”

“And are there any pictures on the wall?”

Mitchell closed his eyes. “Yes, one. It has a dark-wooden frame but I can't remember the picture itself. I think it's a landscape.”

“And what furniture is in the room?”

Mitchell suddenly realised he was describing the “Education” room from his dream. “There's a desk — a rather uninspiring desk — a light wood colour. It's sort of in the middle of the room. There's a couch. Ellen and I sat next to each other on rather hard chairs. Ms Merken didn't sit behind her desk. She sat near us on another chair with her forms and note pad on her knees.”

“Very good, Mr Hearn. Except for the fact that the walls are a creamy fawn, the desk is near the wall, there are no chairs bar the one behind the desk, and you forgot the filing cabinet.”

Mitchell could have kicked himself. The filing cabinet was central to his dream. “It was bright yellow!”

Stafford looked at the photograph in his hand. He didn't answer.

“The fact remains that you had significant details incorrect.”

“Show the jury the photo and let them decide.”

Hallanon interjected, “Mr Hearn, I realise you are not familiar with court proceedings, so I will warn you that such directions can lead to your being held in contempt. Be careful.”

“Sorry, Your Honour.”

Stafford continued, “This little test demonstrates that your memory of that meeting is not as vivid as you first led the court to believe.”

Justin jumped in. “Objection. Mr Stafford is drawing a conclusion which does not automatically follow from the evidence. The fact that Mr Hearn accurately remembered certain aspects of the office, an office he hasn't seen for nearly twenty years, could also be construed to mean that his memory of the events is particularly vivid.”

“Mr Stafford,” said Hallanon, “reveal to the court any details Mr Hearn correctly identified.”

Stafford pursed his lips. “The colour of the frame on the picture. The couch. The colour of the desk.”

Justin interjected again. “My client also very accurately described the colour of the walls.”

“And the filing cabinet,” Mitchell added.

“Yes, and the filing cabinet,” admitted Stafford.

Hallanon gave Mitchell the eagle stare, “Mr Hearn, I have warned you.”

“I apologise for my client, Your Honour,” Justin seized the opportunity, “but the extent of accuracy in his recollection of that office shows that his memory of the events is adequately vivid to be trusted on the balance of probability. It is far more likely that my client would more accurately remember the events of the meeting than trivial details of the room in which the meeting took place. I also note at this juncture that St Mary of Dolleours Adoption Agency has consistently maintained that no record exists of this meeting and have repeatedly denied the event. May I submit to the court that Mr Hearn’s diary, which includes Ms Merken’s 1980 office phone number, address and the time of the appointment, coupled with Mr Hearn’s description of Ms Merken’s office here today, constitute proof beyond reasonable doubt that this meeting did in fact take place.”

“Rebuttal, Mr Stafford?”

Stafford knew his experiment with Mitchell’s memory had backfired. He now had to concede that the meeting did take place. The defence moved to its secondary position. “Mr Hearn, you are aware that my client asserts that you never asked any questions about vetoing the adoption or adopting the child yourself.”

“I definitely asked. I also asked Louisa Puddle on the phone and the chamber magistrate at Manly Court.”

“Again there is no record of either of those conversations and in the absence of any other witnesses, there is no record of what was said in your meeting with Ms Merken.”

Stafford obviously had a sneaking suspicion that Ellen, although listed for the next day, was not going to be available.

“When it all boils down,” he continued talking to Mitchell but turning to make his point to the jury, “it really is just your word against my client’s. Isn’t it, Mr Hearn?”

“I definitely asked.”

“How can we know for sure, Mr Hearn?”

“I wouldn't perjure myself!”

“I'm not saying you would.”

“I certainly wouldn't take an oath on the Bible and then lie.”

“No, you wouldn't, Mr Hearn. The Bible's a very special book to you isn't it?”

“You're going to belittle my beliefs now are you?” Mitchell looked angrily at Justin expecting him to call an objection, but Justin just held his hand up slightly off the table telling Mitchell to stay calm.

“Mr Hearn, is it true that you are an active member of the New South Wales cult group, Australian Christian Churches?”

“ACC isn't a cult!”

“Mr Hearn, are you or are you not an active member of Australian Christian Churches?”

“Depends what you define as 'active member'.”

“Do you attend a branch of Australian Christian Churches?”

“Depends on what you define as 'attend'.”

“Mr Hearn, stop playing games. Would you consider yourself a member of a congregation that meets under the auspices of Australian Christian Churches?”

Mitchell looked at Justin pleading with him to call “relevance”, but he sat there giving “calm down” signals.

Mitchell looked to the back of the hall where Anna sat leaning forward chin on her hands and elbows on her knees. When she realised Mitchell was looking at her she leaned back and folded her arms.

“Answer the question, Mr Hearn,” instructed the judge. Mitchell couldn't understand why Justin was allowing this clear religious vilification. If he wasn't *ex gratia* Mitchell would have sacked him right then and there from the witness stand.

“My wife and I, with our children, attend one Sunday service per week at the local branch of Australian Christian Churches.”

“And when did you first attend an Australian Christian Church?”

“In September 1980, but I might add, I wasn't impressed.”

“1980? Must have been a difficult year for you, Mr Hearn.”

“Yes, of course it was.”

“So it is understandable that you would seek some, shall we say, spiritual significance to the events of your life.”

“Of course it’s understandable.”

“However, the place you have chosen to make your church home is a particularly virulent anti-Catholic cult.”

“That is not true in the slightest. If Australian Christian Churches is a cult then every mainstream Protestant church in the country must also be regarded as a cult. These churches bear absolutely no hallmarks of a cult. And as far as being anti-Catholic, probably sixty per cent of the congregation are ex-Catholics — including my wife!”

“That’s right, Mr Hearn. This particular church seems to major on converting Catholics to its own brand of Protestantism.”

“On the contrary. Australian Christian Churches do absolutely no evangelism to Catholics at all. It seems to be that Catholics who are well grounded in Biblical basics, are attracted to their style of service. In fact, there’s a branch of the Catholic Church approved by the Pope that is almost identical.”

“The Charismatic Catholics, yes, I am aware of them, Mr Hearn. The point I am making and I put it to you, is that these entire court proceedings have been brought on because of your hatred of Catholicism and your emotional instability, both of which have grown out of the traumatic events in your life during 1980. That just as you sincerely believe in impossible events like a virgin birth, walking on water and a man rising from the dead, so you also honestly believe that you asked Ms Merken if you could veto the adoption. I put it to you that just as your belief in the miracles of the Bible is a coping mechanism in reaction to the upsetting events of 1980, so too, your shifting of the blame from yourself to Ms Merken is an attempt to cope with the guilt you felt for all these years after the event. The fact that Ms Merken is a Catholic makes it all that much easier for you, doesn’t it, Mr Hearn?”

“If your analysis was true then Lionel Walsh would be sitting at the accused’s table, not Ms Merken. It wasn’t until last year when I started retrieving certain documents and I learned that the law conferred onto me the rights of veto over the adoption, that I saw Ms Merken’s culpability in all this. Up until then I regarded Lionel Walsh as the villain of the piece.”

“Yes! Another Catholic, Mr Hearn. You do have it bad, don't you? But, you knew you would never get Ellen to testify against her own father. And you also knew that Mr Walsh did not have ten-million dollars to give you in compensation. Far better to attack a wealthy institution you despise and hopefully close it down. That's your motivation isn't it, Mr Hearn?”

Mitchell took a deep breath and thought about this accusation. Could there be a kernel of truth in it? He looked at Anna. He loved her so much but Mitchell couldn't deny she was a twisted product of this system. But which system?

“I do not despise the Catholic Church. I do despise illegal adoptions. It wouldn't matter if the injustice that happened to me, the stealing of my child, had been perpetrated by the Department of Community Services, the Salvation Army, Anglicare or the Australian Christian Churches movement. I would still be here attempting this prosecution.

“As for feelings of guilt, they departed from me around the time Ellen was married. Mr Stafford, I would only feel guilty if I had not been punished. But, I certainly have. The price I've paid over the years so completely outweighs the sin, that even if my faith offered no forgiveness, I would still be guiltless because I have served the time and I'll continue to serve the time until the day I die, irrespective of the outcome of this court action. It's not guilt or blame that I carry, Mr Stafford. It's the knowledge that in complete contradiction of my wishes I had my life stolen from me. No amount of compensation can make up for that. To be honest I intend giving away most of the money, if I end up winning any, to the people who've really been damaged by these sorts of actions.

“I did not institute this action to prove anything to my daughter or to Ellen. In fact, these proceedings have probably further alienated me from both of them.

“My motive was purely that the truth be told, so that this state would know what really went on.”

Mitchell locked a ferocious stare onto his adversary.

“And as for my faith, Mr Stafford, you stand there with your atheistic religion and try to tell me that it's better than what I think and that I'm unstable for believing the Gospel narrative.

“Mr Stafford, I'm not the one who lacks the toughness of mind to stand up and be counted by defending my faith.

“Yes, I do believe that this world was created by a Father who cares for his children. I know a little bit about being the father of a lost, stolen and wayward child. And I know that a father in that position would gladly be nailed to a bit of wood if it would bring his child back to him.”

There was movement at the back of the courtroom as a skinny, cap-wearing teenage girl rushed from the hall sniffing loudly.

§

Any semblance of Christian grace disappeared from Mitchell’s demeanour the moment the courtroom started to clear for the recess and he stood face to face with Justin.

Mitchell pushed Justin quite hard in the shoulder. “What in the name of God Almighty are you playing at, Justin?”

“Not here, Mitch. I’ll get us a private room.”

He did and they entered.

“That was nothing short of irrelevant religious vilification and you just sat there letting him go at me. I looked like a bloody religious whacko out there. The press will have my scrotum, Justin. And Annalee’s in the courtroom. I’m trying to prove to her that I’m normal and you just hang my butt out for a bloody good whipping!”

Justin was way too calm. “Ok. One point at a time. Firstly, Anna. You’re never going to get through to her until she knows all about you. Trying to hide your faith from her just makes her suspicious. Now she knows what makes you tick, it’s probably a relief for her, as opposed to all the things she might have been imagining, that you’re a “rock spider” or a neurotic or something worse. She’ll go away, have a think about it. Whatever she decides, let’s face it, you had nothing to lose. Your relationship with her is already at rock bottom. It won’t get any worse for this.”

“Well more importantly, what about this trial? I was crucified out there!”

“You answered brilliantly and I knew you would. You’re at your best under pressure. You tend to waffle when you’re not. Your testimony was real ‘heart’ stuff. The jury loved it. I watched them. They were nodding at you and frowning at Stafford. And do you know why?”

“Why?” Mitchell was ropable, determined not to believe Justin’s lawyer-speak explanations.

“Well, who chose the jury, Mitch?”

“You and Stafford.”

“Right. And what do you think we look for when we’re eliminating jury candidates?”

“Things that will influence the case, I suppose.”

“Right. That’s why I didn’t eliminate the two women wearing the fish necklaces and the guy wearing the cross choker.”

“I didn’t notice that.”

“That’s because you don’t do jury selection every day. Also the Italian-looking lady. Stafford basically put today’s show on for her. But it blew up in his face because you showed real commitment to your faith. Old Catholic ladies love that. She was actually smiling at your answers. And the two girls wearing the fish necklaces. They always sit together — you watch this afternoon — and they were nudging each other every time you spoke. You won them out there today, Mitch. Most of the jury is on your side now because you showed them you have nothing to hide. There was only one guy who wanted Stafford to win in the end — the older guy with the big nose. Each time Stafford asked a question he leaned forward, then he’d lean back with a concerned look on his face when you answered.

“And now the punchline, Mitch. Hallanon is one of the top legal advisors for the Sydney Diocese of the Anglican Church. And the one thing he’s sick of is court actions that are bashing the church, irrespective of what denomination. My one reservation about this whole case was that Hallanon might view it as just you putting the boot into the Catholics.

“But, you proved to him today that you’re not. Stafford was trying to put that seed into Hallanon’s mind. I didn’t really know what you were going to say, but I’ve heard you backed into a corner before and you always come out fighting. I knew Stafford was making a mistake taking you on like that, so I just let him go.”

Mitchell shook his head and smiled at Justin. “You are a sneaky bugger, aren’t you?”

25

The afternoon session arrived, and as much as the prosecution hated the thought of Dyson being on their witness list, it was the only way they could get her on the stand, to dump on Merken.

Justin commenced the odious task of drawing out Dyson's testimony. "Ms Dyson, in what capacity do you appear here today?"

"As an adoption worker from 1964 to 1995 and as chief executive officer of St Mary of Dolleurs Adoption Branch from 1975 to 1987."

"Is it fair to say that you are probably the most experienced adoption worker in New South Wales?"

"I would certainly be one of them, yes."

"You're familiar with the case before the court. You have reviewed the records. Is there anything in the way the adoption proceeded that would suggest to you that Ms Merken acted in disregard for the law?"

"Heather had a rather cavalier attitude to the way she handled the case."

"You are aware that the prosecution claims that Ms Merken allowed the coercion of Ellen?"

"Heather mentioned the actions of Mr Walsh on several occasions."

Stafford made the call, "Objection. My client can hardly be held accountable for the actions of the girl's parents."

"I'll rephrase the question, Your Honour," answered Justin. "In your opinion, did Ms Merken seem to care that Ellen's parents were applying coercion?"

“On the contrary. She didn't regard it as coercion at all. Just normal family squabbles. Heather did confide in my secretary that she was rather proud of how she had been able to stir up the girl's father against Mr Hearn!”

Stafford scribbled an infuriated note.

“How did you feel about the way Miss Walsh had been treated by her parents?”

“As I said, we didn't know the details.”

“I meant, when I showed you Ellen Walsh's deposition recently in my office.”

“I was shocked. Disgusted.”

“Why is that?”

“Well, I *am* a mother myself. I know what it's like to give birth. I know what it's like to lose a child.”

“And how is that, Ms Dyson?”

“I had three stillbirths in the late Fifties. I know what it's like to go through labour but have nothing at the end of it. I could easily empathise with how these young girls felt. That's why I am testifying here today. I was very sensitive to the pain of the young birth-mothers.”

She paused. “From what I have seen of Ellen's story, might I say it is my personal opinion that Heather's actions, done in secret without the knowledge or approval of anyone at St Mary of Dolleurs, were reprehensible.”

Mitchell could hear Merken from where he sat. “Oh, Maureen,” she complained under her breath.

Dyson raised herself in her seat. “Let me say just this: I personally regret deeply the lifelong pain experienced by many women who relinquished their children for adoption. I recognise that decisions taken in the past, although based on the best knowledge of the time, and made with the best of intentions, may have nevertheless been fundamentally flawed.”

Stafford could hardly wait for his cross-examination.

“Bravo, Ms Dyson,” he started sarcastically. “Fine sentiments indeed. Deep regret? The best knowledge of the time? Dear oh dear, Maureen, do you think we're fools? Your Honour, in the light of Ms Dyson's last remark, I submit to the court a copy of the *Australian Association of Social Workers' Statement about Adoption*, dated 12th June 1997, a statement almost verbatim repeated by Ms Dyson just a moment ago. Her expressions of 'regret' are not even her own.”

“And, might I add,” interjected Justin, “that expression of regret has been utterly rejected by surrendering mothers’ associations.”

“Duly noted,” formalised Hallanon.

Stafford contemplated for a moment. “Ms Dyson, during your time as CEO at St Mary of Dolleurs, it went from the fifth-largest placement agency of the time, to the second largest. That’s a lot of mothers losing their children!”

“Yes, but you have to understand the social culture of the time. Society generally saw adoption as a ‘no pain’ option. I understood it wasn’t. There was considerable pain for the girls. But, society as a whole, including for example, the parents of these pregnant teenagers, were not aware that adoption was sentencing a birth-mother to a life of trauma. We understand that now and that’s why I’m writing my book, to change that thinking.”

“Ms Dyson, you have heard the testimony of Dr Richardson. He testified that there was plenty of research around in the sixties and seventies to suggest that the separation of a child from its natural parents had a pathological effect on the psychology of both the child and the natural parents. Do you still adhere to your view that in the culture of the time, the horrendous detrimental effects of separation through adoption were unknown?”

“They were not unknown, but they were little known. Misunderstood, especially by the general public. In fact, the effects of adoption are still a mystery in the general community.”

“So do you agree that you had a duty to take into account your knowledge of these traumas, especially when you came into contact with pregnant teenagers and their parents?”

“Of course. And we did. That’s why around sixty-six per cent of single girls during the late seventies, early eighties, kept their babies. And, might I add, that was fine with us.”

“I’m sure it was. Especially when your particular agency was placing a larger and larger percentage of adopted children at the time. In fact, the sixty-six per cent figure you quote is an industry figure. However the percentage for St Mary of Dolleurs in 1980, for example, was fifty—fifty. For every refusal, your agency was able to gain a consent. How is it that your agency, in a time known as ‘the adoption drought’ was able to have twice the success rate in placing children than other agencies?”

“It was our Catholic base. Our clients had a greater sense of obligation to their parents. We also had very, very good placements. Excellent families that the children went to.”

“So you admit you would tell the mother the quality of the adoptive family?”

“No, we just had a reputation for good placements. So, those girls who were more serious about their placement would come to us.”

“It does seem strange, don't you think, that St Mary of Dolleurs had three times the consent-conversion rate of the Salvation Army during the years you were CEO?”

“Objection Your Honour,” yelled Justin. “These statistics hardly constitute proof of any negligence on anyone's part. They're hardly relevant to the case.”

Stafford insisted, “Relevance will be shown presently, Your Honour.”

“Get to the point, Mr Stafford,” said Hallanon.

Reg Stafford continued. “Ms Dyson, you were born in 1929, correct?”

She nodded. “And you have how many children?”

“Four.”

“The oldest is Allen and he's thirty-five years old, is that correct?”

She nodded.

“So, you were in your mid-thirties when Allen came along?”

“As I said, I had a number of stillbirths in my twenties and so I was a bit of a late starter, yes.”

Justin was to his feet again, “Relevance, Your Honour!”

“I'm getting there,” Reg yelled back at Justin.

“Last warning, Mr Stafford.”

“Ms Dyson, just for the record, I want to go over your career. How did you start in social work?”

“During the 1950s I was a rehabilitation social worker at Concord. I left there in 1962. My husband and I went to live in New Zealand for two years and, when we returned in 1964, I joined St Mary of Dolleurs.”

“That's right,” said Stafford with a glint in his eye. “In fact, Ms Dyson, when we tried to serve a subpoena on you to appear in this trial, we couldn't find you on the electoral roll. We found Ms Puddle in Mosman and Ms Tilley in Wahroonga, but we couldn't find Ms Dyson in Hunters Hill. All rather well-heeled suburbs of Sydney, I might add.”

“I was taken off the electoral rolls when we moved to New Zealand and we never bothered going back on.”

“Thank you, Ms Dyson.”

Justin shrugged at the judge.

Stafford was quick, “Now, let’s put all this together.”

He went to his folder and pulled out a document. “Ms Dyson, read the name at the top of this medical report.”

She put her glasses on and peered at the document, which was shaking with excitement in Reg’s hand. “Where did you get this?”

She looked sickly at Justin who jumped in. “Objection, Your Honour. This document is not on the list of evidence!”

“How do you know if you haven’t seen it?” asked Hallanon.

“He knows what it is, Your Honour, and I submit that it *is* on the list of evidence, under *Medical Reports of Witnesses*.”

It was handed to Hallanon as Justin and Stafford approached the bench.

Hallanon handed it back to Reg and nodded.

“Thank you, Your Honour. Now, Ms Dyson, could you read the name?”

Dyson removed her glasses and sighed, “Dyson, Maureen Elsie.”

“And the date, Ms Dyson?”

“Sixteen November 1961.”

“The name of the surgeon?”

“Dr Abraham Sussman.”

“The same gynaecologist who attended to Ellen Walsh’s confinement. And the medical procedure carried out on you that day in November 1961, Ms Dyson?”

“Emergency hysterectomy.”

“Thank you.” Reg turned his face to the jury. “And, you have how many children, Ms Dyson?”

She didn’t answer. Stafford answered for her. “Four children, Ms Dyson. All adopted *after* 1964. The youngest in 1973 when you were forty-four. We also have records that show you attempted to adopt a fifth child in 1974, but the CEO of St Mary of Dolleurs, Mrs Eileen Cooper, vetoed it — so you led a coup to have her removed the following year. Is that right, Ms Dyson?”

She failed to answer again.

“Relevance!” cried Justin.

“Overruled.”

“I now submit to the court documents supplied by Mrs Eileen Cooper — it doesn't pay to make enemies, Ms Dyson! These are the adoption documents for each of Ms Dyson's four children and you will notice that they are all listed in the hyphenated name of 'Sinclair-Dyson'. This would make Ms Dyson impossible to trace should any of the natural parents of the Dyson adoptees try to find their children.

“Ms Dyson, you have testified to this court that you could empathise with young surrendering mothers, but the truth is that you identified much more readily with the tragedy of barrenness. After three stillbirths and an emergency hysterectomy, you put together quite a brilliant strategy. It was calculated a lifetime in advance. The first thing was to be removed from the electoral roll. You then sought a position where you could adopt children at whim. You placed each one of those adoptions in such a way to prevent the natural mother ever being reunited with the child.

“I submit you then manoeuvred yourself into a position where you could cover your tracks and simultaneously allay the tragedy of infertility for other women just like yourself. You regarded fertile teenage girls as too incompetent to look after their babies. They would have ample opportunity to have other children, so you regarded it as a public service to place their children into what you decided were the perfect family situations.”

“Objection, Your Honour! Ms Dyson is not on trial here today — Ms Merken is.”

Hallanon's ruling was swift and savage. “Mr Karamarnis, this is your witness presented to the court to further the case of your client. Mr Stafford has every right to probe her testimony. However, I will ask him to show the absolute relevance of his assertions immediately.”

Mitchell scribbled three words on a piece of paper and pushed it across the desk to Justin: *Let him go.*

“Your Honour,” continued Stafford, “this woman, as CEO and immediate superior to Ms Merken, had an insatiable motive to unrelentingly pressure her subordinates to gain consents from birth-mothers, no matter what the cost.”

“It was the social belief at the time! Adoption was seen as a very good alternative for children born to single mothers!” protested Dyson.

“Oh was it really, Ms Dyson?” Stafford was on a roll. “If that be so, why did the Attorney-General record into Parliamentary Hansard on the 16th of November 1976 that *it is a fundamental right of an ex-nuptial child to know who his parents are?*”

“If one reads the Attorney-General’s speech that day, it demonstrates that Ms Dyson’s attitude to ex-nuptial children harks back to the 1720s and 1840s!

“The Attorney-General rightly called them *anachronistic*. *The values which underlie these attitudes must surely be offensive to a society which adheres to the principles of equality and dignity for all.*”

“There was no adoption culture of the time, Ms Dyson.

“The World Health Organisation issued a strong recommendation to all member nations, to do everything possible to keep natural parents and their children together — in 1952! A recommendation endorsed by the New South Wales Deputy Premier Heffron in 1956!

“How hard did you try to keep Rebecca Walsh with her natural parents? As Ms Merken’s immediate superior, did you pressure her to make sure the Walsh child was adopted?”

“Of course I didn’t. If Heather Merken acted improperly in this matter then she acted alone and without my knowledge.”

“How do you explain the extraordinary consent rate of your Agency in the years that you were CEO?”

“Just good luck,” replied Dyson defiantly. “And the adoption culture of the time.”

“This tired old defence. Ms Dyson, you know that all the research spoke against adoption. The Parliament spoke against adoption. Even the standard-issue social workers’ manuals spoke against adoption! Ms Dyson,” he revealed an A4 size book from his pile of folders, “do you recognise this?”

“Yes, of course. It’s the *Child Welfare Manual*.”

“Please read the highlighted portion, Ms Dyson.”

She placed her glasses on and read. “*World authorities are placing more and more emphasis on the retention of the child in its natural home environment. Every effort should be made to keep the child in the home circle.*”

“*If the home conditions are impossible, the consensus is that adoption or foster care, in that order, are the next best thing.*”

“Right. Clearly best practice was to do everything possible to keep the child with its natural parents. Now Ms Dyson, please read the highlighted portion here.”

Maureen was clearly flustered.

“In passing the Adoption of Children Act, the legislature has made it clear that the legislation is to promote the welfare of infants. Their welfare is best served if they are brought up by their own natural parents in their own home. Adoption is only a second best, when from the nature of things, the best is for some reason not available. This is derived from R v. B 1960 — V.R. 407.”

Dyson protested. “The adoption of the Walsh child was exactly according to this stipulation! Ellen Walsh was living in a war zone! Clearly the home environment was impossible!”

“I thought you said you didn’t know the details, Ms Dyson?”

Stafford paused then pressed the advantage. “The jury will note that Ms Dyson earlier in her testimony stated that she did not know the details of the duress placed on Ellen Walsh. She implied that she did nothing about it because she was unaware of it. She has now just described the home life of Ellen Walsh as a ‘war zone’. Clearly, Ms Dyson knew of the coercion placed upon Ellen Walsh. Ms Dyson, you in fact instructed Ms Merken to stir up Mr Walsh to create an environment where Ellen Walsh could see no alternative but to adopt her child away.”

“That is not true,” she slapped her hand on the rail.

“I ask you again, Ms Dyson, did you, in accordance with the social workers’ manuals of the time, instruct Heather Merken to offer all assistance to Ellen Walsh so that she could keep her child? Or did you do everything possible to pressure Ms Merken into gaining an adoption consent from Ellen Walsh against her will?”

Maureen Dyson had only one line left. “If Heather Merken acted improperly in this matter then she acted alone without my knowledge.”

“A few minutes ago you were boasting to us how wide your knowledge was. Now you’re trying to tell us that you didn’t even know what was going on in your own agency?”

“If Heather Merken was over-zealous in her acquiring of this consent then she obviously got caught up in the pro-adoption culture of the time!”

“Ms Dyson, the only pro-adoption culture was that which existed between the years of 1975 and 1987 within the walls of St Mary of Dolleurs Adoption Agency.

“And I can actually prove that statement by presenting to the court, copies of archived submissions to the New South Wales Government’s *White Paper on the Children Equality of Status Act 1976*.

All submissions, from Barnados, Salvation Army, Burnside, Lifeline, Presbyterian Homes, even Anglicare Adoption Agency, all of them called for the end of discrimination against ex-nuptial children to help them to be raised in their own homes by their natural parents. All of them stressed the desirability of keeping a child in contact with its natural parents. All of them stated that such considerations overrode the preferred option that the two parents be married. All except the submission from St Mary of Dolleurs, which stated, and I quote:

“The legislated removal of discrimination against ex-nuptial children is undesirable because it will encourage a dismissive attitude towards marriage in our society by removing one of the main motivations for marriage, that being the legitimisation of ex-nuptial children.

*“Conferring inheritance rights on the ex-nuptial, **and guardianship rights to the unmarried father**, will result in a disintegration of the institution of holy matrimony and is therefore against Roman Catholic teaching.*

“The signature at the bottom of that submission of course reads *Mrs Maureen Dyson J.P.* Regarding that particular point of view, the member for Ku-ring-gai responded in the New South Wales Parliament on the 2nd of November 1976: *It is sad that people are unable to distinguish between the accident of birth and whether or not the parents were married.*

“I further enter into evidence the original submission to that White Paper Inquiry from St Mary of Dolleurs, written by Mrs Eileen Cooper, which expresses the exact opposite sentiment.

“Far from acting according to the law, which states the interests of the child will be paramount, I submit to the court that Ms Dyson’s allegiance to infertile couples overrode her responsibilities of care towards both newborn children and pregnant teenagers to such an extent that she imposed her own set of priorities and fostered her own set of convenient beliefs among those who worked for her.

“Furthermore, not content with separating children from their natural parents, Ms Dyson then moved herself into a counselling position from 1987 to 1995 — ”

“I am an experienced adoption worker! Of course my skills are — ”

“ — where she was able to recruit staff from the consent-taking industry who then censored information being given to surrendering mothers and actively discouraged adoption reunions. We have forty-five affidavits to that effect.”

“What possible reason would I — ”

“Those natural parents who went ahead with reunions and started sharing information with the adoptive parents, found gross anomalies in the stories each were told, exactly as in the Walsh case.

“We now submit affidavits from two adoptive mothers who were counselled by Ms Dyson that the natural mother had died. We submit three affidavits where natural mothers had been told by Ms Dyson that the child had died, and one where a natural mother wished to return to the hospital during the thirty day revocation period, only to be told by Ms Dyson that the child had died of complications after birth, when in fact it had already been adopted.”

These stories rang far too true to Mitchell. It had been the sheer weight of the numbers of these types of stories that had caught the Parliamentary Inquiry by surprise. Now, in a criminal court, they were being given a very public airing.

At first, Justin wondered why Mitchell continually stopped him from trying to defend Dyson from this onslaught. To Justin, the conviction of Heather Merken was all-important. As Stafford went on and on detailing the rancid track record of Maureen Dyson, that conviction went up in smoke, but, Justin realised another dimension to the character of his client. He now understood it was this evidence — the truth — that Mitchell needed to hear.

Stafford continued. “I further submit audited tax records for St Mary of Dolleurs for every year from 1967 to 1988. The significance of these is that they show income between two and three times the amount the agency would have derived from normal fees applicable to their adoptions in any given year. For example in the 1979—1980 tax year, St Mary of Dolleurs placed 238 children into adoption. The Department at the time charged a total of \$1700 per adoption, a projected income of \$404,600. However, for that year St Mary of Dolleurs Adoptions declared an income of \$1.4 million.”

“Our fees were slightly higher and we invested wisely,” interjected the pathetic creature at the stand.

“Let the court of the general public decide exactly what you were investing in.

No further cross-examination, Your Honour.”

The public gallery erupted, even the press! Mitchell turned around to see the faces of the same people who had been daily attending the Parliamentary Inquiry.

All except one: a freckled, multi-pierced face at the back of the hall, who hastily exited under baseball cap at the final massacre of Dyson's testimony.

Mitchell emotionally shook Stafford's hand. "Thank you. Thank you, so much."

Stafford winked at Mitchell. "My pleasure, Mitchell."

Justin approached. "So, the 'Eichmann' defence, Reg? Didn't anyone tell you Eichmann still got the electric chair?"

"He was hanged, Justin," corrected Reg.

They laughed.

Mitchell excused himself to chase the crewcut stick-figure out of the back of the hall. By the time he reached the courthouse vestibule all he saw was the exit door still rotating. Escaped again.

Dyson, however, remained firmly trapped. She had finally come face to face with the reality of who she was. She never recovered. Peat Island Psychiatric Hospital has a special room for baby-stealers.

26

The trial came to Monday, the penultimate day of hearings. All weekend Justin had tried to telephone Ellen but there had been no response.

At nine o'clock the press gallery was full, the public gallery packed. But as far as Mitchell could see, no Ellen.

"Your Honour," commenced Justin, "we indicated to the court we proposed to call to the stand Mrs Ellen Stenner, the natural mother of Rebecca. However, due to circumstances beyond our control it appears —"

The door opened with a thump at the back of the public gallery and two-hundred heads turned in unison.

Mitchell felt sorry for her. Two-hundred pairs of eyes focussed on her and her natural shyness caused her to blush. Thankfully, she looked gorgeous.

"— it appears that she has been held up in traffic and has only just arrived. If Your Honour would allow me a few seconds with the witness."

Mitchell smiled at her so broadly he thought he was going to cry. To see her up close for the first time in eighteen years was almost overwhelming. Justin went to her and gently touched her arm, asking her if she was happy to go straight to the witness stand. She nodded. But she refused to look at Mitchell.

She was sworn in and still she refused to look at the prosecution's table. Mitchell was directly in front of her but throughout her entire questioning with Justin, her concentration was such that she didn't allow even a flicker in Mitchell's direction.

“Ellen, as you know, your affidavit has been presented to the court as evidence. The jury will have opportunity to read it during their deliberations. So if there is anything that might be too traumatic for you to recount, that’s ok. We have it in writing.”

“I’d like to tell.”

And she did.

Justin put onto the overhead a list from one of the social worker manuals of adoption alternatives which must be offered to a birth-mother before a consent can be taken.

“Did Heather Merken discuss with you alternative accommodation arrangements for you and your baby?”

“No.”

“Did she tell you about any pensions or government benefits?”

“No.”

“A maintenance order for support from Mitchell?”

“No.”

“Short-term foster care?”

“No.”

“Help in finding employment and day care?”

“No.”

“Did she ever counsel you that adoption would result in lifetime regret, possible neurotic psychology for both you and your child, as well as feelings of worthlessness and depression?”

“No, all she ever told me was what a wonderful life my child would have with the adoptive family.”

“Did you at any time insist that Rebecca had to be adopted?”

“Never.”

“Did you ever state to Heather Merken that you thought the best option for Rebecca would be adoption?”

“Not once. Not with anyone, and least of all in the presence of Heather Merken.”

Justin turned to the jury. “The jury will note that I have just gone through the mandatory check list that all consent takers were required to offer a mother in Ellen’s circumstances. Ellen has clearly indicated that none of those alternatives were ever offered to her. You will note that the

adoption handbook states, *only when all these aids have been rejected, should the consent be accepted.*

“We further present five affidavits from other surrendering mothers whose case-worker was Ms Merken, all of whom state that they too, were denied any discussion of these alternatives.”

He turned back to Ellen. “Did Ms Merken inform you that during the thirty day revocation period after signing the consent form, you had unlimited visiting rights to your baby?”

Ellen just looked stunned, and so did Mitchell. He whispered it to himself but Ellen said it out loud, “I had what?”

“You and Mitchell Hearn had unlimited visiting rights. It’s standard practice for any fostering. According to the laws governing foster care in 1980, you could have gone to see your daughter at the foster carer’s home anytime you wanted during the thirty day revocation period. Did Ms Merken inform you of this?”

Ellen was almost in shock. “I’m sorry. This is the first I’ve ever heard of it.”

“If you had known, would you have taken up the offer?”

“Of course I would have. Of course!”

“Even if the child had been fostered a long way away, somewhere difficult to get to?”

“Of course! It wouldn’t have mattered if she had been taken to Perth! I would have gone there somehow!”

“Well, she was fostered to Gynea.”

“I wish I’d known!” Ellen’s voice showed definite signs of cracking at this revelation.

“Ellen, when you left the hospital, what did you assume happened to your child?”

“Ms Merken told me she would go to a foster home ... ”

“When?”

“Immediately. So that Rebecca could get used to a home environment.”

Justin pulled out another document and showed it to Ellen. Her mouth dropped open in disbelief, then she locked her gaze onto Merken. “You left my baby in the hospital for two weeks! For two weeks. While I was in agony to hold her and she had no one to cuddle her! How could you do that to my baby?”

Hallanon interjected. “Ellen, I realise you’re upset, but I’m afraid you can’t ask questions of the accused from the witness box.”

“I’m sure it was a rhetorical question, Your Honour,” reassured Justin.

Ellen wiped her eyes with a handkerchief before Justin changed the pace, putting various information sheets up on the overhead, then Ellen clearly and sometimes tearfully recounted the various levels of coercion that had been applied by Merken and others, as she filled them out nineteen years before.

“This one has been changed,” she pointed to the top of the Contact Information Form.

Justin looked at it and could see the additional markings. “How has it been changed, Ellen?”

“Well it now says *Initial contact with agency: 25/2/80*. But my mother was talking to the agency in December 1979 and one of the social workers was coming around and talking to my parents right through January and February.”

Justin looked closely at the writing and indeed, the 25 had been derived from a 15, the stroke between the day-date and the month had been derived from a number 1, while the 80 had obvious signs of overwriting. It had originally said *15.12.79*.

“What do you believe the significance of that would be, Ellen?”

“To cover two months of pressure they put on my parents before they met me. There was always a social worker coming around with adoption literature for my mother and talking to my father about Mitchell.”

“Ellen, would you recognise that social worker now if you saw her?”

“My oath I would. I fused her image on my brain. Every time I looked out my bedroom window and saw her coming up the garden path I knew there would be a massive fight in our house that night. I vowed I would never forget her ugly face.”

“Is she in this courtroom?”

“Yes.”

“Could you point her out to us?”

“Certainly.”

Ellen raised her arm at Merken, opened her index finger from her hand, and pointed to the top of Heather’s head.

“Let the record show that Ellen Walsh has identified Heather Merken.”

“Oh no, not her,” said Ellen. “That’s the woman, in the third row of the gallery. The little grey woman.”

As each head turned, this woman involuntarily shrank in her seat. Louisa Puddle.

The frantic scribble of the journo's pens was quite audible as Ellen revealed how Puddle had run courier between the agency and her parents from early January to late March, antagonising her father and convincing Lynette of the benefits of adoption.

Finally Justin came to "that" meeting.

"Ellen, do you recall the events of Friday, March the 3rd at three o'clock in Ms Merken's office?"

"Like it was yesterday. Mitchell asked and kept on asking about all the different ways he could stop the adoption."

"And how did Ms Merken respond?"

"Basically that he didn't have a hope."

"What do you mean, 'didn't have a hope'?"

"Her exact words were, 'You haven't got a hope of stopping this adoption. Ellen is the only one'."

"How did you feel about that?"

"I thought she had been pretty rude to Mitch, and he reacted to it. He was a bit excitable in those days."

Mitchell winced. Ellen continued.

"But I thought that was ok because I had no intention of going through with the adoption. I intended to marry Mitchell. And I told him that as we left the meeting."

"So when did you change your mind?"

"About what?"

"The adoption."

"I didn't."

"Ellen," Justin pulled a document out of his folder and covered the bottom of the form with a blank piece of paper. "Do you recognise this form?"

"No, I don't."

He removed the paper.

"But Ellen, it has your signature at the bottom of it. That is your signature isn't it?"

Ellen went white and was unable to answer. Her mouth was open but so dry that no words would come out. Her eyes were wide but she found it hard to focus.

“I don’t remember it.” She started to stress. “Please, take it away. I don’t remember it at all.”

She started hyperventilating and blinking her eyes trying to maintain equilibrium as Justin spoke to the jury, oblivious to Ellen’s loss of balance.

“For the record, I am showing Ellen the actual adoption consent form.”

“I don’t remember. I’m trying, my darling. I’m trying but I can’t remember!” And she started to cry as she recounted scenes. “I’m standing near the window of my hospital room ... ” she pulled a tissue from her pocket, “holding Beckie ... ” she was almost inaudible.

“Do you want to take a break, Ellen?” asked Justin.

She was now digging deep and found herself calling up an animal she had visited only once before, standing atop a table on the eve of her tribulation with her arm hanging limply out of the window.

“No. I need to go on! Someone is listening. She needs to hear.”

She tilted her head back and slowly inhaled enormous balloons of air. Then she spoke in short sentences, punctuated with long, breathy commas and gulping full stops.

“I’m kissing you, Rebecca. Your beautiful red hair. I stroke it. So soft. My little girl. Tears streaming from my eyes onto your face. Pressing your whole body against my shoulder. I want to put you back in my womb and steal away.

“I put you in your crib. Such agony. No words for it. Beckie’s big, round eyes staring at me. ‘Don’t go mummy. Don’t leave me.’ You just keep staring at me. Hoping. ‘I’m so sorry, my little darling. I wish I wasn’t living this life. I wish we were together in some other existence’.”

The courtroom was silent. Mitchell felt as though a twelve-inch knife was being forced into his throat as she spoke.

“Searing pain in my legs. No, my backside. I hit my mother in the chest. I want to strangle her. But then I’m awake in my bedroom. My guts exploding, on fire. Right up into my ribs, front and back. I can hardly walk. I’m in the house but I don’t know how I got there. All I know is my beautiful Beckie is gone. One minute I was mum to the most gorgeous little girl in the world. Then I just evaporated.”

Merken and Stafford had to look away. Hardened court reporters wiped away the emotion streaking their faces.

And one little baseball cap in the back row, bowed between skinny knees, feet on chair, arms wrapped around shins, this tight little package jerked in unrestrained primal outpourings. "This sweet lady cries my lament. My sorrow. The anguish of my abandoned falling."

Here Annalee spasmed beyond shame, surrounded by curious onlookers but travailing in her lonely "bastard-moment".

Justin sat down. The judge, the solicitors, the witness and at least half the jury poured themselves glasses of water.

Hallanon called a recess but no one moved.

Just breathing.

Mitchell almost felt sorry for Stafford as he rose to drink from this poison chalice.

There was no need. Ellen finished him off immediately with a brilliantly held ace.

"Mrs Stenner — Ellen," Stafford commenced, "you have a great recall of the events of that meeting in Ms Merken's office. Yet you have no memory of signing the adoption consent. Now I can understand that. But how is it you can remember Friday the 3rd of March so completely, even down to the supposed 'exact words' spoken by my client?"

Ellen blew her nose as she began to recover her poise. "I have an aid to memory."

It was the one expression she had retained from her three weeks in library studies.

"What do you mean 'an aid to memory'?"

She smiled shyly, then reached into her jacket pocket and pulled out a small bundle of papers. Her mascara-lined face looked up at Stafford and she offered the bundle to him.

"Mr Stafford," she said with the dignity of a long-awaited conquest. "These are Heather Merken's original case notes."

The delicacy of the tension could no longer accept the strain. The gallery erupted. Hallanon clouted his little hammer. Justin yelled over the top of the commotion, "Permission to approach the bench, Your Honour!"

Much gavel-thumping. Ellen used the confusion to draw a long breath and from her face escaped the satisfaction of finality. She looked contentedly at Mitchell's hands crossed on the desk, the closest they came to eye contact.

In quite audible whispers, Justin and Stafford argued with the judge over the admissibility of the notes.

“Your Honour, these are stolen documents and they are NOT on the evidence list,” claimed Stafford.

“They are not stolen documents. In fact, we don’t know how she got them,” contended Justin. “And they *are* on the evidence list.”

“Neither the defence or the prosecution has had access to them. They are inadmissible,” retorted Stafford.

The protagonists retired to their respective tables and Hallanon turned to Ellen. “Could you tell the court how you came to be in possession of these?”

“On one of her visits, Louisa Puddle brought them to show my father. To prove to him that Mitchell was still interfering, still seeing me and still wanting to stop the adoption. She left them on the dining room table, told my mother to keep them as the agency had copies and no further use for them. She said it would be good for dad to be reminded of what Mitchell was like. Mum took them and put them in the bottom of a box full of unsorted family photographs. I guess after Rebecca was gone she just forgot they were there.”

Photographs of Ellen and her brother at around ten, eleven years! My dream, Mitchell contemplated. Was it subliminal knowledge or premonition?

“One day in 1993, I was at my parents’ place with my other children and I wanted to show them what I looked like at their ages, so we went through the box of photos. I found the case notes and took them. They were the only tangible link I ever had to my first — ”

She started to crack again.

Stafford challenged the judge. “Your Honour, as touching as this story is, these documents are clearly inadmissible as evidence.”

“It doesn’t matter, anyway,” Ellen interrupted. “I can recite to you every word that’s in them. I’ve read them almost every day.”

She closed her eyes and began to bring them forth:

“PF argument re: stop adopt. No hope. Inform LW.

“PF (MH) adamant. Wants to keep child or his mother to adopt. Informed of consent requirements.

“PF unstable upbringing. Rather confused childhood. Father three-times divorced. Mitch alternated between parents.

“Asks again re: taking baby.

“Assessment: Unsuitable environment.”

Stafford had only one bullet to shoot, so he pulled the trigger in aimless hope.

“Ellen, I put it to you that you had no real intention of appearing before this court, but that over the weekend someone from the prosecution’s office has contacted you and made a bargain; in exchange for the testimony you’ve given today, a large sum of money. Perhaps a slice of the rumoured ten-million dollars that Mr Hearn intends to sue for should Ms Merken be convicted? So, the prosecution has concocted this story for the sole purpose of extracting a large compensation payment from St Mary of Dolleurs.”

Ellen locked her light-brown eyes onto Stafford and answered strongly. “I am not here for any money, Mr Stafford. You’re right. I had no intention of coming to this courtroom to testify. Until Friday afternoon, about four o’clock. I was just getting out of the car after bringing the kids back from school, and a girl from the university came up the path. A tall, dark-haired girl I had met at the uni on open day a couple of months ago.”

Georgie! Mitchell thought.

“She said, ‘I have a message for you’ and she handed me a little envelope and left. I opened the envelope,” she reached into her other coat pocket, “and I pulled out this note. *Please, Ellen, Mitch needs you to go to court to tell the truth — and so do I. Rebecca.*

“That’s the only thing that could have brought me here. Like I said before, someone needs to hear the truth. Now that she has, I’d really like to go home.”

Ellen was excused and stepped down from the witness box.

It was the moment she had been dreading more than any. “Go back to sleep now, Therese,” she whispered to herself as she left the dock and fixed her gaze on the back door. Walking briskly, she plunged herself through to the courthouse vestibule. “Go back to sleep, Therese!” she audibly quarrelled with herself.

Mitchell broke protocol to chase her out the back of the hall and Ellen could feel it, his presence pursuing her.

As she neared the courthouse exit and the safe anonymity of the populated city street she held her right hand in front of her to push the revolving door. She stared at the back of this hand — the hand that signed the consent form. Again she said it out loud but with more force and desperation this time, “Go to sleep, Therese!”

It was Therese who wanted to tarry a little with Mitch, but Ellen forced her on. He would blame her. He would accuse Ellen of callous indifference for signing away his child. But it was Therese not Ellen who was to blame. He wouldn’t understand that.

She was almost at the revolving door. Mitchell called to her, “Thanks Els. You’re magic, you know.”

His voice echoed around the cavernous vestibule mixing with the click of her heels on the sandstone, “Once a punk, always a punk.”

Mitchell could see in the reflection of the glass doors she was smiling. He desperately wanted to say those three special little words to her. Why not? What harm would it do?

“Freddie says hello!”

Her head threw back and Mitchell could see her pearly whites clearly reflecting her laughter in the glass as she exited.

He ached to chase her and ask her a few burning questions that had lingered all of twenty years.

Or did he just want to plant a big love bite on her neck?

Either way, Mitchell just marvelled at her. “You could’ve made this a damn sight easier on me, Punk. If you’d just grown old, bitter, fat and ugly like the rest of us.”

27

The hem of Ellen's coat almost flicked the baseball cap off the elfling crouched on the courthouse step.

Despite having the green "walk" sign shining at her, Ellen stopped at the lights at Liverpool and Elizabeth Streets and leaned her forehead against the light post. Again, "Go to sleep, Therese."

Therese Mary was immature and silly. Ellen was demure and controlled.

Therese had long, heavy auburn hair. Ellen had short hair of constantly varying colours.

Therese let people push her around. Ellen vowed to be the one doing all the pushing.

Therese was a good girl who everyone thought was bad. Ellen was a naughty girl who had fooled everyone she was good.

Therese had disgraced her parents. Ellen didn't have any to disgrace.

Therese chose her mate with her heart. Ellen chose her mate with her mind.

Therese was a hopeless mother who signed her child away. Ellen was the perfect mother who protected her family with her life.

Therese was best left dead, so that Ellen might live.

But sometimes, Therese just wouldn't lie still in her coffin.

Ellen blinked up to the lights as they clicked into their next phase. She walked across Hyde Park lighter than she'd been in memory, oblivious to blue eyes trailing her every move from the courthouse steps. At the fountain, she greeted a tall, wavy-haired man with a kiss and walked arm in arm with him as two girls around seven and ten strode along hand in hand to Ellen's left.

Across College Street, the reflection in the window of the Hyde Park Plaza partially obscured her perfectly sports-fit figure as she and the two girls asked the concierge to deliver luggage to the front drive. The tall man handed his valet ticket in, combed his fingers through his hair and waited at the kerb, tapping his feet.

As Ellen and the two girls emerged through the sliding doors, a white Tarago bounced up from the basement. The four piled in, luggage in the rear. Tipping the concierge, then into the driver's seat, the tall man kissed Ellen on the cheek and she smiled through the windscreen.

It was now or never.

As the Tarago waited for a break in the traffic, there was a sudden frantic thumping on the rear windscreen. The girls jumped in fright, Ellen held her hand to her chest while Richard exclaimed, "Bloody reporters!"

"No, wait," said Ellen. "We might have left something in the hotel."

The thumping ran up the passenger side panels and Ellen turned to be greeted by sunglasses and brown cap in her window. She leaned on the down button.

"Did I forget something?"

"No, it seems you haven't forgotten a thing."

The figure at the window lowered her sunglasses and a contrite voice pleaded, "I need a lift back to Armidale."

Therese punched Ellen right in the womb. "Oh, my God! Oh my — " She hurriedly unbuckled, opened the door, and the two red-heads stood on the footpath hugging, crying onto each other's necks for a full twenty minutes.

Occasional half-sentences were whispered. "Oh, my little girl. I have missed you so much."

"You were amazing up there today."

"I looked for you!"

"I couldn't show my face."

"How did you know my address?"

"The card your daughter Anna-lee filled out on Open Day."

"My other daughter Anna-lee!"

"Two Annalee's. It's amazing!"

"What's your full name?"

“Annalee Julie Rebecca.”

Oh, my God! You kept the Rebecca!”

“My parents did.”

“You’re so skinny!”

“Hold me.”

“You’re alive!”

“You’re alive!”

“It hurts so much.”

“It’s finally over.”

“No. It’s just beginning.”

Home.

28

Monday afternoon's session came and the defence would start to put their witnesses on the stand, Merken herself first.

Her testimony was predictable. Maureen Dyson had forced her to pressure Ellen. Louisa Puddle had acted against her wishes. Merken claimed she tried to stop Ellen's father bullying his daughter, but no one at the hospital or the agency was interested in helping her. The fascinating thing to the trial now, was that the defence had completely given up even trying to pretend that Ellen had signed the adoption consent voluntarily.

Merken denied that Mitchell had ever asked about his rights to veto the adoption, claiming that he only ever asked if the father's consent was required.

"It is true," she said, "I wasn't aware of the provisions of the law regarding fathers' rights to oppose adoption. Ok, I was ignorant. But I wasn't alone in that, as you heard from Maureen at the Inquiry."

Justin decided to test out her ignorance. He rose from the prosecution table with a large folder in his hand.

"Ms Merken, do you recognise this?"

"Of course I do. It's the *Operations Manual* for the Australian Social Workers Association."

"And when did you first see it, Ms Merken?"

"When it was issued just after the proclamation of the *Adoption Act* in 1967."

"Have you read the manual, Ms Merken?"

"I read it through a long time ago."

"Did you refer to it when you were practising?"

"From time to time."

"So, when a problem arose you might refer to the relevant section in the manual?"

"Perhaps."

"A problem like suitability to adopt?" He opened at the relevant page.

"Yes."

"A problem like a girl's mother wanting to adopt the child?"

"Yes, but that was frowned upon from a legal perspective. It made the birth-mother effectively the sister of her own baby."

"Well done, Ms Merken. So you *have* read the manual and memorised it. Now read here, Ms Merken."

*"If there is **any vacillation or uncertainty** by the relinquishing mother, the officer will **insist** that the mother consider the question further before signing the surrender. A consent is never accepted from a mother until she is **quite firm** in her decision."*

"Ellen Walsh refused to sign the consent twice. You have just confessed to knowing the duress being placed on Ellen Walsh by her parents. According to what you have just read, you had a duty to ensure that Ellen's consent was being given freely. Ellen showed clear signs of uncertainty in that she twice refused."

Merken challenged. "Quite the contrary! Ellen was going to sign on the Tuesday but then Mr Hearn arrived and together he and I enabled Ellen to see that she wasn't sure. So I took the documentation away. I came back the next day. Again she seemed like she might sign, but I still sensed some doubts, so I returned on the Thursday when she was quite firm about her decision."

"So you claim that Ellen only made a firm decision on the Thursday, you having rescued her from making an uncertain decision on the previous two days?"

"That's correct, yes," declared Merken confidently.

"If that's so, what were you doing in there on the Tuesday with prepared documents?"

"Well, of course I had to have my documents prepared. That's just part of the process."

"Ms Merken, read the next section of the manual."

"Only when a reasoned and firm decision to adopt has been made by the mother of the child, will documents be prepared."

“You see, Heather, you were, by law, supposed to get a firm decision from Ellen first, and then go and prepare your documents. Then you would come back a day or so later when the mother had thought it over, and take a consent then.”

“That’s what I did. I came in on the Monday which was the fifth day, and she seemed sure then. So I went back to the office, had the secretary prepare the documents and returned on the Tuesday.”

“Is that so, Ms Merken? The problem is that it was Easter. Your office was closed and neither you or the secretary worked any of the previous four days.”

“Oh, that’s right. I prepared the documents myself. You do so many, it’s hard to remember individual cases.”

“Yes, it is, Ms Merken. Perhaps we would be better to believe the testimony of two people who have only one case to remember. Both Mitchell Hearn and Ellen Stenner have testified that you did not come into the hospital on the Easter Monday.”

“It’s just my word against theirs, isn’t it?”

Justin turned on the overhead projector and on the wall was a blow up of the consent form signed by Ellen.

“The jury will note here,” he pointed “that the date has been changed. This document has been prepared either on Thursday the 3rd of April — the day Rebecca was born — clearly Ellen would not have made a firm decision on that day, or the document was prepared on the morning of the 8th of April 1980, the day Ellen first refused to sign the adoption consent. Clearly she had not made a firm decision then either.

“Secondly, you will see down here near the bottom, an affidavit typed out claiming that Ms Merken had informed Ellen of all her rights before she signed.

“This portion is supposed to be filled out immediately *after* the signing of the consent, in the consent-taker’s handwriting. Since it is typed, it is quite clear that this too has been filled out on or before the 8th of April, before Ellen signed the consent. The fact that Rebecca was born three weeks early caught everyone by surprise, including the agency and the fact that Easter followed immediately after the birth meant that there had been no opportunity for post-natal counselling of Ellen before Tuesday April 8th. Quite clearly the consent documents had been prepared before

there had been any opportunity for Heather Merken to obtain '*a reasoned and firm decision to adopt*' from Ellen Walsh."

"I was in there on the Monday! You'll penalise me for being in there on my day off?"

"Ms Merken, there is no hospital or agency record that you attended Ellen Walsh on Easter Monday. Since all other witnesses, including Ellen's best friend Julia and your immediate superior Maureen Dyson, have testified that your first attendance at the confinement of Ellen was on the Tuesday, then the court is entitled to believe that as the fact."

"I am telling the truth!"

"Ms Merken, as you just said, you took so many consents, it's hard for you to recall one particular case. We've already seen that you couldn't recall the meeting on March 3rd. On the balance of probability, we are entitled to believe that you have confused memory."

He switched off the overhead and turned the pages of the manual to show Merken another highlighted portion. "Read on, Ms Merken. This is most enlightening."

"All assistance must be offered to an unmarried expectant mother, including financial assistance, to enable her to keep and care for her child ... only when a mother has rejected all offers of assistance should documents for surrender be prepared."

"To the best of your knowledge, was Ellen Walsh offered all assistance to keep her baby?"

"I steadfastly maintain that I discussed all options at length with Ellen before she signed the consent, as I did with all my clients."

"Fair enough. A little clash of opinions there. Did you inform Ellen that she had any visitation rights during the thirty day revocation period?"

"She never asked!"

"You had a duty to clearly inform her."

"I didn't know what she did and didn't know! How could I?"

"Was it a policy at St Mary of Dolleurs Adoption Agency to place babies in foster care as far as possible away from the natural mother, so as to make visitation difficult?"

"Don't be preposterous!"

"Fine! We submit to the court all twenty foster placements effected by Heather Merken in 1980. Ellen Walsh, domicile on Sydney's Northern Beaches, her baby fostered to Gymea in Sydney's deep south. KM, domicile in Liverpool, child fostered to Hornsby. MW domicile Chatswood, child

fostered to Thirlmere, near Wollongong. PK domicile Sutherland, child fostered to Galston. BN domicile in Blacktown, child fostered to the Northern Beaches suburb of Dee Why! Just where Ellen Walsh lived! Need we go on through all twenty placements Ms Merken? Those familiar with the metropolitan area of Sydney will immediately recognise the pattern in Ms Merken's foster placements. They are consistently at the opposite end of the city to where the surrendering mother lived. You have just heard Ms Merken state that this was not St Mary of Dolleurs policy. We therefore must conclude that this apparently non-random foster placement of children by Ms Merken was carried out purely at her instruction."

"Maureen might have suggested some of those placements. I can't remember."

"But you just told us it was not agency policy."

"Not a general policy. Maureen occasionally suggested certain placements, to match the child to the surroundings. For the benefit of the child. The Walsh allot — err, child — was fostered to the very best foster carers. They received the Order of Australia. Wonderful people."

"Yes, well, let the court decide just how meritorious is an Order of Australia for services to the adoption industry," Justin quipped, returning to the social workers' manual before Stafford could call an objection.

"Ok. Now the big one, Ms Merken. Would you consult this manual in a case where a putative father is asking for custody or wanting to veto the adoption proceedings?"

"The manual says absolutely nothing about it," Merken responded confidently.

"You're quite sure about that?"

"Yes, I am."

"You're sure you wouldn't want to reconsider?" said Justin taking the manual and flicking towards the back.

Merken looked worried. "I'm certain. The manual doesn't mention it."

Justin continued to flick towards the back of the manual. The turning pages cut cleanly through the intense atmosphere of the courtroom, as Merken watched, desperate to recall, proud of her knowledge and keen to resurrect her flagging professionalism. "No, definitely," she declared, still lacking real certainty. "There is nothing in the manual."

Justin flicked the last page over and snap-closed the folder.

“Correct, Ms Merken. You have just demonstrated to the court exactly how well you know the recommended work practices contained in this document. And we would expect no less from an adoption practitioner of twenty years.”

She smiled momentarily pleased with herself and nodded at Justin. He had her totally confused. Right where he wanted her as he wiped the smile from her face.

“I submit to the court that Ms Merken knew full well the regulations governing the preparation of documents, the informing of rights and the protocols of fostering, yet she consistently acted in such a way to add to the duress being placed on Ellen Walsh to consent to the adoption.”

Stafford interjected. “Your Honour, this is all well and good, but the question before the court is one of a putative father’s rights. If they are not stipulated in the manual then my client can hardly be blamed for being unaware.”

Justin smiled. “You really should know me better than that, Reg.”

He put the manual back on the prosecution’s table and picked up an overhead and a book.

“Ms Merken, do you recognise this book?”

“Yes. It’s the *Proceedings of the First Australian Conference on Adoption.*”

Justin clicked the overhead projector back on. “This is a list of delegates who attended the 1976 First Australian Conference on Adoption. As you can see here, the representatives from St Mary of Dolleurs included (1) *Maureen Dyson: CEO St Mary of Dolleurs Adoption Branch*, and a little further down here, *Heather Merken: adoption worker*. Now, Ms Merken, I place in your hand the transcripts of the lectures given. Please turn to page 93 and read the highlighted portion at the bottom of the page.”

“A putative father’s consent is not required for an adoption, but if the court is informed of his interest it may, if it appears necessary in the interests of justice to do so, direct that he be given notice of the adoption application, and if the court thinks fit he may be joined as a party for the purpose of opposing the application.”

“That is David Hambly, Professor of Law at ANU quoting almost verbatim, clause 23 of the *Adoption of Children Act*.

“I remind the court again of Ms Dyson’s testimony to the 1998 Parliamentary Inquiry which denied all rights of veto to putative fathers.”

“So if Maureen didn’t remember that lecture, why do you expect me to?”

“I don’t necessarily expect you to remember, Ms Merken. It’s just that you have already demonstrated your conscientious approach to these sorts of things. No doubt you took notes at this conference and obviously you have looked at this book from time to time, since you recognised it when I showed it to you. I submit to the court that this further demonstrates your selective memory loss. While you were meticulous in your recall when it suited you, for example, the lack of father’s rights covered in the social workers’ *Operations Manual*, you were decidedly less meticulous about clause 23 of the *Adoption Act*, Professor Hambly’s lecture and in your study of this particular book.”

“I had only limited access to that book.”

Justin smiled broadly, then slotted the padlock tightly shut. “Only limited access, Ms Merken? Open the book to the title page and read the red stamp.”

“*St Mary of Dolleurs Adoption Branch Reference Library*. So what if it was in our library? I might never have even looked at it.”

“Except that you remembered the book when I showed it to you. Now, turn to the inside dust cover and read the inscription.”

Merken nervously turned back a page. “*To my darling Hetty, my flatmate, my soulmate — love Lou. Christmas 1976.*”

“You were without excuse Ms ‘Hetty’ Merken. No further questions, Your Honour.”

“How dare you,” she protested. “Before I put this in the library, I whited that out!”

29

It was Melbourne Cup Day 1999, twelve months to the day since Hurricane Mitchell struck. It was also the day Mitchell's mother would celebrate the fortieth anniversary of her son's birth, and thankfully, he anticipated, it would be his last day in that courtroom. The defence was due to parade a long list of former consent takers who had laboured under the regime of Maureen Dyson. All were expected to prop up Merken's "Eichmann" defence, that Dyson put indomitable pressure on each of her underlings in order to secure consents. These testimonies strengthened the prosecution's case that the adoption of Rebecca was not done according to the law, but Justin feared these testimonies might place enough doubt in the minds of the jury members, about Merken's role in the whole affair, to earn her an acquittal.

Next to last would be Louisa Puddle, a completely unknown quantity. She could go either way. She'd had a falling out with Merken over the years, but once she was placed under the pressure of cross-examination, it wasn't easy to predict where her allegiances might fall — either with her own reputation, which would lead her to point the finger at a lone Heather Merken to distance herself; or to her former "flatmate" which would lead her to impugn Maureen Dyson.

Justin had plenty on Puddle from Ellen, but still Louisa was the "loose cannon" to both sides.

Lastly, Sharon Tilley was listed to tell the world Mitchell was "weird". At this stage, he could live with that. He just wanted out of that courtroom and back to some sort of normality.

Unfortunately, Justin would ruin Angelique, Caleb and Jessica's chance to give Mitchell an early morning fortieth birthday wrestle in bed. Five-fifty-five, the phone rang.

"Just had a call from Reg Stafford, Mitch."

“Merken’s pleading guilty?”

“I have no idea what she’s pleading, Mitch. She took an overdose of sleeping tablets last night.”

“Is she in hospital?”

“She’s dead, Mitch.”

“Oh, Justin!” Mitchell tried to get his head around what this meant. “That’s going to ruin your cross-examination!”

It was a strange coping mechanism of Mitchell’s, to crack appalling jokes at times of tragedy.

“It’s over, Mitch. We still have to appear but the trial will be aborted.”

“Is there any suspicion of foul play?”

“Not really. I mean, it’s possible, but the police are treating it as a straightforward suicide. She left a note.”

“What’d it say?”

“Just two words: *Justice finally*. It was very sloppy writing. She must’ve been just about gone when she wrote it. Police say there was someone with her in the flat earlier in the night. Signs of washing up for two. But it was all pretty standard.”

“Why would she wash up if she was going to kill herself?”

“Women, mate. They like to go ‘clean’. That’s why they take sleeping tablets. Throwing yourself under a train or blowing your brains out is all too messy.”

“If I were the cops, I’d go over the flat for Maureen Dyson’s fingerprints.”

“Mitch, you’re too cynical.”

“Got us this far.”

Mitchell went back to bed. Angelique was awake. “Was that Justin?”

“Yeah.”

“What’s happened?”

“Merken topped herself last night.”

“Don’t crap me!”

“True, Ange. Too bloody true.”

Mitchell blew a sunlit spear of airborne dust at the ceiling and put his hands behind his head, lying there in deep thought.

“Mitch look at me.” Angelique put a finger to his face. “Merken did it to herself. You are not to blame.”

You live with someone long enough, they can read your mind. But Mitchell couldn't help thinking as he snuffed out the candle on his breakfast flapjacks, that this had certainly taken the icing off a big birthday cake.

§

Hallanon surprised them all. Certainly he had no option but to dismiss the jury and abort the trial. But he wanted to make a comment.

“Enough evidence has been presented to suggest that the activities of the adoption agency in question, deserve closer scrutiny.

“I thank the members of the jury for their patience and I trust they have found this involvement with the judicial process enlightening.”

The press scrummage on the District Court steps pounced as the prosecution left. Justin had had plenty of experience with the scribes since his high-profile murder trial, but Mitchell had prepared a statement while driving in that morning.

“You've done your job, Justin,” Mitchell said. “This is my area of expertise.”

The questions they fired were interesting.

“Mr Hearn, will you be pursuing Maureen Dyson through the courts?”

“What about the compensation case?”

“Is this suicide an admission of guilt?”

He said nothing until there was absolute quiet from them all. It took a while. Justin stood behind.

“We came here to prove two things. The first was that adoptions in the state of New South Wales have been systematically procured in breach of the law. By the extraordinary comments made by Justice Hallanon this morning, I believe we have achieved that objective.

“I hope that it will have promoted healing for both natural parents of adopted children and particularly adoptees, although I recognise that these revelations will be disturbing to them.

“The second, and to me the more important thing I came to prove, was that fathers have rights, and that fathers have always had rights. Every father of every child born and adopted after the proclamation of the *Adoption Act* in 1967 had the right to oppose the adoption of their child.

“The rights of fathers to raise their own offspring were strengthened by the *Children Equality of Status Act* of 1976.

“The mere fact that we were able to bring this matter to trial shows that we successfully argued a father’s rights in the pre-trial committal hearing.

“Every adoption consent taker who has denied a father the right of veto, has a case to answer.”

Mitchell placed a momentary edit pause, then commenced the voice grab that would reverberate through the nation that night.

“The right for a father to veto the adoption of his child is a basic human right for both fathers and children. That right is now firmly established. And in honour of my beautiful stolen little girl, I hope this principle shall always be remembered, as *Rebecca’s Law*.”

§

Mitchell tripped through the door and slumped onto the lounge. Angelique came over and lay her body on top of him. They kissed for ten minutes.

“It’s good to have you back,” she prophesied.

“It’s good to be back,” he replied.

They rested silently for a minute or two.

“It could’ve been so much worse, Angie. We could have lost and I’d have to pay Merken’s costs.”

The thought of it made Mitchell ill. The enormity of what had been risked came hurtling at him like a runaway train.

“This could have ruined us, Ange.”

She said nothing. But a tiny tear escaped. What a mighty effort she’d put in. She had hardly seen her husband for almost the entire year as Justin and Mitchell put the case together. Mitch had been negligent in his love for her and his children for more than eighteen months since meeting Annalee.

He had been consumed, to the abandonment of everything else. A full year and a half, Angelique had lived with no sustenance other than a flickering candle of hope resting inside her.

“I did what I had to do; but you, my beautiful lady, are the real hero.”

“The kids have missed you terribly.”

A typical projection, transferring her own sentiments onto the children.

“Angelique, you are wonder woman. How you have kept this going?”

“I nearly left plenty of times.”

“But you didn't. You pushed through.”

“I made a promise.”

“So did I, and I'm sorry I've neglected it.”

“Apology accepted.” She smiled. How could such a large person live in such a tiny package?

“Many women do noble things,” Mitchell quoted, “but you surpass them all.”

She answered with typical insight, “So Ellen did a noble thing, did she?”

Mitchell smiled at her. “Perhaps. I always thought of her as a bit of a weakling, but she really stood up. Compared with what you had to do though, she had the easy job — appearing for one day at the trial. You've put in for eighteen months, Mrs Angelique Hearn. Very hard yards over a very long time. I owe you a debt I could never repay.”

“Was it hard seeing her again?”

Mitchell had to be honest. Angelique could read him too well. “Of course.”

“Did you feel anything?”

“Ange, twenty years ago she had at least five clear opportunities to say yes to me. But she didn't. Then she dumped all her pain on me and made me the target for her sorrow. And, after what she'd been through, I was happy to carry it. But over the years I've had to realise that she made me a scapegoat, the same as her parents did. The same as the agency did. The same as Annalee is now. And that makes it very hard for me to have any truly deep feelings for her. It hurts like you wouldn't believe to come to that realisation, Ange.

“But, I know one thing now — that the woman I did marry is better-looking than Ellen. She's more loyal than Ellen. She has deeper reservoirs than Ellen. She's wiser than Ellen. And I love her more than I loved Ellen, and you know how much I loved her. That's never been any secret. If

anything, seeing her and going through all this has proved to me just how much more you're pure gold, right through."

"I was petrified that you'd fall in love with her again. Please don't ever put me through that again."

Justin's suggestion to indite Maureen Dyson, had to exit Mitchell's mind from that moment. He realised that Maureen Dyson simply wasn't worth it.

Within a couple of months she'd be unfit for trial, anyway.

§

For the first time since he could remember, Mitchell picked the kids up from school. Caleb was incredibly excited. When he saw his dad through the window of his classroom Mitchell heard him call out, then the class sang the worst rendition of happy birthday Mitchell had ever heard. What a wonderful cacophony!

The head of primary shook Mitch's hand as he left. "We saw you on '11AM' this morning. Great diplomacy. We were very proud."

Mitchell was stunned how quickly the media had put it on. "Thanks Jean, but Angelique's the real champion."

Jessica was excited to see dad, but a little more aloof. Mitch's heart ached hoping he and his little daughter hadn't grown apart. It would be so easy with her. Caleb was very forgiving in nature, much more pliable. Jessica took a lot more work. She'd need to dose up on at least eighteen months' worth of genuine cuddles to overcome the barrier.

"We definitely need a holiday," Mitchell said to Angelique.

"I'll put the bite on mum." (Income had been sparse over the course of the last few months.)

As they prepared to go out for a quiet fortieth-birthday celebration, Mitchell stepped on the scales. He'd lost another ten per cent of his body weight. He'd gone from eighty-four kilos to sixty-two in the previous eighteen months. Angelique had replenished Mitchell's wardrobe about six months after meeting Anna. Now they'd have to do it all over, and on a shoe-string.

Mitchell's hairline had receded three inches and his temples had turned grey since meeting Annalee. He scrutinised his forty-year-old face as he shaved for the dinner-date, examining the mat

of wrinkles under his eyes. Remnant of days when I used to smile, he thought. He saw deep trenches across his forehead and furrows between his eyebrows. These had been the most recent additions to his face.

Mitchell realised he could no longer kid himself that all this hadn't affected him.

§

"Booking for Hearn," Mitchell informed the maitre-de.

They serpented through the maze of tables to the back. Strange, thought Mitchell as they passed a dozen eminently suitable tables for four, to a reserved table for probably twenty.

Mitchell smirked at Angelique, her impeccable smile shone back. "What's going on, dearie?" he asked her.

Caleb pulled dad's arm. "Turn around dad."

Behind Mitchell, his own personal "This is your life" guest-list yelled, "Surprise!"

He looked through the faces. No, she wasn't there, but everyone else of significance to Mitchell was: his mum, Caroline, Chris, Sally, Justin and Christie, friends from church, even John, his best man from thirteen-and-a-half-years before, and John's wife Sue. They'd been there the moment Mitchell found out. They'd been there when Mitchell was hurting bad, and took the time to look after him. Now they were here for a minor victory.

"It is amazing to see you again, John. Especially today."

"Count yourself lucky, since you didn't come to my fortieth."

"I've been a bit busy lately."

"He didn't have one, anyway," chipped in Sue. It was typical banter. Nothing had changed since they last saw each other five years before.

Mitch looked in semi-astonishment at Angelique. "With everything that's been going on, how did you ever organise this?"

"Actually, you not being around much made it a lot easier."

"You really are wonder woman," he said, kissing her.

Celebrity is a fickle mistress. A number of diners recognised Mitchell from that night's news bulletins. He hadn't seen any of them but the waitress certainly had. "I'm an adoptee and I'd just

like you to know that what's going on is good. We need to know. As much as all this hurts, it's better to have been stolen than to have to live with the thought that I was freely given away."

That made it seem all worthwhile.

But, a fat woman diner accosted Mitch as he went to the gents. "Your selfish posing is ruining our lives. Look at our daughter! She's adopted and she's not screwed up!"

Her daughter looked utterly embarrassed, probably ten or eleven years of age.

"And how many lives have been ruined by the selfish demands of people like yourself?" Mitchell returned with interest.

"Don't talk to my wife like that!" insisted the half-tanked husband.

"Don't embarrass the little girl. She's been through enough. She deserves better."

As he came out of the gents, the little girl came out of the ladies. She looked at him. "Are you my dad?"

Mitchell almost cried. "No, darling, I'm not. But don't ever think that you weren't loved very much by your dad and your mum. One day you'll find them and you'll know that for sure."

"I wish my dad was like you."

Mitch had a huge lump in his throat. "I wish my little girl was like you." He looked at the sadness in her eyes. The anger would surely come as she grew to teenhood. "You'd better go back to your table."

She did. Mitchell went back into the gents and washed his face.

§

The party was leaving the restaurant around ten to ten when in came the perfect nightcap.

Mitchell's mobile went off to peels of derision from the partygoers.

"Oh, you didn't bring your mobile, did you?"

"Turn it off, Mitch!"

"It's probably Maureen Dyson — she wants to adopt you."

Mitch had left his mobile on just in case. He'd even diverted the home number to it. For once it paid off.

"Mitchell Hearn speaking."

“A thirty-seven-year-old red-haired birdie told me it was your fortieth birthday.”

Then he heard two voices. “Happy birthday, Freddie!”

“Oh Anna! She didn't tell you about — ”

Everyone was staring at him. Angelique looked particularly vexed. This is impossible, Mitchell grimaced. I can never fully enjoy these moments. All these “significant others” have such contradictory needs.

But, Mitchell quickly decided that it was his fortieth and Anna had obviously made a huge effort.

“So, how are you and Ellen getting on?”

“Pretty well. She's nice. Not weird, which is a pleasant change.”

Abrasive as ever. But Mitchell thought he'd pop the question to Annalee anyway.

“And how are you and I getting on?”

“Working on it.”

“Have you met your namesake?”

“Yeah, the name is about all we have in common. She's pretty quiet, actually.”

“Well, take it easy on them all, ok?”

“Mmm. I'll put Ellen on.”

“Anna?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks for ringing.”

“Here's Ellen.”

Down the line the familiar greeting came. “Hello, Punk.”

Angelique was standing next to Mitch as the party started to disperse. “Hi. Just a sec, Els.”

He said goodbye to his co-diners. “Thanks for being here. Yeah. I'll be in touch. We'll get together before Christmas. Look after yourself. Bye.”

Mitchell returned to the phone call. “So, how are things?”

“It's been a pretty huge couple of days.”

“Tell me about it.”

“I can't look at her eyes, Mitch.”

“She's got your button nose. And what about that red hair!”

“Well, I haven’t seen it. She’s cut it all short.”

“Oh, that’s right.”

“I’ve seen some photos.”

“Ellen, trust me, the colour is absolutely stunning when it’s long. First time I saw her I picked her out from a hundred-metres away. She’s got my temper though, Els. Things might be nice and cuddly at the moment but watch her. Don’t be surprised if it all goes a bit sour.”

“I think the last week has shaken her.”

“Yeah, actually, the fact that you’re not like me, the two of you will probably get on well. She and I are just too much alike. We have the same temperament but completely opposite attitudes. We’re bound to fight. You two being the same gender too, will probably help. You’ll understand each other. How’s Richard handling it all?”

“Pretty quiet.”

“It’s very hard on spouses, Ellen.”

“I hear your wife’s French.”

“I married the most beautiful little French *femme* in the world. She’s been to hell and back with me, Els. Unbelievably loyal.”

“I’m happy for you, Mitch.”

“It has never been easy.”

There was a long pause. “I have to go, Ellen. Have to get my kids home to bed.”

“Yeah, I’d better go too.”

Another long pause. “Ellen?”

“Yeah, Mitch, I’m still here.”

“Have you had a good life?”

A shorter pause.

“Yes, I have, Mitch. There have always been those painful ‘what ifs’ but all in all ...”

More pausing. Such subtle, bitter-sweet admissions in this conversation.

“Well, watch that Annalee for me. For both of us. She’s pretty volatile.”

“I will. Take care. See you.”

“I hope so — one day.”

“That’d be nice.”

“Gotta go.”

“Goodbye Punk.”

“Goodbye Punk.”

Part 4

Maybe I'm amazed

30

It was Mitchell's aversion to unfinished business which had compelled him to make contact with Rebecca. Now his hatred for loose ends drove him to some truly irrational behaviour, although this was something that had been on his mind for probably four or five years.

The immediate catalyst might have been Pastor Ian's sermon on Matthew 5:23, but whatever motivated him, Mitchell was suddenly struck with anxiety as he found himself around quarter-past-two, one warm Wednesday afternoon, back on the headland. He parked JON 316 boldly at the kerb right outside the gate, in line with "first-kiss" tree.

He still didn't know if he could go through with it but he had hand-written a note, placed it unfolded in an A4-size parliamentary envelope — so it looked important — and hand-addressed it to *Lionel and Lynette Walsh*.

As Mitchell opened the car door he could hear Lynette's uncannily familiar voice talking to a neighbour in the back yard. Surveying this old scene, it had hardly altered from twenty years before. Ellen's window. The side-window. The small brick fence. The S-shaped garden path.

The backyard conversation ended and the neighbour came down the drive. It was Sergeant Neal's wife heading across the road.

"Excuse me," Mitchell surprised her. She didn't recognise him with his now slightly greying hair and dark glasses on. "Is Lionel Walsh still alive?"

"Oh, yes," she replied in bemusement, then trundled on her way.

It was a bizarre feeling, opening the old gate with the same old squeak. Up the path. Those steps — nothing had altered at all.

Every leaf on every plant, every blade of grass was in the exact same place.

He tried, but Mitchell couldn't bring himself to knock on the door, so he slipped the envelope under it and strode back to the car. There he pulled out his mobile and from memory — amazing after twenty years — dialled their number. From the road, Mitchell could hear the phone ringing and watched in utter fascination as, through the frosted glass next to the door, the silhouette of a stooped little balding man dressed in a singlet and trademark baggy shorts, arthritically jaunted down the stairs to answer the telephone next to the front door. Mitchell pressed the “end call” button, which beeped louder than felt comfortable. Then he stood lead-footed as this old man, now in his late seventies, shuffled past the expansive bay windows out to the kitchen with the yellow-orange parliamentary envelope in hand.

Dear Mr and Mrs Walsh,

It may seem strange to suddenly write to you after twenty years but I do this for one reason. And that is to ask you to forgive me. Of all the people who have passed through your lives none could have hurt you as I did.

None of us lives forever, so I felt it was time to give you this opportunity to consider it.

I want you to know that I respect you and I am truly sorry for the hurt I must have caused you and your family.

It was such a tragedy for us all and I deeply regret blowing my chance to be your son-in-law.

Yours sincerely,

Mitchell Hearn

Mitch paused for a moment to pay a final homage to this place, then drove away, in a much quieter mode than he ever had before.

§

“Will we ever be rid of this pest?” exclaimed Lionel as his wife entered the kitchen. He mashed the letter and envelope into a tiny ball, threw it on the kitchen floor and ran back to the front door as he heard the 1300 motor strain into the distance.

A torrent of expletives overflowed his mind. "How dare he interrupt!" Lionel slammed the door and aggressively hobbled back to the kitchen for a beer. Lynette was uncrumpling the tightly crushed paper.

"Looks important, in a parliamentary envelope," she said.

"You deal with it, then," humphed Lionel as he returned upstairs to his television, pressing the mute button and reentering the world of "Double Jeopardy", a world where he knew all the answers. He picked up his rosary beads and fiddled with them frantically as he mumbled another Hail Mary, punctuated by occasional embittered scorn at "that horrid paedophile."

Lynette stood as alone as she had been since the last time the name of Mitchell Hearn had entered her home almost twenty years earlier. Far from the promise of a quiet life, hers had been a significantly saddened existence, one robbed of fellowship with her daughter and granddaughter, in exchange for a life of dutiful servitude to a wealthy hermit.

She didn't really know what she could do to make it all bearable, but somehow this seemed like some sort of opportunity, so she smoothed the page out, a hauntingly familiar motion of her hand over Mitchell's handwriting, then she sat at the dining table and wrote as best she could.

§

On Friday morning, Mitchell checked his post office box, where a single piece of correspondence awaited. A stiff floral envelope, confidently addressed in a mature hand, encasing an emotive floral card. It was the response he had expected but not the one he had hoped for.

Dear Mitchell,

Please rest assured we have never held a grudge against you. What's done is in the past. Move on. Don't live in guilt. Guilt only causes bitterness. Life is for living.

Lynette Walsh.

P.S. All is forgiven.

Mitchell was deeply affected by those last three words. He hoped they were personal and not some broad religious statement. He trusted they were genuine.

He was not surprised by the “guilt” angle. Typical Catholic, he thought, but without his former prejudice. Just a sadness that they still didn’t understand him. No Lynette, it wasn’t guilt. It was just grief. Mere grief.

Mitchell felt disappointed that Lionel had left his wife to do his bidding yet again. When is he ever going to be a man? he thought.

But then, almost supernaturally, despite this negativity, or maybe because of it, great weights began to lift from Mitchell’s shoulders — relief that he had ground-stroked this ball quite firmly into Lionel’s court. Lionel’s response was Lionel’s business. Mitchell believed it important to at least offer a hand of reconciliation before Lionel died. From this day forth, it was no longer Mitchell’s problem. Maybe it never had been, but Mitchell simply wanted to follow the command. He could no longer continue in churchian hypocrisy and ignore the clear call of Matthew 5:23. If others misinterpreted his motives, so be it. Life’s too short.

Mitchell looked closely at Lynette’s handwriting. The card was very different to the envelope. Her addressing was graceful, certain, assured, satisfied, peaceful.

But, the card was painted in shaky brush-strokes. The “w” in Walsh looked like half an “n”. Lack of clarity in the letter formations abounded. The penmanship was light, unlike the envelope, which was bold.

All over Lynette’s card, characters remained semi-formed. Unclosed loops. Slurred joins. Nervous word-endings. It was obvious that Mitchell’s sentiments had profoundly moved her.

He looked at the postmark: *3.15 Wednesday*. She had not wasted one second in replying, so automatic was her concern for this boy, now a man.

Mitchell placed the floral card and envelope carefully on the passenger seat, repeatedly glancing at it as he drove the short distance from the post office to home. He pondered how little he knew of this woman who now offered him absolution. The only thing he remembered was how she had once told him in the heat of battle that she had converted to Catholicism in her early thirties. It was Lynette’s half-hearted attempt to challenge Mitchell’s protestantism, so he had just passed it off as simply one more oddity in an enormous raft of peculiarities that were the Walsh family.

But, now it seemed important. Why did she tell him that? Why was it so significant to her? What was she really trying to say to him?

Mitchell searched for other recollections of this woman — her blond hair. She has blue eyes too. That's where Annalee gained the other recessive gene. The inadequacy of these scant details piqued his curiosity. I don't even know how old she is, he thought as he reversed the Suzuki into the garage.

Just by the way he turned the key in the front door, Angelique could tell her husband was thoroughly distracted. He tried to mask it but she had seen this act far too often.

“What's up? What are you thinking about?”

“Oh, nothing.”

Mitchell rushed through dinner almost without a word then took his leave from the table, hurrying to the office.

Opening the “Annalee” box he rummaged for the bundle of documents that Justin had handed to him at his fortieth birthday dinner. Mitchell had intended sorting them out into folders for Anna to easily follow, but he had never gotten around to it.

He flicked them through, searching for one in particular that he'd seen upside down on Justin's desk during a pretrial consultation. “What's that one?” he'd asked Justin. “Oh, nothing much, just part of the agency's confidential file on the Walshes. You know, all their ages and physical features.” He remembered Justin hurriedly changing the subject.

Now Mitchell had found the document again, he pulled it out of the bundle, slightly tearing it on the thick elastic band, then scanning it eagerly for the information scraps of everyone at the time of Rebecca's birth.

Client: Ellen Therese Mary Walsh. Aged 17.

Client's father: Lionel Neil Walsh. Aged 59.

Client's mother: Lynette Walsh. Aged 49.

Siblings: Peter. Aged 13.

Then the next line totally flattened him.

Half-sister: Judy (by Lyn). Aged 32.

“Oh, my God! Lyn Walsh has a skeleton!” Mitchell slumped back onto the office desk. “Forty-nine minus thirty-two equals — seventeen! The sins of the mother visited the daughter!”

Mitchell was dumbstruck. He raised the document to his eyes again and deciphered Merken’s handwriting: “*Ellen’s parents are now encouraging adoption, mainly because her mother brought up a half-sister without a father and feels they both had ‘only half a life’.*”

“Lyn! Lyn! Lyn! If a child without a father only has half a life, how little life does a child have, who knows neither of her parents?”

But then Mitchell considered the shame, torment and poverty that Lynette Walsh must have faced from 1948 to 1961. A strange mixture of admiration and frustration welled in Mitchell towards her.

“Lyn, you proved it could be done. Why did you lie to your daughter?”

“To avoid the shame, poverty and torment,” came the ethereal answer.

“But, Lyn, 1980 was very different to 1948.”

“I didn’t want Ellen to relive my life.”

“Has your life been so bad, Lyn?”

“Mitchell, you’ll never know the half of it.”

As Mitchell argued within himself, he came to considering his own answer to Ellen’s repeated doubts about her ability to carry on without him.

“So this was the spike they were driving into her confidence. Oh Punkie, how my answer must have been a dagger. No wonder you couldn’t face it.”

Mitchell cried softly, “Oh, Ellen why didn’t you tell me?”

“Family secrets,” came the answer. “Precious, pathetic family secrets.”

All these years Mitchell had thought Ellen had been made to pay for the indiscretions of his father, when in fact it was Mitchell who had paid for those of Judy’s father.

“At least Ellen got to know my dad,” mused Mitchell. But then he realised neither he nor Ellen had ever met the real culprit — Judy’s father, whoever he was.

Mitchell’s thoughts turned to Lionel’s manic reaction to Ellen’s pregnancy and suddenly all the pieces fitted together. Lynette had converted to Catholicism to marry this man, whom she saw as

the rescuer of both herself and her Judy. Lionel equally saw himself as the saviour of these two damsels in distress. Their eternal gratitude was all the permission he needed to laud his religious piety over them. This piety would be demonstrated through the gilt-edged quality of the daughter *he* would give this desperate woman, heralding to the world the superiority of his seed and station. This daughter, his first, but his wife's second, would carry his name and lead an exemplary life, in imitation of his own, declaring to all that even a fallen protestant could be of some value to the world when joined to Rome's spiritual bloodline.

But, Lionel had negligently allowed the glorious pedigree to be tainted by the protestant scourge. Satan had thwarted the godly lineage of Walsh, so Walsh himself had to make it right, even if the price would be the psychological well-being of his treasure. It was a small price to pay to maintain the purity of the vision. As for this woman he had mistakenly married, she would graciously submit or be again discarded, her greatest fear. She knew the choice was hers. She also knew that either way, she didn't matter much.

The Walshes of Dee Why headland were less a family, more a personality cult. This justified totally, the mind control techniques Lionel had inflicted on disciple Lynette and her intern Ellen, when they dared to question the prophet's vision.

Mitchell sat silently, tossing both ways on the subject of Mrs Walsh. Finally, he acquiesced. "Dear Lyn. What you must have gone through married to that infantile peasant."

Mitchell wanted so much to write back or call her. To sit down with her over a cup of tea, but that seemed rather forward and inappropriate. He further doubted she would receive his views on Lionel should they happen to spill forth. For now it was enough that this multifaceted woman whom he freely admitted had once been to him the enemy, would forever be joined to him simply by the fact that she was the grandmother of his first child.

That's the thing with adoption — there is no end.

§

"I think I'd like to go back to uni and get my degree," said Ellen engaging Annalee Decker as the presumptuous youth searched Ellen's refrigerator for a light beer.

"Yeah! We could attend lectures together."

“Oh, I wouldn’t be doing Applied Sciences like you! Huh! That’s way beyond me!”

“What would you do?” Annalee was curious as to what else of value there could possibly be on campus.

“I could probably do Social Studies as an external student.”

“Vegie subjects, Ellen! Only morons do Social Sciences!”

Ellen was mortally offended but held her peace. “I just don’t have the HSC mark, Anna.”

“What was your TER?”

“We didn’t have TER in 1979. I only got 245 out of 500.” Ellen hesitated to say it in front of her genius progeny. Annalee did not disappoint.

“Pretty crappy mark! Did you do any study?”

“Well, yes, but I was a bit distracted when I sat the exams. I knew what was going on in there. You never sat still for the whole nine months!”

“But, Ellen, you could’ve done better than that.”

“Well, not everyone is ‘Miss Megabrain’, Anna. Give me a break.”

“I’d be embarrassed to be seen on campus doing Socials!”

Ellen fumed. She desperately wanted to put her know-it-all daughter in her place and yet feared any such confrontation might sever this fragile union that had been in her heart for twenty years, right from day seven. Ellen’s real dilemma: to play the mother or to play the friend?

She attempted a compromise position.

“Young lady, you seem to think you’re pretty special just because you have a good brain. Well, intellect is only a gift. It’s nothing to be proud of in itself. When you’ve actually achieved something worthwhile with your intellect, then you might have something to be proud of.”

Anna cut her down. “Yeah, that’s what all dumb people say.”

The young girl couldn’t understand why it came out of her mouth but somehow she couldn’t stop it. It was like a demon inside her forcing her to ruin this relationship simply because it existed.

Ellen was decapitated and started to cry. “Anna, you have so much to learn. You’ve lived your whole life in a tiny little cloister. A minute town like Oberon, then a minute, hidden little group of boarding school girls. You think you’re so wonderful because you’ve never made a mistake. Well, even that’s a gift, Anna. You’ve never made a mistake because you’ve never done anything!

“But one day you’ll learn about a thing called humility. You think I’m stupid because I did something dumb like fall in love and get pregnant. When are you ever going to realise that that was a gift to you as well? Or do you hate yourself that much that you even despise the way you came into the world?”

Anna couldn’t wait to respond. “I wish you’d had an abortion! Then I wouldn’t have to put up with this! You should have had an abortion and saved us all the trouble. That’s what proves how stupid you are. Anyone with half a brain would have done it.

“You and Mitchell, you’re both the same with this gooey-lovey crap. I’d have been better off in a bucket.”

Anna snatched her coat, and marched for the door.

Ellen chased her. “Why are you doing this? Why do you say these things? What’s wrong with you? We were getting on so well! Why are you trying to hurt me?”

“Maybe I’m just trying to get even.”

Ellen grabbed Anna’s arm but she struggled violently. “Leave me alone, Ellen! Stay away from me or I’ll have you charged. That’s assault, Ellen! Now let me go!”

Anna shook free and Ellen just stood in the hallway bawling. “I love you, Anna. Don’t go! Please!”

The only answer was a slamming door and a smashed front gate. Ellen fell to the floor cross-legged and wept for fifteen minutes until Richard came home. Her girls had learned to stay out of Ellen’s way during these ever more frequent outpourings.

“This arrogant little upstart is destroying you, Ellen,” lamented Richard. In eighteen years of knowing Ellen he had hardly ever raised his voice to her. Now it was almost a daily occurrence. “You’ve always been so bold. So organised. So cool about everything. Now you’re always emotional. You’ve become a silly little teenager. The girls are more together than you now! Where’s the girl I married — always in control? Please, Ellen! Now that that little bitch is gone, it’s time to just snap out of it.”

Ellen stared at the kitchen floor. Then started laughing. Just a slight giggle at first, then a hearty, out-of-control chuckle.

“What’s so funny, Ellen? This is serious.”

But the more he protested, the harder Ellen laughed.

“Stop it, Ellen. Pull yourself together. This is not funny. What the hell are you laughing at?”

“You.” And she just about fell off the kitchen stool with mirth. “For the first time in twenty years I’ve suddenly become me — and you don’t even recognise me.” With this she laughed way over the top.

“What?”

“Richard, I *am* just a silly little teenage girl. One who’s been pretending to be tough all these years. And, d’you know the funniest thing? You loved that about me, and yet that’s exactly what you hate about Anna. She’s just a cranky teenager playing tough, and you call her a bitch. But when I organise you and seem so calm and detached, you think it’s great!”

Ellen started to gain some control of her hilarity, so Richard humphed a muffled laugh.

“And she’s not gone, Richard. She’s run off in a huff, but she’ll be back. She won’t be able to stay away forever. We’re two peas in a pod.” Ellen’s mood evolved to tiny tears with a heavy sigh.

“In the meantime though, I will miss her.”

“You have us, Ellen.”

“Yes, I do, Richard. And you are my delight. But she is the hole in my heart. Can you understand that?”

Richard was uncomfortable answering such a question. But his discomfort arose from his own actions, his own premarital impregnation of Ellen, which now came back to haunt him. He was unable to take the moral high ground and claim to be the innocent party, so he struggled to adequately verbalise his anger, not only at Annalee, but also at Mitchell and even Ellen herself. He knew that if there had been no Rebecca, there would have been no Ellen Stenner. He loved his wife, but he hated these truths, and the paradoxes they presented.

Richard just shrugged, “Ellen, I would never harm you.”

She smiled at such an inconsequential answer, accepting it not as a deliberate evasion but as a straitjacketed expression of love. To not hurt her with a truthful answer, but to also not lie. Such stunted communication had been sufficient for her over the years.

Strangely though, she now longed for that argumentative spirit in Annalee that challenged her and forced her to consider deeper options. Yes, she would miss her for that and so much more. Her baby had become the yardstick of what really percolated within.

Annalee Decker spent most of her weekend in her bedroom at her adoptive parents' house. This pre-term break had given her time to reflect. "Ellen's so dumb. I'm nothing like her," she kept telling herself over and over in her own adoption mantra. "So what if I have her nose? She's an idiot."

But how could such an idiot deliver such perceptive truths about her gifts? Anna counted them. Her high IQ, a gift from heredity. Her caring family life, a gift of pure luck from the roulette wheel of adoption placement. Her schooling and university opportunities, a gift from her adopters.

"Thank God I'm a Decker," she said yet again to the faded *Titanic* poster on the wall. But then the inward echo, "Am I a Decker?"

Time for an inventory. She went to the mirror. Eyes, mouth, nose, that stupid red hair. But who's travelling in this vehicle? she wondered. "Annalee Decker. Speech Pathologist extraordinaire," she would answer, although she knew a person was more than the sum of what they do.

Because of her attendance at the court case, Annalee had missed some important end-of-year lectures and even one exam, all of which was going to add an extra year to her graduation. She wondered now why she had wasted her time chasing these ghosts.

Surely her future was all that mattered. Her past, whatever the truth of it, was irrelevant.

Everyone showed surprise at her chosen career, speech therapy, but on reflection it seemed very natural. She could easily relate to children who had something to say but were unable. Her own self-expression had been suppressed by the role she had been forced to play, living "as-if" to heal the pain of everyone else's "if-only". It's a situation which leaves every adoptee as an "if"— and "if" is a question.

Now with first-hand knowledge of Ellen and Mitchell, as much as she disliked them both, she could at least look in the mirror and no longer see a blank.

Through this wrench with Ellen, Annalee was actually becoming aware of her "acting out", and although she couldn't break the habit, she could see that she would no longer have the excuse of being "just a teenager" with her twentieth birthday fast approaching. Somehow though, she still felt like a sixteen-year-old.

“Perhaps this year I’ll grow my hair back,” she mused. “Maybe even take a few studs out.” Lawry and Ros were glad to hear that.

Annalee was wistfully realising that soon it would be time to cast off childhood. It had been a comfortable cloak, a genuine friend, but through the curtain, adulthood beckoned.

Annalee Decker was graduating through the university of self-parenting, but not without her own rites of passage — a most ugly, yet necessary process that would integrate this fractured self.

§

Lawry was jovial and couldn’t pick up on Mitchell’s resistance to the idea. “She’s had her heart set on this Commodore V8 for years, and with the matured insurance bonds she’s just a few thousand short. So how about it, Mitch? It’d really make her twentieth.”

“Look, Lawry. My finances really haven’t recovered from the court case.” It was a white lie, but Mitchell had to hedge this issue. “I’ll send her something, of course, but not money for a V8. I’m sorry.”

“Why not? Ellen’s chipping in!”

“Lawry, Ellen doesn’t know Anna like I do.”

“Yes, you’ve known her for all of five minutes!”

Lawry was forcing Mitchell into a corner from which there was no choice but to throw the most forceful blows.

“Well, I don’t think Annalee Decker and a Commodore V8 are a very good combination. Why not buy her something smaller and let her buy her own V8 Commodore when she’s ready?”

“She’d be embarrassed to drive around in a little 1300.” A as a not-so-subtle gibe at Mitchell’s Suzuki.

“Lawry, even you say she drives too fast. And she’s always hitting the piss.”

“Oh, so that’s it. You want her to be a wowser like you. Well, not everyone wants to live like a bloody Quaker.”

“It’s not that at all, Lawry. You might as well just buy her a gun and ask me to chip in for the bullets! It’s just plain bloody dangerous.”

"You just want to be a tightwad."

"She's not equipped!"

"She's twenty years old! She's not a baby!"

"She *is* a baby, Lawry! Can't you see that? Can't you see her tantrums? She makes herself look plug-ugly with all this body-mutilation she's into. The shaved head. The way she burns off all her relationships, particularly with men. Think about it, Lawry! She treats all of us like sewage! You, me and Andrew. She's on a real self-destructo trip. And you want to put her in charge of a V8 Commodore? You might as well just drop her off a cliff!"

"That's not my job, buddy. You did that yourself twenty years ago."

"You just don't get it do you, Lawry? Well, it's about time you realised that not for one single solitary minute did you *ever* have my permission. You hear me? Not for one single second. I've tried to be patient with you and I've tried to understand your position. But you've never for a moment ever considered mine."

"Oh, utter crap, Mitchell. We've always tried to include you in her life over the last couple of years. Why do you think we suggested to her to contact you? That was a big risk for us. Why do you think we got you involved when she was arrested?"

"Because it was convenient, Lawry, at least admit that!"

"It was simply to include you. And you couldn't handle it. You stuffed it up."

"Well, what was she doing with a coatful of drugs in the first place? Where did she learn that sort of behaviour? It certainly wasn't her 'Quaker' background."

"They were planted and you know it."

"What! She was convicted, Lawry! Wake up and smell the coffee!"

"She was set up!"

"Woah! Woah! Woah! Hold up a minute. What about the ring?"

"What ring?" The derision in his voice was concrete.

"My mother's ring that she hocked to buy the grass!"

"Bullshit."

"Ok, if it's bullshit, you ask her to produce the ring. She can't. It was hocked when she was up here. How do you think she got the money for the hits?"

"I have never heard a bigger load of horse-clack in all my life."

“Ok, then. Did she tell you about the Shania Twain tickets?”

“They had a great time at the concert. She wrote to you and told you that.”

“No, she didn’t, Lawry. What I received were four Shania Twain tickets ripped into a few-hundred tiny pieces. She obviously either bought her own tickets or did something else that night. Did she tell you about the HSC card? About Hampton Court?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Lawry, I think you need to realise that our little Annalee is a consummate liar.”

Lawry took some convincing but the fact Mitchell had kept all the evidence in “Annalee’s treasure box” and offered to post it all to Oberon, compelled Lawry to believe.

“All that was a long time ago, Mitch. She’s changed her attitude lately.”

“Not enough to convince me that she either deserves or can handle a V8 Commodore.”

“You’re wrong, Mitchell. And I know her better than you do.”

“I think I just proved you very wrong on that score, Lawry.”

“I’ve lived with her for twenty years.”

“And I’ve lived with her personality for forty.”

It was an honourable stalemate.

“I’m telling you, Lawry, give her a V8 Commodore and she’ll kill herself in it.”

In the end, to prove he wasn’t being a “tightwad”, Mitchell couriered to them five tickets to the Sydney Olympic Rhythmic Gymnastics finals. Ros sent a card with thanks; but from Anna, Mitchell received not even an acknowledgement.

Ros and Lawry bought the V8 anyway, and in their knock-about country way, joked to Anna about exactly where the money did and didn’t come from.

That and the divulging of her secrets to Lawry would alienate Mitchell out of Anna’s life yet again.

His daughter had been lost for a third time.

31

For over a year Mitchell wrote to her on the third of every month, without a reply. A copy of every letter was put into the “Annalee” box. He’d heard from other first-parents how they’d written consistently for five or ten years before there was any resolution, usually at the insistence of the natural parent. Mitchell didn’t know how long he could endure this. He knew things were going on in her life. There was one short letter from Ellen saying they’d had a falling out and that Anna had transferred to another university, Ellen didn’t know which.

Annalee’s twenty-first came and went. Mitchell sent a card and an eight-hundred dollar R.M. Williams leather jacket. He heard nothing. It was back to “as if dead”. That’s what all surrendering parents are told: To pretend, “Your child is dead. Move on.” It’s an enforced schizophrenia for all concerned because, unless the child is truly dead, there is no reality on which to base one’s life. Fantasy is not an option and the truth is not negotiable.

§

In a small town like Oberon, anyone under the age of twenty-five, who owns a new car is a personality. Own a new V8 and that makes you a celebrity. And if that V8 was a fire-red Commodore pick-up, the owner reaches legendary status.

By the end of term two that year, Annalee Decker had worn the badge to the full for fourteen months. With Lawry’s connections in the motor trade she was never short of mechanics to tune the

engine, auto-electricians to boost the wattage in the stereo, and the local tyre-mart seemed almost to sponsor her weekend donuts at the town's main intersection.

Even the normally voracious constabulary turned a blind-eye, such was Lawry's local influence. In Oberon, *contra* could pay for anything.

However, doing 135 clicks per hour on a sunset run to Bathurst with a tray-load of concert-goers in the back earned Annalee a crippling fine and a long walk to Mitchell College for the tray-riders. Only Georgie remained in the cabin of the V8 as the cropped red-head discharged her anger at the highway. This would be a record run back to Sydney.

"Give us another drag, George. Is that the one with the hammer in it?"

"Bloody oath. Hmm. Brilliant." Georgie smiled, holding her breath as she handed the stick to the driver.

"Where are we going to stay? The Wentworth or the Novotel?"

"Who gives a rats," laughed Georgie. "Just as long as there's a spa in the en suite."

The two of them cackled stale weed-fumes all over the cabin as a light sprinkling of rain fell on the windscreen. Anna was attempting a second drag. "Oh, bugger! Where's the bloody wiper thing?"

She giggled, her right hand on the wheel, "Mary" in her left fumbling for the lever. Georgie was laughing with her as Anna goose-necked her head towards the dash, flicking blinker lights, hazards — at one stage turning the headlights off.

Neither of them saw the scribble gum coming.

With a deafening impact the tree trunk carved the passenger headlight then the entire left side out of the Commodore like a key opening a sardine can. Georgie, not wearing a seat belt, rocketed straight through the windscreen face-first into the gum, her neck snapped, her brain-crushed in less than an instant, and her vertebrae concertinaed. Her crumpled shell lay mangled in the long grass, as the vehicle spun and the impact sent the engine block hurtling through the fire wall upwards towards the back window, slowed only by the dashboard, which pounded Annalee's jaw and right cheek to powder. In a micro-moment, both her legs snapped through the steering wheel like a twig, femurs shattering, with the left tibia slicing through the skin inviting almost instant infection, as air escaped from her lungs in a satanic cry.

In five seconds the car came to rest facing the direction from which it came. Despite the anaesthetic substances she had only moments before introduced to her bloodstream, Annalee was astounded at how alert she was. The twilight descended. The crush of the wreckage made it difficult to breathe but she was suddenly heightened to survival. After a minute, distant voices called and other vehicles were stopping nearby.

Then the indescribable pain. In her groin. In her legs. In her face. Fortunately, the rearview mirror had snapped off, for if she had caught a glimpse of how she looked, she most certainly would have surrendered to the reaper.

But a determination she'd not known before, drew fight from hidden depths she'd never entered, as at first she moaned appallingly and then, seeing the destruction to her left, called nothing but a name as she lapsed in and out of consciousness.

“Georgie. Georgie. My Georgie.”

Within half an hour the paramedics had a drip in place and oxygen in her shattered face, but still the feeble call slurred through her four-piece mandible. “Oh Georgie.”

The medic took one look at her. “Forget Bathurst. Call in the chopper and airlift her to North Shore.”

It took two hours before she could be released. The noise of the metal-cutter prising open the Commodore's remains hurt almost as much as the compound fractures in her legs and face.

Thinking she was out to it, one of the ambos called her a “silly little idiot”. No response. Only a question as they lifted her through the roof of the wreck onto the spinal board.

“Georgie?”

“Don't you worry about Georgie. You've got enough problems of your own.”

The sliding door of the helicopter slammed shut and she could feel the jolt of movement as it wobbled skyward.

Suddenly she was terrified. She called through her smashed face, “I die?”

“That's all up to you,” said the paramedic.

“Bloody amazing she's still conscious,” said the other.

By the time they reached Royal North Shore hospital her legs were completely numb — a blessing in one respect but also terrifying.

Despite the pain-killers she was still cognizant of everything around her. She continued to moan until a needle was driven into the only vein they could find. The oxygen tubes were removed and another replaced it. She could feel herself falling backwards as if tumbling into a well, a sensation all too familiar.

It was a subconscious scream, “Oh my God, I’m going to die again!”

Then two words escaped her lips. “For Ellen ... ”

§

Mitchell was stunned — Andrew Decker on the inter-suburban train to Gosford? Mitchell elbowed his way through the peak-hour crowd to this handsome, uniformed year 12 student.

“Hey, big fella, what are you doing on this train?”

“Just going up to the hospital.”

“You, ok? You look a bit, you know ... ”

“Well, it’s been pretty scary. She’s all I have.”

“I don’t follow you.”

“Annie.”

“What about Ann?”

“Didn’t mum and dad phone you?”

“What’s happened to Ann, Andrew?”

“Oh, that’s not right. They should have phoned you. Anna had an accident. She’s been in a coma for a week.”

“Oh, my God, a car accident?”

“Yeah, just outside Bathurst. They flew her down to North Shore by helicopter.”

Mitchell’s head filled with “I-told-you-so’s” but his heart broke for all of them. “Oh, Andrew. Is she going to make it? Oh, dear God, don’t take my little girl!”

The two of them lost all emotional control right there, in front of all the commuters, on the public train. When they alighted at St Leonards, Andrew gave Mitchell a few more details, her room number and went on ahead as Mitch phoned Angelique and bought some flowers.

Exiting the lift to the eighth-floor intensive care unit, Mitchell was stopped at the desk.

“Who are you here to see, sir?”

“Annalee Decker.”

“Immediate family only, I’m sorry.”

“I’m her father.”

Mitchell was getting very aggravated at this tedious routine. It seemed that every time he wanted to visit his own offspring in hospital someone wanted him to jump through hoops of fire.

“I’m sorry, sir. I met her father on the weekend.”

“Well, she has two fathers, doesn’t she!” And he proceeded down the hall. The nurse chased him.

“I’m sorry sir, you cannot visit unless you’re immediate family. Now please, I’ll have to call security!”

“I am her father!”

“You’re not.”

Mitchell yelled, thrusting his upturned arm at her, “Well, take a bloody paternity test then! Go on! Do a bloody test. Any bloody day. I am her father.”

Andrew heard the commotion and came out to Mitchell’s rescue. “He’s ok.”

“Is he immediate family?” the nurse pressed.

Andrew and Mitchell looked at each other. It was an enormous question for Andrew to answer. “My sister and I are adopted. He’s her father, yes.”

He had a future as a diplomat, that boy. So clear-thinking under pressure.

“I’m sorry,” Mitchell said to the nurse. She understood.

He looked at Andrew as they walked together towards Anna’s room. Andrew had just made a huge admission. Even though he had said them on Anna’s behalf, they were large words for an adoptee — to admit that there was a point where the “as if’s” and the “if only’s” merged; to succumb to the realisation that family was biological as well as societal. Enormous concepts to grapple with, for a teenage adoptee. He’d obviously not come to these conclusions in the heat of the moment. They’d been with him for some time, particularly since turning eighteen. All that Ann and Mitchell had gone through could easily happen to him. He had to resolve whether he was ready or not. He’d seen his sister struggle with it all. Was it worth it?

Mitchell grabbed Andrew's arm before they entered. He spoke softly to the boy. "Andrew, you're very different to your sister. I would certainly wait until after the HSC, but for what it's worth, I think you need to meet your first mum."

Andrew smiled with tight-lipped reluctance. "It's very frightening. I don't know what I'll find."

"Matey, she was interested enough to get a message to you in 1992. She cares, Andrew. All you have to do is learn from Ann's and my mistakes. Take it a bit slower than we did. You'll be fine. And, anytime you want to talk to me I'll be happy to listen. I understand eighteen-year-old boys a lot better than I understand girls. Speaking of which — "

"Mitchell, she doesn't look real good."

"I have to see her, Andrew."

They walked in together and Mitchell nearly passed out. "My poor little girl."

Her gorgeous blue eyes which meant so much to Mitchell, were now just two black slits.

Tubes, an oxygen mask and assorted beeping machines obscured the rest of her face, but what could be seen was shiny black. Three huge surgical pins protruded from her jaw and cheek like miniature cranes. Tubes in her nose. Tubes in her right arm.

Mitchell had the strangest reaction to it. With all the swelling, her face looked kind of chubby and round. He thought she no longer looked anorexic. Her face was now oval like Ellen's rather than the gaunt, long face she had acquired through her eating disorder. Her legs were both in heavy traction; multiple pins were all that held them together.

The single unbruised portion of her entire body was her left forearm. Mitchell moved to her slowly, put his roses on her bed and held her hand to his face, weeping onto it. "Dear, Becca. What have you done to yourself?"

Andrew resiled at Mitchell's use of Anna's middle name, and tried to change the subject.

"It's amazing Mitch," he said. "She didn't lose any teeth."

"What? Did they collect them in a plastic bag for her?" Mitchell's appalling "coping" jokes.

Mitch wanted to kiss her face, sneak his first one while she was sleeping, but he daren't risk bumping any of the little crane-things.

"What are they saying, Andrew?"

"They tried to repair the veins, but they might have to amputate her leg, just below the knee."

"Oh, Andrew, no!"

“Mitch, we have to face it, she might not make it at all.”

Mitchell tried hard to control his emotions for Andrew's sake, but the more he tried the harder it was, so Mitchell dispensed with men's protocols, to never talk religion in public. This was life and death — which to Mitchell made it appropriate to let loose a spiritual secret on the youth. If Andrew didn't like it, too bad— this was too important.

Mitchell pulled a Bible out of his briefcase, turned to Joel 2:25, and read out loud.

“I will restore to you the years that have been eaten away — all that has been taken by this plague that came upon you.”

Andrew looked at the page. The verse had a big red circle around it. “You've drawn on your Bible! Are you allowed to do that?”

Then Andrew saw the inscription above the circle. *For Rebecca: 11-7-90.*

He was awe-struck. “You never forget us, do you?”

“How could we? Our whole lives revolve around you.”

Andrew smiled slightly, so Mitchell continued, confident that this intelligent young man was getting the picture.

Mitchell pointed to the open book. “You know what this is? This is the eternal version of *Rebecca's Law*. It's been the hope in my heart. The only hope sometimes. And now look at her. She needs beeping machines to keep her alive. They have to feed her through a stick in her arm.

“But as long as you and I don't give up on her, then He won't, ok?”

Andrew gave a charming and knowing nod.

“It's all we have.”

Andrew was a fast learner.

Mitchell held Anna's left hand up to his cheek, kissed her fingers one by one, just like Ellen had done with his through the side-window. Then Mitchell closed his eyes and stammered, “Please, from the top of her head to the soles of her feet.”

It was all Mitchell could say, but He knew what Mitchell meant.

32

The threat of amputation passed when blood started to flow to Annalee's ankle the following night, but still Annalee looked horrendous as over the next week, the blackness in her face slowly turned yellow-brown.

Every day for an hour at lunchtime and after work, Mitchell would go in and read into her ear. Sometimes he'd sing to her quietly.

On the second Thursday's lunchtime as Mitchell was getting to the second verse of *Seed*, Anna distinctly moaned through clenched, wired teeth, "Please! Will you shut up? I'm trying to sleep!"

Mitchell jumped back and hit his head on a shelf, where the vase containing his second week of roses wobbled. But Mitchell didn't have time to catch it.

He ran down to the desk nurse. "She's awake! She spoke to me! She woke up!"

The nurse looked non-plussed. "Yes, Ann Decker woke up around five-thirty this morning. We rang her parents."

Mitchell was heartily pissed off. Why was he always cut out of the loop?

"Look! Here's my mobile number," he scribbled on a piece of paper. "Put it in her file and phone me on every development. Any time of the day or night."

"Mr Hearn, we can't phone everybody. We only phone the next of kin. It's their responsibility to call you."

In twenty-one years, nothing had changed. Despite the court case, despite every effort, he was still the shadow, the ghost. The non-relative. The undead.

More importantly, though, Anna. She was now the undead. There still remained a mountain to be moved, or climbed (or tunnelled through), but she was back from the brink.

That evening she was fully awake, although tired and in considerable pain. Despite her discomfort she greeted Mitchell with her usual gaiety.

“Oh, you,” she mumbled and closed her eyes.

Here she lay without defence, and still she goaded him, so Mitchell took the bait. “I suppose I’m to blame for this, too, am I?”

“Not now,” she simmered.

“You started it. Anyway, you’re a captive audience.”

“Hmm.”

“We nearly lost you, Anna.”

No reaction, her eyes continually closed.

“You nearly lost your leg. You’ve been charged with about ten driving offences.”

“The cops were in this morning. Just told them I didn’t remember anything.”

“Your parents are very cut up about the drugs, Anna.”

A droplet scampered across her bruises.

“I don’t care about my parents. I don’t care about my leg. I don’t care about the charges, or you. I wish I had died. I should have died and she ... ”

“Georgie?”

Nothing but tears. This was immense grief. She would never allow anyone to see her displaying emotion, least of all Mitchell. But in this she didn’t care.

She couldn’t turn her face to hide, she couldn’t stop tears mingling with spit dribbling from her mouth. She couldn’t fully scream as she wanted. Mitchell wiped her face as gently as he could and squeezed her “good” hand, but there was no comforting her.

Mitchell couldn’t help feeling this with her although she certainly didn’t want him to.

“For what it’s worth, Ann, I’ve been there.”

“You never killed your best friend,” she said with tangible scorn.

“Oh yes I have Ann. I played a part in killing my three best friends.”

“You’ve never told me this one.”

“Yes I have, Ann. In fact, one way or another it’s the only thing I ever talk to you about.”

Her body might have been beaten up but her mind was as sharp as ever. “Who’s the third?”

“My first family. That could have been my lifetime friend, just like the other two people in it would have been. But they’re all dead now.”

“You didn’t actually kill us.”

“Well, if I didn’t, who was it I buried in the basement?”

“Ellen and I are still alive. Georgie’s dead. Really dead. And I killed her.”

“The Ellen I knew died in April 1980.”

“Well, I’m still me.”

“How do you know? I seem to recall someone saying to me, ‘Rebecca’s dead. Get over it.’”

The cruelty of her own words were like a paper cut, but she refused to let him know he was getting through to her.

Mitchell knew from bitter first-hand experience that nothing promotes humility like the grief of a friend’s blood on one’s own hands.

He was pleased to watch her wrestle with these realisations. It was a tragedy, no question. But the slim chance remained, that through the death of Georgie, there might be a rebirth of the true Beckie.

Or perhaps a hybrid Beckie.

§

She slept through lunchtime so Mitchell read a letter from Ros and Lawry lying open on the floor beside her bed. It was a few days old and had been addressed to Andrew to read to her:

We went over to Koorawatha today for Georgie’s funeral. It was a lovely funeral. There were a lot of your school friends there. They came in from all over the state. Have any of them visited you yet? We said hello to some of them but they didn’t seem to want to talk at all. I suppose underneath they wanted to know how you are. Belinda Fragar gave the eulogy. Georgie’s dad was very upset but he thanked us for being there. I don’t know if he knew who we were.

Andrew tells us that Mitchell has been visiting you. That's good. Maybe out of all this you two can get to know each other a bit. He seems to have a pretty good lawyer. Ask him about getting you off the charges.

Katherine seems to be coping alright with it all. The teachers at Bathurst Catholic College seem to understand and have taken her under their wing. So much better there than at Monte, and the fees are so much cheaper!

We get updates from the hospital every day Ann, so we're thinking of you.

Love Mum.

Mitchell couldn't help asking himself, where were they through all this? They seemed so indifferent, distant. But this was how they lived. Anna in a Sydney hospital was just an extension of Anna in a Sydney boarding school.

As he put the letter down Mitchell felt the presence of a man standing at the door to Anna's room, just staring at Mitchell, and going red in the face. He wasn't dressed like any hospital staff, just jeans, shirt and an Akubra.

He began to speak. "I can't begin to tell you just how much I hate you. Look at her. Why isn't *she* dead? I raised my little girl right. Why didn't you? It's because of you, you know. You made her such a spoilt little brat. You never disciplined her. You never taught her to be responsible. I don't know why Georgie got tangled up with her.

"The only thing that keeps me going is knowing that one day it'll be you standing here. The way she is, she *will* end up killing herself. And that'll be the first day I'll smile since Georgie.

"So enjoy her while you can. I don't have the privilege of my daughter's company anymore.

"And it's all because of you. I don't blame her. I blame you. I hope you rot."

With that, he walked out.

"I'll pass it on to the relevant authorities," Mitchell said. Then he looked back at Anna. She appeared to be asleep but her diaphragm was in spasm and water trickled down her cheek.

"Why didn't you tell him?" she grimaced.

"What's the point? He's angry. He has to let his anger out. It's part of grief. If a person doesn't let their anger out then it will come to the surface in very destructive ways. They start to hurt themselves, and everyone around them. Unresolved anger will always exact its price, Ann. Booze.

Drugs. Anorexia. Driving too fast. They're all signs of a person who hasn't dealt with the anger of their grief."

Mitchell was well aware from discussions with Dr Richardson, that orthopaedic and intensive care wards, spinal units and graveyards, are full of young adoptees who tried to live the reckless life, and like all of them, Annalee Decker's entire psyche was starting to splinter into more pieces than her shattered legs and face. Georgie's father had brutally laid open the truth behind the face in Annalee's mirror. Mitchell had now exposed the lie to the cold air. She no longer had anywhere to conceal her nakedness.

"Cry like a river, Annie. It's time to start living in the real world."

§

Mitchell began to witness just what agony Annalee was going through on the days he was able to take an early lunch.

It might have been a simple sponge bath but every movement ground unknitted bone against jagged edges and she'd scream. Bed sores burned Anna like triffid-stingers at the touch of the nurse's soapy hand towel. But worse, far worse was the ignominy of disability and disfigurement. This porcelain figurine who lived for her independence was now more dependent than the day she came into the world.

The bedrock of her subconscious shuffled those near-primal birthing memories into the front of her mind, bringing with it an abandoned baby's abject terror.

The subliminal familiarity of hospital sights and smells, Mitchell's voice, a stranger wiping her most delicate and private self after ablutions — all were depth-charges reverberating through her mind, returning her to infancy, but this time, with full understanding. Nothing for an adoptee could carry more horror.

Mitchell could only hold her hand or reassure her through the curtain as she was bathed, hearing her bark in muffled baby yelps, "Don't let me fall! Please! Catch me!"

The nurses wanted to call in a psychiatrist but Mitchell talked them out of it. "This is between me and her. It'll be ok."

Then one day he made the blessed mistake.

She called as always, but in a slip of the tongue, Mitchell stumbled, "It's ok, Becca!"

Instantly her voice stopped. Nothing. Not a murmur. Mitch called the nurse bathing her. "Is she alright?"

"It's strange," the nurse replied. "She's just listening. Say something again."

He could think of nothing else. "Becca!"

Her eyes darted to the source of the sound. The nurse covered her with the sheet and opened the curtain. Anna squeezed Mitchell's finger involuntarily.

"Becca!" he called again.

And despite her broken jaw she smiled. "I know that voice," she said. Her bottom lip quivered. "I know that voice ..."

Mitchell was terrified as he crossed this rickety rope-bridge. "What's in there, little girl?"

"I'm not me. It's like I'm someone else."

She kept smiling. "And I think I like her."

§

Andrew rang Mitchell that night. "What the hell have you done to Anna, Mitchell? She's psycho!"

"What's going on?"

"Her moods are all over the place! In five minutes today she went from being really happy, to just total grief over Georgie, then she went into a rage about being in bed and unable to do anything, then she got angry because she couldn't scream properly with her mouth wired up, then she called mum and dad idiots, then she had a few choice words for you and Ellen, then she talked to me about uni like nothing had happened!"

"Andrew, you really don't want to know."

"Yeah, I do. She's scary."

"It's really not my place, Andrew. Ask Lawry or Ros."

"I did. Mum said to ask you."

"You're kidding me, aren't you?" said Mitchell in absolute astonishment.

"Mum figured you'd know what you're doing to her."

"Andrew! I'm not doing anything to her. This is just part of the process."

“What process? You’re turning her against us!”

“Oh, Andrew please! It’s not me! This is just — ”

Mitchell checked himself, hesitant to give clinical details of adoption psychology to a teenage adoptee with whom he had only an embryonic relationship. On top of everything else Andrew was coping with, it would be too much to have thrust into his consciousness the truth, that Annalee carried his anger while he carried her sadness.

“Do all of us go through this?” Andrew struggled.

Mitchell could hear the terror in Andrew’s voice, so he answered cryptically.

“No, Andrew, it’s anger that sends you mad, not sadness.”

Andrew picked up the ball immediately. “She is angry, isn’t she? She never laughs. In fact, you did well to get a few smiles out of her.”

Andrew could see the pattern of Annalee’s behaviour — to get close to people for a time, then drive them away. But it was too early for Andrew to admit to the reasons, which he knew stemmed back to Anna’s entry into the world — a time of intimate bonds forged then shattered. Her unions with Ellen, with Mitchell, with her neo-natal foster carers. Each bond cruelly rent asunder by sterile isolation, where her only human contact came by way of one painful medical test after another. Her pre-verbal days had been filled with nothing more comforting than sudden loud noises in her ears, little hammers on her joints, cold hands and stethoscopes on her chest, thermometers inserted into her rear passage, tubes rammed up her nose and down her throat to her stomach, unfamiliar food producing at first vomit, then alternate diarrhoea and constipation, as her tiny gut revolted, doubling her in colic pain.

Her infant psychology had been flippantly oscillated from unrequited cravings to enforced torture. It was this emotional bedrock that Annalee was now confronting, but its implications for Andrew meant that Mitchell had to hold his peace.

As Mitchell held the telephone to his ear silently mulling over Anna’s beginnings, he mused, “No wonder she has trouble getting close to anyone.”

Andrew responded to this cue obtusely, but insightfully.

“Mum and I were in a supermarket the first time I saw a pregnant woman.”

Mitchell was surprised the boy opened up to him like this, but he could see it was something Andrew had wanted to get off his chest to someone, so Mitchell resisted interrupting as Andrew continued.

“I remember it clearly. I said to mum, ‘Can you tell that lady to give her baby to someone else. We have enough already.’ I thought that women who carried babies in their tummy did it just to give the baby to other people.”

There was a deep pause in the conversation as Mitchell read Andrew's subtext, and Andrew waited for the response. Mitchell spoke cautiously.

“Andrew, who was the first woman Anna ever saw with a baby in her tummy?”

Andrew had seen it clearly for years, but was surprised at the relief he felt as, at last, he'd found someone willing to share the pain he carried for his sister.

“Mum.”

“That's right Andrew. Ros Decker when she's carrying Katherine.”

“But she doesn't give that baby away, Mitch,” Andrew opened out. “And it's a girl. This is the child Anna's supposed to be, Mitch.”

“How on earth does a little five-year-old cope with these thoughts, Andrew?”

Again a silent pause, then Andrew cutting to the heart. “No wonder she's angry.”

“She's coping with so much right now, Andrew — her physical pain, her helplessness, her boredom, her thoughts. To cope as a five-year-old she shut down her true feelings and masked them with an attitude that she was the girl who could do no wrong. Now she's looking into a very tough mirror.

“But Andrew, let me tell you something,” Mitchell conjured up an assurance for both their sakes. “Don't you worry about Anna, ok? She's pretty strong-willed. Remember how she dragged herself out of her eating disorder? She just needs support from us, and the right incentive.”

Andrew agreed — and all the incentive she would ever need walked into her ward the following Monday.

33

Light-strawberry blonde. Light-brown eyes. Well built. Fit. Five-feet ten-inches tall. Twenty-six years old. The top physiotherapy graduate from University of New South Wales. The moment Mitchell saw this young man he somehow knew he was tailor-made. Judging by Anna's immediate regression to a giggling schoolgirl, she thought he was tailor-made, too.

“Hi, Anna. My name's Nathan Hillcrest and I'm going to be your physiotherapist.”

Despite her face still being a little misshapen, her eyelids went all lazy, and her head began that characteristic easy sway — she was flirting with him! Mitchell could recognise it when she aimed it at someone else.

However, Nathan marched to a different drum. “Anna,” he said strictly, “you can put all that stuff straight back in your kit bag. We have serious work to do.”

“What?” She feigned ignorance but the little muscles in each side of her now repaired jaw, flexed and unflexed in a regular, annoyed pulse. From the opening second, Nathan had her measure.

It had been two months and the only time she had been out of her room was under general anaesthetic for operations on her legs.

“Now Ann, I'm going to lift you out of bed and put you in this wheelchair, then we're going out to the balcony, and get you some fresh air.”

“Great!”

Eating through straws and being as fussy as she was about food, she had become exceedingly light; but even at normal weight, Nathan would still have lifted her like a dove carrying an olive branch.

She wrapped her skinny arms around his neck and locked her gaze onto his eyes but he refused to reciprocate, being utterly business-like. In fact overly so, but Nathan was positioning her expertly, both in the wheelchair and otherwise.

It was a perfect day on the balcony, but once out there, it was time for the three of them to get down to uncompromising reality.

“So what are the doctors saying, Ann?” Nathan was obviously journalist-trained: never ask a question you don’t already know the answer to.

“That I might never walk again without the use of a cane.”

“Old before your time, eh, Ann? Well, I think we can do a bit better than that, but you have to do everything I say, exactly how I tell you.”

Nathan described what was ahead — at least a couple of years of treadmills, exercise bikes, hydrotherapy.

“Anna,” Nathan fixed his gaze on her. “Within a few weeks you should probably hate my guts.”

“I’m good at that,” she quipped. Mitchell was impressed. She was starting to get a sense of humour about herself.

“But I’m always in your corner, ok?” Nathan reassured.

She nodded. “Yes, I usually end up hating the person who says that to me.”

Mitchell looked at Anna curiously. This was not the same girl he had spoken with, the day she woke from her coma. Months of incapacity had given her more time than she needed for soul-searching.

As Nathan drew up a chart of expectations for her, Mitchell just stared at her. She didn’t like it but for once, she resisted reacting to it. She simply stared back in her habitually defiant way, but both knew there had been a change in the dynamic. “Ever done any top-level sport, Anna?”

Nathan’s interruption ended the stare-out in a draw, although Mitchell had smiled first.

“I was a gymnastics champion when I was ten.”

“And what then?”

“Oh nothing. Just gave it up.”

“Well, there’ll be no giving up here, Anna. Perseverance! It produces character. Character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint.”

It was a quote Mitchell knew. He suddenly became very interested in this young physio. Almost as interested as Annalee Decker was.

“I’m hoping for a full recovery, Ann,” Nathan said. “What about you?”

She nodded and patted her slowly growing hair, in a typical grooming gesture.

“I like the colour of your hair, Ann,” Nathan commented unemotionally.

She didn’t cut it for twelve months.

§

One Saturday, Lawry and Ros Decker made the trip from Oberon to North Shore Hospital, their first for eleven weeks.

Mitchell was as ill-prepared as the Deckers were for this impromptu meeting, their first face to face.

He bounded into Anna’s private room and saw Andrew first, then with mutual trepidation, the “Great Wall of Adoption” collapsed as they all recognised each other from photos.

“Ros! Lawry! At last!”

“Mitchell! How wonderful to meet you!”

Mitchell air-kissed Mrs Decker and shook Mr Decker’s huge hand. Lawry smiled warmly, but somehow his grin seemed to be sticky-taped on. The two “fathers” both tried hard not to stare at each other but in the second or two it takes to have your hand crushed by a cattleman, they sized each other physically and personally. Lawry seemed so big to Mitchell and he couldn’t help the thought. Lawry towered. Mitchell felt like a gnat in Lawry’s shadow. The cattleman must have been twice the weight of the ad man. He had large lips while Mitchell’s were ferret-thin. Football-shaped head while Mitchell’s was box-like.

Lawry’s genuineness unnerved Mitchell just as surely as Mitchell’s overt theatricism embarrassed Lawry. He’s way too soft to be her dad, thought Mitchell. She needs a son-of-a-bitch like me.

He's so unlike her, thought Lawry. He's too pushy. She doesn't like that. She prefers the softly-softly approach.

Lawry had great business acumen of which Mitchell freely admitted to being jealous. Mitchell had a dog-with-a-bone tenacity (usually for lost causes), which Lawry couldn't understand. And now they stood face to face, each making their unspoken claim: "I'm her father."

Lawry compensated with an endearing shuffle of the feet and an excessive jolliness, which quickly faded to unease. Mitchell compensated with off-hand gregarious straight-shooting.

"So, things have been busy in the service station, I suppose."

"Yes, we understand you read her mail," Lawry replied. "Not catching a train right past here every day puts us at a bit of a disadvantage."

Everyone went silent.

"Sorry," Lawry recanted. "It's just been very stressful."

Lawry had always been the boss-fella, so he was used to speaking his mind. The only person he never took on in such up-front manner was Annalee.

Ros rescued the moment. "So, possum, you're starting physio on Wednesday?"

"Mmm." Anna didn't really hear. She was too busy comparing Lawry and Mitchell. "Yeah, Nathan's going to look after me through all this," she predicted a little tersely. Mitchell's entry had suddenly put her in one of her moods.

"Don't you hurry it, honey," said Lawry. "We'll pay the bills just as long as it takes to get you right."

"Nathan reckons it can take up to two years," Mitchell offered. "There's been so much withering in her legs."

"Oh, she'll be right," Lawry piped bombastically. "We breed 'em pretty tough up in Oberon."

Ros couldn't believe her husband actually said it, to Mitchell of all people. Mitch let it pass without word, just a thought and a wry smile: "Maybe so, but someone has to put the steel in first."

§

After just one hour Anna was totally discouraged. Nathan had asked her to touch her toes, but she could barely reach her knees. There was absolutely no give in her hamstrings, quads or spine.

Nathan cajoled her, massaged her, and nearly snapped her in two, but after an hour and a half she just sat in self-pity. A disgrace to a former gymnast.

“I’m trying, I really am, but I just can’t do it.”

Nathan was lost for words. He’d never worked on anyone for two hours without some sort of result. He was looking for the keys to Anna when Mitchell unwittingly found them.

“They told me I couldn’t come down here but I thought I would anyway,” said Mitchell.

Nathan’s eyes creased into thin slits as he assimilated what Anna’s genetic heritage had just offered.

After some idle chit-chat Mitchell blended into the background while Nathan and Anna went back to work, getting nowhere fast.

“I can’t do it! I just can’t,” Anna protested.

Nathan drew back from her and ran his fingers through his hair, then started shouting at her. “You’re dead-right, Anna! You can’t. And you never will. You’re the most pea-hearted patient I’ve ever had.

“And I can safely say that you’ll remain in that wheelchair pretty much for the rest of your life. You’re right, I can see it now. You’ll never be able to do anything for yourself. You can’t do it. But, I don’t work with losers like you.”

Nathan turned towards the door and began to walk out in a temper, as Anna responded with the lowest insult she knew.

“You bastard!”

How angry she must have been to use *that* word.

Nathan went back to her quickly. “Is that the best you can come up with? I thought you were supposed to be some sort of child genius! But you’ve got nothing! Nothing in your head! Nothing in your heart! And nothing but jelly where your spine should be. Gutless!”

He turned to walk out as she fumed silently for less than a second before steam came out of her ears.

“Kiss my arse, Hillcrest. You’re the gutless wonder.”

Mitchell indicated to Nathan to turn around, and there they watched Ann, her face racked with pain, and knees stiff, as she tucked her fingers under the soles of her feet. Nathan folded his arms

unimpressed. She released her grip and flopped back into her wheelchair with an exalted cry, "Aaaaahhhh!"

She was in obvious agony but she stared him out desperate not to show it.

"Is that all you've got?" Nathan dared her. "Do it again."

She did, screaming unrepeatable insults at Nathan, but he just responded with, "Hold it! Hold it! Longer. Hold it!"

She let go.

"Don't stop!" Nathan screamed at her. "If I tell you to hold it, you bloody-well hold it until I tell you to let go!"

"Up yours! I'm going to get my father to find me another physio."

"Tough luck, babe, you're stuck with me. And even worse, I'm stuck with a big girl's blouse like you. Now do it again!"

She immediately bent her chin down to her outstretched knees for what seemed like a full minute.

When she sat up red-faced, Nathan turned to Mitchell so angry he could hardly speak. "I think we found the key to her," he confided in Mitchell, "but I don't know how long I'm going to last."

"Don't whisper around me — especially to him!" blasted the red-head.

"Sorry, Nathan," shrugged Mitchell, "she got all the aggro genes."

"Oh up yours, too!" scowled the child in the girl.

§

During their sessions, Nathan found her so contemptible he could barely bring himself to even talk, but Anna didn't care. She was now on a mission.

Nathan told her she'd never swim two laps of the hydro pool without stopping. She did it within two weeks.

He told her she'd never walk without the frame. She threw the frame into the pool within a month. Her walking stick followed in four months. By that time, she'd defiantly tell him to pick a number between ten and twenty — he'd usually say nineteen — and she'd swim that many laps of the pool.

By June she was an outpatient and back at university part-time. Her physical recovery was going well but something gnawed away at her. Something deep.

“I’ve done it again, haven’t I?” she confessed to Mitchell.

“Done what?” As if he didn’t know.

“What I always do,” she obfuscated, but he shrugged, forcing her to verbalise her admission.

“I found someone I like and pissed them off in two weeks.” Mitchell never thought he’d hear such words come from her mouth, and even as they did, she mixed anger with muted reluctance.

“There — you happy now I’ve said it?”

He ignored this self-conscious pseudo-tough outburst.

“What are you going to do about it?”

She thought for a moment, then surprisingly smiled mischievously. “I’ll just turn on the charm. Win him over with girlie-looks.”

She looked at Mitchell well satisfied, but he was stony.

“Won’t work. He’s light years ahead of you, Anna. Besides, that doesn’t solve the problem.”

“What problem?” she charged, straightening in her chair.

“You’d only be flirting with him because he’s told you not to. It would still be the old Anna, defying everyone, taking up the dare. You need a total change of attitude.”

“Are you saying I can’t win him over?”

“Now you’re trying to just make it a double-dare with me! Not everything can be turned into a contest, Anna. Sure, some things can be competitive, like psyching yourself up for your physio, but just being nice to someone for the mere sake of it — that’s not a contest. That’s just part of life as a human being.”

Anna wanted so much to create conflict with Mitchell, just to start a debate she could then try and win. But that would just play into Mitchell’s argument. She was trapped and Mitchell could see it, so well satisfied with his victory, he gave her the permission she was seeking.

“You just concentrate on your physio,” he said. “Anything else is a bonus.”

34

The harder Nathan insisted that it was too early for her to start kick-boxing the bag, the harder Annalee insisted she was up to it. Nathan relented, allowing her to swing her left leg quietly at the bag.

She had gradually extended her pain threshold, slowly regaining some of the flexibility she once had as a gymnast, and while every stretch hurt like hell as her will and body were out of synergy, she suffered in silence, contorting her face but trusting Nathan's judgement.

Nathan however, continued to play his part stony-faced. He liked her but was wary of the panther that had manifested when they first started working together. For her part, Annalee's recovery was giving her the chance to channel this creature into constructive physical pursuits while keeping it out of her personal relationships. Bridling old habits wasn't easy, but she had come to realise that she had no option than to succeed in this, or endure a long and lonely life.

Analysing her every move, diagnosing her progress, Nathan would watch her eyes as she trained, fully aware that she had taken this way beyond mere physio. There was such determination in her face, something that was completely lacking when they started together.

Nathan was actually quite proud of her — you could see it in the way he would walk her to the outpatients' sliding door. And Mitchell was proud of her, too. She had become so much like his mother's family, so much like Jessica and, dare Mitchell even think it with any conviction, so much like himself.

"I don't know what you've done to him," Mitchell said as he walked Anna to coffee, "but just for laughs, when I count three, turn really quickly and look back at the sliding doors."

The two of them did, and caught Nathan watching her walk down Reserve Road. She waved with a cool look of triumph on her face, while Nathan shyly waved back.

“Told you I’d win,” she said assuredly.

“Yes well, I wonder where you got that from.”

“Not everything relates back to you, Mitchell.”

They smiled at each other but for different reasons. Mitchell quoted to her, as if reading, acting as if he was straining to remember, “I’ll never be anything to you. You’re just the derro sperm donor. It takes more than DNA to be related. Just piss off out of my life and over a cliff somewhere. I think that’s pretty much word for word.”

They stopped at the Pacific Highway crossing and engaged each other eye to eye, as her brain worked overtime. “Well, that’s the best way to win,” she said. “To make the other person think they won.”

They continued to wrestle eye to eye. “I don’t feel like a cappuccino today,” she said eventually. “Let’s go get an ice cream.”

§

Mitchell closed the front door behind him and greeted the family that night singing Bob Dylan’s epitaph, “*Yes, I’ll leave this old world, with a satisfied mind. Oo-oo yeah!*”

He did the rounds of the homecoming kisses and looked at each of them: Caleb thirteen in just over a month; Jessica now nine-and-a-half; Angelique, his wife of sixteen-and-a-half years. He had definitely neglected them yet again, but they would prove to be more than forgiving over the years.

Angelique presented him with his birthday cake, but he made no wish as he blew out the candles. For the first time in twenty-three years, he felt like a complete dad.

§

As they often did these days, Nathan and Annalee sat overlooking the lunchtime touch-football on North Shore Hospital Park.

Despite the hot day, Annalee wore long trackpants, to hide her scars. But some scars can never be hidden.

Nathan opened with what he thought would be good news. "Mitchell tells me the cops have dropped the charges. Lack of evidence."

She half-smiled. "I'll always pay for my mistake."

His experiences with Anna held him undecided as to whether this was genuine repentance or just part of the act.

His cynicism dissolved as Anna spoke. "Nathan, my whole life is a lie."

Nathan could see immediately she was struggling with what was to her, a revelation. He looked into her face and saw she was already crying as she mumbled through her tears, "They've all lied to me. They made me believe it."

"Don't cry, Red. I'm real. I will never lie to you."

"Remember I was telling you about the court case."

"Yeah."

"You know why I was really crying in that courtroom? It wasn't just Ellen's story. It was the fact that mum and dad knew. They knew that someone went through such agony to have me, to lose me to them. And yet, they never told me."

"How could they tell you, Anna? Be fair on them."

"Oh, that I could handle, if that was all there is. But I have a younger brother, Nathan. That's what really hurts."

Nathan couldn't follow the logic. "What has that got to do with it?"

"They knew, but they were happy to do it again! They knew that the system was rotten to the core, Nat! They knew that Ellen was treated like dog-bog but they went to the same people, the same system and let it happen all over a second time, just so they could have another one! What the hell is Andrew going to find?"

"Anna, Ros and Lawry probably didn't know all the details. Look, they're really nice people. They wouldn't do that, not deliberately. And even if they did, Anna, they did it for you."

"That's what Mitchell said to Andrew."

They sat in silence for some time, while Nathan gathered strength to approach her.

“You have to face it, Red. We need to be able to forgive. That’s the basis of every relationship. If you can’t do that, you won’t have any lasting relationships.”

“Are you telling me, that you want to split up?”

Nathan hardly knew they were going together, but he took it as a compliment and pressed on.

“Anna, if you can’t hear this from me, who can you hear it from? I care for you, Anna. That’s why I’m telling you. You have to forgive your parents. You have to forgive Ellen and Mitchell. And there will be times when you’re going to have to forgive me. That’s just how the world works.”

Annalee Decker realised she had never forgiven anyone in her life. Sure she had her achievements, but they were based on proving her worth to a world that she didn’t like, to people with whom she had a point to win.

“Anna, you can’t live your life like that,” said the still small voice. “Only by the extent to which you forgive others, can I forgive you.”

She had always hated religion classes at Monte. But somehow they had soaked in.

Then Nathan complemented her internal dialogue. “Forgiveness is a conscious decision, Anna,” he said, quietly. “And then it becomes an action. Eventually it becomes a lifestyle, which makes you truly happy. That’s what I want to see for you.”

“I love you, Nat. You’re a great man. You’re a gentle and wise man. I need you so much.”

They were words she never thought she would ever say to anyone. But now she had, she was pleased she’d let them escape.

And so was he.

§

Three-score Sundays later, the officially “going-together” Annalee and Nathan visited Mitchell and Angelique’s humble abode. For the first time she saw the “Rebecca Wall” and caught a glimpse of the large-labelled “Annalee Box”.

“What’s in there?”

“Oh, that’s for when I’m gone,” Mitchell replied. “Just in case I never get to see you again.”

She looked at Mitchell curiously. “How could you ever think that?”

“You have a short memory, Annalee.”

Anna spent a good portion of the day with Jessica playing games in her room. Mitchell went in to call them for lunch and saw his two girls sitting together on the bed, so he stopped just outside the door and eavesdropped.

“Read me your favourite story, Jes. Let me practice analysing your speech.”

Jessica didn't know what that meant, but it sounded important, and being the champion reader in her class, she was keen to show off to her new found sister, so she selected a book from her shelf.

“This is dad's favourite,” Jes said, going for the most familiar story, so she could be sure she would make no mistakes. “He used to always read it to me.”

Mitchell stood at the door in wonderment, listening as Jessica read. *“As he was still speaking a beautiful young girl named Rebekah arrived at the well with a water jug, so the servant asked her for a drink ... ”*

It was the narrative of Isaac and Rebekah from Jes's *Read to Me Bible Stories* — the passage that had inspired Mitchell's naming of his first-born even before he had ever met Ellen. He watched them as Jessica read on, Anna intent on every word carefully appraising Jessica's speech patterns. *“So the servant gave Rebekah expensive jewellery and asked her, ‘Whose daughter are you?’ ”*

Jessica suddenly stopped reading and looked at Annalee.

Silence for a near eternity. “What's the matter, Ann?” asked the younger half-sibling.

“I'm sorry, Jes. Don't read anymore. I think it's time for lunch.” And they looked up to see Mitchell at the door.

In typical nine-year-old oblivion, Jessica exclaimed, “It's good to have a big sister to read to! She listens better than you or mum! And she doesn't correct me on every little word.”

“Go wash your hands for lunch,” Mitchell instructed. Then he smiled at Ann. “And you go wash your face.”

Jessica pushed past Mitchell while Ann and he exchanged gazes. “Anna, I want you to know, that I do realise there's a difference between natural father and parent dad.” No answer from her. “It's been a long journey, we've been through a lot to get here, but for what it's worth, welcome home, Becca,” Mitchell said.

“Mitchell, please,” Annalee sighed, quietly yet firmly, “We're friends. Be happy with that.”

“Are you happy with that?”

“Happy as I can be,” she grinned kind of shyly.

Mitchell satisfied himself with the compassion in her voice, if not the content of her answer. This was the compromise she had been seeking since May 31st 1998, and she smiled at him trying to encourage him to be comfortable with it. Mitchell’s reluctant smile in return reassured her that this non-verbal communication had been accurately read, and accepted.

After lunch Nathan and Mitchell wandered around the garden. Nathan looked at Mitchell’s Suzuki in the drive.

“I know what your number plate means,” Nathan said rather nervously, unusual for him.

“Well, you can talk about a life of brotherly love, but show me someone who knows how to live it,” Mitchell replied.

“Bob Dylan, ‘Slow Train Comin’, 1979,” Nathan returned immediately. Mitchell was impressed: a kid who knew his seventies music!

“One day I’ll start thinking up my own cliches,” Mitchell laughed.

“I want to ask you something,” Nathan quaked.

Here it comes, thought Mitchell.

Nathan pulled a little green velour box out of his pocket and opened it. A sparkling solitaire shimmered inside, and it reminded Mitchell immediately of the one he had bought for Ellen, although he suspected, Nathan’s was much more expensive.

Mitchell looked at it long and hard while Nathan sweated.

“Well?” Nathan asked finally.

“Sorry, mate,” Mitchell said straight-faced. “I’m already married.”

Nathan’s strenuous unease, cracked.

“Nat, I can promise you,” Mitchell said, “I won’t be throwing that out any window.”

Nathan looked befuddled. “It’s a long story,” said Mitchell. “Ask Anna one day.”

“So, what do you say?”

“Well are you asking the right person? I mean I have no legal claim to being — ”

“You have every claim. Besides, I’ve already asked Lawry.”

“So I’m second-best, am I?” Mitchell teased.

“No, of course not. It’s just that — ”

Mitchell burst out laughing. "Are you sure you want to take on three sets of in-laws?"

Nathan relaxed. "If I have what it takes to get the better of her then I can handle as many in-laws as she can give me!"

They were talking too loudly. Anna heard it all from behind them. "What's this about in-laws?"

Mitchell looked at Nathan. "I'll give you two some privacy." Nathan turned to his pride and joy. "Isaac here wants to talk to you."

From Caleb's bedroom window the Hearn's beamed down onto the driveway, where Nathan awkwardly slipped the sparkling diamond onto Annalee's finger.

The onlookers cheered as Annalee Decker spontaneously flung herself around Nathan and enthusiastically kissed his neck. Mitchell was so pleased to see Anna this comfortable with her emotions.

"She's alive, Ange," he emoted. "My Becca's alive."

35

Mitchell was genuinely surprised when both the invitations came.

His auntie's seventy-fifth birthday and fiftieth wedding anniversary fell just a week before the wedding:

Mr & Mrs Lawrence Decker request the pleasure of the company of Mitchell and Angela Hearn (and family) for the happy event of the marriage of their daughter Annalee Julie Rebecca to Nathan John Hillcrest at St Alban's Anglican Church Oberon.

"An Anglican Church? That'll put all the Catholic noses out of joint." Apparently Nathan's family had chosen the church for its picturesque federation grace. Annalee didn't care, just as long as she was the centre of attention for the day. The trade-off was a Catholic priest and liturgy. That way, Mitchell supposed, everyone could be equally offended, such are these ecumenical times.

At least, Mitchell thought, they're starting to include me in things. He telephoned his acceptance immediately with a question.

"Will Ellen be there?"

Ros laughed down the line. "Oh Mitchell, you two are so paranoid! That was her first question as well."

Angelique was heartily annoyed with the question, the answer, and the fact that they'd misspelt her name. She really should have been used to all three of these annoyances by now.

§

Mitchell had never really had a huge amount to do with his Aunt Pauline except for a couple of holiday stay-overs when he was very little, but he and Angelique attended the birthday celebrations out of duty to Mitch's mother. Pauline didn't seem to be well fitted to this family. Her four siblings were city-streaked hustlers but Pauline was your typical country girl, warm and uncomplicated. She just wasn't like the others and this night Mitchell was to find out why.

He chatted with his cousin about her reunion. She too had struck the trademark adoption anger in her lost daughter's heart, but the two of them had worked it through relatively smoothly. With a few years of added maturity and with the adoptive parents having passed on, there was no need for fatal car accidents.

However, Mitchell complained to her bitterly about one thing. "It was a total betrayal of trust to send Rebecca to Oberon. I am just still so angry at the agency for that. It's strange, but I keep finding all these little connections in my life to that silly little town. The lady who's the relief teacher at Caleb's school, she grew up with Lawry Decker in Oberon. My best friend is the state sales director for Stanley's batteries and does business with Lawry. But, still and all, I suppose one day I'll find there's some other close link-up with Oberon."

His cousin's mother Aunt Lorelie, had stood by listening to the conversation smiling broadly, but repeatedly putting her left index finger to her mouth in a classic "Shut up!" gesture. Finally she cut off her nephew in mid-sentence.

"Oh, there is, Mitch. There's a definite connection to Oberon."

She went over to the wall of photographs that represented Pauline's life and took one down.

"You see this?" she began, knowing nothing of Mitchell's plans for the following Saturday. "This is your grandfather's wedding, at the Anglican Church in Oberon."

§

Mitchell pulled the diminutive Suzuki up next to the Range Rovers, Landcruisers and Mercs in the church's parking lot. Angelique and the kids sprang out of the car. He caught up to them and squeezed Angie's hand. They both stood there looking in amazement. It was just like the photo.

Stepping into the church to the giggles of Nathan's second cousins, Angelique and Mitchell were overwhelmed by this great sense of history — not just the history of large-hewn sandstone laid by Victorian labour, but now with a close, intimate sense of family history.

The groom's party was already there. Mitchell shook hands with Nathan as they milled around the altar, while Angelique wondered about this very spot on which they stood.

Andrew was best man for the day and Mitchell quietly called him outside to a spot where he could easily appraise the accuracy of the photograph. "Andrew, I know you have a lot to think about today."

"Nervous as."

"Look, I was wondering if you could just sort of secretly add me to the speeches list?"

"Oh Mitch, I don't know."

Mitchell took the cracked sepia photo out of his top pocket. "Andrew, I'm going to show you something but you have to keep it strictly to yourself. This is my grandfather."

Andrew's eyes grew about three-centimetres larger as he compared the photo with the setting around him. "It hasn't changed!" he exclaimed laughing. Then it hit him, the full implication. "This is Annalee's great grandfather!"

"It's more than that Andrew. It's her whole Australian narrative."

Andrew knew just how important narrative is to an adoptee. Now he had a very definite conundrum. "Birth-parents aren't supposed to have an official part ..." he agonised.

"It's up to you, Andrew," Mitchell shrugged, "but I promise I'll keep it short."

Andrew paced a little then stood there tapping his feet and clicking his fingers nervously.

"What the hell, Mitch. I'll leave you to the very last speech, so don't panic."

As Annalee Decker walked down the aisle with Lawry, Mitchell watched Nathan's face. Written all over it was, "God I love my job!" Every step she took was a tribute to his excellence as a physio. The smile on her face was a tribute to his excellence as a man.

It was incredibly harrowing for Mitchell to watch Anna walk the aisle with Lawry. Mitchell was sorely tempted to call out some smart comment at "Who gives this woman ..." and probably would have but for the evil eye he was getting from Angelique.

All in all, though, it was a beautiful service. Mitchell was very pleasantly surprised at just how uplifting the Catholic wedding liturgy could be if you were open enough to let it touch you.

Mitchell had never cried at a wedding before, but he cried at this one. Annalee looked stunning. Angelique looked ravishing. Ellen looked gorgeous, too, although she refused to go near Mitchell or make eye contact. Mitchell couldn't help but feel Ellen's pain as wedding guests filed past Ros to congratulate her as the mother of the bride, while Ellen looked on powerlessly. Ellen felt she was supposed to offer her own greeting to Ros but she didn't, and just stood quietly to one side, fidgeting.

Mitchell prayed Ros would notice, and she did. She broke away from the congratulatory scrimmage of relatives and walked smoothly over to Ellen and kissed her on the cheek.

"It's the right time, Ellen. Thank you. Everyone's saying to me how beautiful the bride is, but we really have you to thank."

The two women stood holding each other's hands, quiet water in their eyes. Each unthreatened by the other for this brief moment.

Mitchell whispered to Angelique, "They are both exceptional women. That Ros has a lot more in her than I ever gave her credit for."

"All the women in your life do, Mitch."

"Even Anna," Mitchell surrendered.

"Especially Anna," said Angelique. "And Jessica. Don't ever underestimate any of us."

His chastening was quietly accepted.

Everyone lost patience with Mitch, as with much attention to detail he set up his grandfather's exact photo shot on the steps as the bride and groom exited the church.

"What's the difference which way my foot's pointing?" complained Mrs Annalee Hillcrest.

"You're married now," said Andrew. "Unlike the rest of your life, now you have to do what you're told!"

"Hold still," Mitchell insisted. "You'll all thank me for this."

The thespian in him could hardly wait for the speeches.

§

Andrew introduced Mitchell as the last speaker. Most looked bemused. Angelique patted him on the arm as he stood to walk to the microphone. Mitchell caught a glimpse of Ellen, seated towards

the back, totally usurped by all the Deckers and Siimonses, Hillcrests and Dohertys. Despite Ros's kind words at the church, the reception proved very difficult for Ellen, sitting as a mute spectator while all congratulations went elsewhere. Mitchell watched her gradually rip her serviette in half during the speeches and she looked particularly worried as he now made his move. She knew too well, Mitchell's lack of tact. Don't worry Punk, he winked at her, biology is about to win the day.

"I just wanted to tell you a bit of a story which was totally unknown to me up until last Saturday when I stumbled upon it by accident."

Mitchell unfolded the story told to him the previous weekend by his aunts and uncles. It seems that during World War One, certain clubs in Australia sent to Britain a sum of money for the building of a battleship, a dreadnought. However, by the time the money reached London the war had ended, and so the sum was used to sponsor young, energetic men to emigrate to Australia, where they would be billeted with those who had contributed to the fund.

In the early 1920s, a sixteen-year-old boy named Osric Pitchford enjoyed a typical sweetheart romance with a young girl named Eileen Isabel Cave. Osric joined the dreadnought boys telling Eileen he would one day send for her. She would wait five years.

Meanwhile, Osric was sent to a prune plumb orchard in a small New South Wales town.

"Of all the towns in all of this vast continent," Mitchell waxed lyrical, "Osric had been sent to Oberon."

The guests were suddenly very interested. This was history pertaining to their town, but a history with which they appeared to be unfamiliar.

Mitchell brought the guests to late 1928, when the twenty-one-year-old Osric and the nineteen-year-old Eileen were married in Oberon.

Within ten months, Eileen had given birth to a daughter, Pauline, but by early 1930 a local Oberon doctor confirmed Eileen's worst nightmare: tuberculosis. She was given two years to live. During the Depression, no-one recovered from TB.

Eileen sought a second opinion with a quack doctor in Oberon who insisted that if Eileen religiously drank condensed milk, sardine oil and uncooked newborn calves' blood every single day, she would recover.

“There was one other proviso,” Mitchell said with a rye smile. “She had to sunbake naked as often as possible. This was not an easy task for a prim and proper English girl living on an all-male wheat farm.”

After two years of steadfastly enduring this unorthodox treatment, Eileen was virtually bedridden, but one day fell out of bed coughing up huge amounts of fluid from her lungs. She walked out into the sunlight that day, totally cured.

“And, by the way,” added Mitchell, “fully clothed.”

For the rest of Eileen's life, she consistently had to show documentation to convince doctors not to worry about the shadow on her chest X-rays — that she had recovered from TB in the Depression years.

“Even my committed atheist uncle says it was a miraculous healing. And just as well for him that it was,” quipped Mitchell, bracing himself to deliver the story's climax. “For if there had been no miracle Oberon cure, then he would never have been born, here in Oberon. And neither would his three younger siblings have been born when the family moved to Sydney's northern beaches.

“And, one of these younger siblings would never have grown up to be a well-known opera singer,” continued Mitchell, “and, she would never have had her son, Osric's fourth surviving grandchild. A boy she named Mitchell.”

His eyes wandered to Ellen, who immediately looked to the table and her shredded serviette.

“And of course, that boy would never have grown up to kiss a girl at midnight, under a tree on Dee Why headland and fallen in love.”

Mitchell paused to take an A4 blow-up of his grandfather's wedding photo out of its envelope, then faced the bride and held the box brownie sepia original aloft in his left hand, the blow-up in his right.

“These are photographs of Ossie and Eileen's wedding. I don't know if you can see up there at the back tables, but those of you close to the front will recognise — ” Mitchell turned the photo to face the audience and a few close by gasped, “ — that they are standing on the steps of St Alban's Anglican Church Oberon.”

He showed the photograph to the bridal table. “Anna. Nathan. Today you stood together and took your vows in the very same spot where seventy-six years ago, Anna's great grandparents were joined together. The exact place Anna, where your story in Australia begins.”

Mitchell was very close to cracking so he finished quickly.

“Annalee Hillcrest, twenty-five years ago I gave you life and a name. And certain people had in mind to take them both away from you. But, thanks to the kindness of Ros and Lawry, you still carry the name. And through close brushes with death, you still carry that life. Today I give you your narrative.”

He went over to her to give her the A4 blow-up and for the first time in the seven years Mitchell had known Annalee she spontaneously initiated physical contact — a hug.

How strange, he thought. I never received a hug from Annalee Decker. But a hug from Annalee Hillcrest will do just fine.

They stood there embracing and there was absolute silence in the hall.

She whispered in his ear, “You ARE weird. You’re very weird. It’s a shame there aren’t more weirdoes like you in the world.”

Mitchell whispered back. “Dear Annie, now I know, you weren’t sent away to Oberon. You were sent home.”

“I always felt I belonged here. And you kept telling me I belonged somewhere else. That’s why I resisted. Now I know ... I just know.”

An echoing crack broke the silence and Mitchell looked around to see who had initiated the clapping. No, not Andrew. Angelique? Typical Pentecostal (when in doubt, clap). No, it was Ellen. Standing to her feet, tears streaming down her face, still refusing to make eye contact with Mitchell but looking to the ceiling and clapping enthusiastically. Within about three claps, others joined in and quickly the room was filled with that snapping sound that, if you close your eyes, inevitably reminds you of thunderous rain or potato chips cooking.

Ann and Mitchell continued to hug each other and whisper. “Keep holding me, Anna, it’s good theatre!” She laughed heartily right in his ear — what a wonderful sound. He winked at Nathan. “It could be a little while before you get her back, mate.”

“No problem, Mitch. Just as long as I leave with her tonight.”

As one by one, Oberon’s best citizens filed past to closely examine the photo, each greeted Mitchell eagerly. Names were exchanged and families discussed but no one recognised any of the people in Mitchell’s story. Still, it didn’t matter. They had the photo and that was proof enough he was one of them. Mitchell repented of his attitude towards Oberon just as surely as Oberon now

repented of its attitude towards him. They could now accept the fact that he hadn't journeyed to take one of their own away. He had travelled here to rejoice in the new life of his prodigal daughter, and as a bonus, had found a new life himself, as the prodigal grandson. Ange, Cal, Jes and Mitchell: honorary Oberonites!

§

Mitchell sat twiddling the stem of his glass between his thumb and forefinger. Conversations meandered all around and he perused this amazing chain of humanity.

Angelique — but for a stolen life Mitchell would never have found this gem. Caleb and Jes in animated pre-teenage chat with Ellen and Richard's youngest two. But for a grave injustice, none of them would exist.

Andrew Decker caught Mitch's eye — they exchanged smiles. But for the systematic stealing of children, Mitchell would never have had the chance to input into this delightful young man's life.

Andrew would soon start his own personal quest. Mitchell mumbled to himself, "Andrew, I would have been proud to have claimed you myself."

Ellen kissed Richard and rose from the table, as Angelique watched her intently. "I find it hard to believe that's what all the fuss was about," she said semi-smiling to the air. Mitchell looked at his wife. So Ange, you are human after all, he thought protectively towards her.

Mitchell put his arm around Angelique and gazed, captivated by the glow of the bride. Nathan whispered in Anna's ear. He had found his angel, she had found her knight — but for the seriousness of her accident she never would have. But for her displacement at birth, she would never have had that accident.

Mitchell examined the small sepia photograph cupped in his hand. Oh life ...

I know the thoughts I have towards you, says the Lord. Plans to prosper you and not for harm. To give you a future and a hope. I will end your captivity, restore your fortune and bring you home.

Mitchell raised his eyebrows and sighed out loud. "I don't know what business you're in Lord, but you sure have a funny way of going about it."

Angelique gave him the deepest smile.

And so there remained just one loose end ...

§

Mitchell pushed through the swinging doors which separated the main hall from the men's.

As they closed behind him, Ellen exited the ladies.

Somehow it seemed fitting that these two people who had known each other so intimately, should reunite outside the bathroom. No pretension. No hiding. Just a sense that this was how they were.

Mitchell tried to look at her but she pretended not to see him, although it was unavoidable.

“Howdy Punkie-poos.” Mitchell decided on a cheeky approach.

“Hi.” Ellen giggled softly to hear that nickname again, but still she set her eyes to the swinging door through to the main hall, hoping someone, preferably Richard, would burst through and rescue her from this awkward moment.

Mitchell sensed there was no room for small talk.

“For all these years, Els, there’s something I’ve wanted to tell you, and there’s something I’ve wanted to ask you.”

“Mmm.”

Her eyes glanced to the roof, the floor, the walls, even back to the ladies.

“Ellen, I have always just wanted to tell you that I’m so sorry. I was so stupid to put you in such danger.”

She startled with genuine surprise.

For the first time in twenty-three years, she looked straight into Mitchell’s eyes.

A tiny raindrop forced its way, washing away her clouds.

Through swinging doors, the DJ called the oldies to dance as he struck up Ringo.

You come on like a dream,

Peaches and cream,

Lips like strawberry wine,

*You're sixteen, you're beautiful,
And you're mine ...*

"I thought that DJ looked familiar," Mitchell smiled. Hers a slight grin.

They stood so close their tears dropped onto each other's shoes. No embrace. Just foreheads gently kissed, the same as the day of Rebecca's birth. Now, Ellen prayed no rescuer would come, as Mitch whispered.

"I've always wanted to ask you, Els, did you ever find it in your heart to forgive me?"

"Mitty, how could you think ... " She drew in a long mournful breath. "For years I've always wanted to ask you — "

She snuffled a semi-laugh in disbelief, embarrassment and relief, then smiled like she hadn't smiled since April 3rd 1980. Released from a thousand prisons.

Just for a split second, her Mitty of old stood before her as he tenderly wiped away a droplet rolling down her smooth, rouge cheek.

"Punkie," he stammered, "there was never anything to forgive."

"Yeah," she whispered, a minute yet radiant nod in amazement. "Yeah. I was just about to say the same to you, Punk."

*In memory of
Rebecca Bernhauer,*

1979-1997

a casualty of war.

*Though you were not my Rebecca,
how easily you could have been.*

*To all the Rebeccas,
we will never forget you.*