

Past caring

'I'm not going.'

The creases deepen around the tight grimace of her mouth. The blue eyes are faded, but they've lost none of their intensity.

'It's only for a fortnight, Mum, and it's such a lovely place. It'll be a holiday for you, too. I've booked you a room overlooking the sea.' Lou pounds the dough, folding her anger through its softness. How many more times do they have to go through this?

'The sea? Who wants to look at the sea? All that grey, grey, grey. It's so depressing.'

'They say the food's really good.'

'Who says? Bet they'll cook food I don't like. Bet they'll cook pasta. Tasteless crap.'

'Mum!'

'And eggplant. I hate eggplant. Might as well eat rubber. And shop bread with seeds in it. If God wanted me to eat seeds, I'd have been born a bird.'

'I'll let them know before you go. They won't force you to eat anything you don't want to.'

'I'm not going.'

Her words hang in silence, reverberate in the steamy oven heat, swirl in the overhead fan, interrupted only by the thump of dough, the punch of Lou's fist through its delicate skin. Fifty weeks a year, Lou thinks. Fifty weeks a year she abuses me and still she resents my fortnight away. Two weeks at Noosa. Is that too much to ask? She shakes flour onto the board and continues to knead the dough, to squeeze the air out of its pallid lungs. The yeast smells unpleasant, like an old man's feet. She sets the dough in a tin on

top of the Aga. She can feel trickles of sweat sliding from the dampness of her hair down the back of her neck.

‘What’s today?’ The old woman’s voice is high as a piccolo, without the sweetness. Sharp with much vibrato.

‘Sunday, Mum.’

‘Thought so. Why aren’t you at church, then?’

Lou shakes her head. ‘I didn’t feel like going. Thought I’d keep you company instead.’

‘More like a guilty conscience, I’d say. What have you been up to?’

Lou fixes a smile on her face. ‘If only. What chance is there of me getting up to anything?’ Her mother hasn’t lost her perceptiveness, just the thickness of her hair, the grip of her hands, the control of her legs, her bowels, her bladder.

‘Do you want a cuppa while I wait for the dough to rise?’

‘Yes. And not the dishwasher you made at breakfast time. I do wish you’d make it properly in a teapot. With leaves, not teabags.’

‘Yes, Mum.’ With a sigh, she stoops to pull the pot from its place at the back of the cupboard. She turns her back to her mother and puts two teabags in. The kettle is always ready on the Aga. She wraps a tea towel around the handle, tips the boiling water in, stirs, and breathes in the steam, losing focus as she stares at the miniature whirlpool and the two teabags caught in its eddies, their strings entwined, labels straining away from each other.