

We will not go yet. Not yet, though we are now in a 'protected area' and our friends, who are not allowed to visit us from outside it, are urging us to evacuate. When an 'emergency' arises, we know that the roads will be closed to us. We shall have to stay put and take what comes.

Mostly I feel that one can face dangers at home that one could not face elsewhere. Why, I've had a bench made to sit on in the sun beside the front door in case some day I may become a grandmother. Clearly, one should try to protect one's home and stand by one's food supply. Food! It may soon become the most important thing in life.

Do we go or stay? Tomorrow when I have finished this book, I must decide these things.

Stella Bowen.

Green End, Essex

JULY, 1940

2006

Israeli troops are removing Jewish settlers from the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The ABC News shows footage of young soldiers as they invade homes and places of prayer to lead families to the buses. There is little real resistance, although men rip their shirts,

women wail, and the faces of children are bewildered. Not everyone goes quietly. It was reported that a woman had set herself on fire at a police roadblock.

The images of these poor displaced people are heartbreaking. I keep thinking how prophetic Ruth's second novel has turned out to be. *Leaving Gaza*, which reflected this situation, was published several years ago. I took the book out of the library and found it a riveting read. It seemed to touch a public nerve and did very well, I hear. After nine/eleven and the Bali bombing, I suppose everyone fears that scenarios for desperate acts are a reality.

Of course Ruth, with her own Israeli background, was very well equipped to use such a setting. She so thoroughly entered the character of the fifteen-year-old Miriam that I could understand the girl's actions and had to question my own ideas of right and wrong. *Leaving Gaza* was a layered story about politics and faiths, revenge and death. As I followed Miriam's stricken manoeuvres after her eviction and separation from her family, I kept remembering that awful year when I lost my friends, Heath died and I had to sell our house.

1996

Chapter one

I saw Ruth at the funeral. At one point, when I thought she was coming over to talk to me, I turned aside to speak with one of Heath's colleagues from the conservatorium. I

didn't see her after that. She must have slipped away. No one wanted to linger in that cutting wind. Half of the mourners were strangers to me; the Melbourne branch of Heath's clan. When there is a death in the family, it seems the living gather in a huddle of gratitude, our respite confirmed by each piety and floral tribute. My grief refused to surface though I knew it lurked, heavy and ominous, deep in my gut. I looked numbly into the grave and shivered, thinking of the remorseless processes it signified. Fire is a cleaner end and I wished Heath had expressed a preference for cremation. The only time we spoke about it, he was quite clear that he preferred burial. He died of cancer; that slow and bitter illness.

Helen had taken charge of the catering for the wake. An efficient daughter-in-law was suddenly a boon. I'd tried to avoid any sort of get-together but she said I must invite people, it was the done thing. Of course she was right. She was the expert on social behaviour and I thought Alex must approve of all those niceties. After all, he married her. I guessed they must have privately discussed my future, now that Heath was gone. They'd already invited me to spend a few weeks with them. Even Joe, my other son, the rolling stone, had come up with a similar offer. Alex and Joe, grown men with private lives, were strangers who flanked me at their father's graveside. Voices were low and respectful as we muttered the *Amen*. It was finished. Heath was dead and my flesh and blood mothering years were behind me. My family perceived me now as needy and frail. There was no way I could possibly explain how much I wanted to be left alone.

By consensus we turned; a little procession making for the carpark. Side by side, Alex and Helen led the way. They were a handsome couple, Alex every inch the man about town, Helen in an outfit undoubtedly bought for the occasion. The sombre tapered skirt

and fitted jacket made her seem tall and her boot heels tapped decisively. Perhaps her thoughts were busy with the co-ordination of the next stage – heating the savouries and setting out the sandwiches and cakes. Joe walked fast while Sophie, looking more joyful than a funeral warranted, clung to his arm. She met him eye to eye, her smile radiant. His little girl had grown up. It had been a year since he last breezed in. Now my granddaughter was the image of her mother; that pretty, silly young thing who'd run off and left them when Sophie was so young. Joe hadn't missed the resemblance. He hardly seemed to know how to talk to a fifteen-year-old girl and strode in a deliberate way as if to remind us all he was merely visiting.

Several people spoke to me solicitously or offered me a supportive arm to lean on. Was I supposed to be in a state of collapse? The scavenger painter in me knew nothing of appropriate behaviour. I was noting details of line and colour, my *paparazzi* eye remorselessly snapping berry reds and yellows, cast-leaf bronzes, greenish clouds suggesting hail not far away. Of course I cared that Heath was gone yet my mind was noting winter sparrows pegged along the power lines. I wanted to avoid the reality of our past, an abyss every bit as dark as that dreadful grave. As for any future ... I couldn't imagine one. I was glad Joe was going to take Sophie back to Bingara for a visit. She was delighted. Joe's latest woman had a child of her own and was willing to accommodate his daughter. Heath and I might have raised Sophie, but she was Joe's flesh and blood. And I needed time alone, to come to terms with everything.

Alex drove us home. I'd been glad of their offer of transport. Driving, like all the other normal functions of daily life, felt like an overwhelming task. I sat quietly in the back

seat, wishing the next few hours away. People like Helen knew the right way to go about parties, house-warmings, twenty-firsts. Her wedding made the social pages of the *Women's Weekly*. I wore a home-made pink lace frock when Heath and I married, thirty-six years ago. His family were shocked to see his bride wasn't wearing white. I'm sure they thought I must be pregnant. His mother implied we were lying about the dates when we did tell her we were expecting. Joe was born just after our first anniversary. That ought to convince her, I thought smugly. But when she visited and I hobbled beside her to show off the baby through the nursery window, her glance was perfunctory. Until then, I'd never paid much mind to Heath when he spoke about her set attitudes. I saw then that, once she made up her mind, that was that. She had that cold type of religious zeal, where rules are rules and black can never be softened with a touch of white. She needed a reason to explain her dislike of me because she was one of those mothers who hate all young and pretty contenders for their son's heart. As I stroked little Joe's soft fontanelle and held him to my breast, I vowed I would never be possessive as she was. I've tried to stick to that.

We were nearly home, following the lake road where pelicans tossed amid the whitecaps like small craft in a storm. I used to love looking out over the water from our veranda until last year's tragic accident, when Vanessa Scarf was drowned. Twelve months ago, nothing could have convinced me our long friendship with the Scarfs could end. They hadn't shown their faces at the funeral and, in spite of what had happened, I felt my aloneness keenly. To be single when, for so long, one was a partner, would take a lot of getting used to.

Alex parked the car and Helen and I, black-draped, clambered out. I never wear that colour as a rule and had borrowed one of her outfits. We might both be a small woman's size but time had rearranged my shape. Her skirt felt tight and the leather shoes I'd dusted off made me feel I was wading in sand. She paused at the front door and took control.

"Mum, you stay here and welcome guests while I get things going in the kitchen. Now, the cakes are cut and the quiches can go in the microwave. I'll get the oven on for the rest of the pastries."

"Helen, can't I help? I don't know these people. They're relatives and friends of Heath."

"You ought to stay here." I might have been an argumentative child. "Someone should show people in."

I could see small groups assembling at the bottom of the driveway and staring up at the house as though summing up our status.

"Helen –"

"Don't *worry*." She patted my arm and left me standing there. I fished out the dark glasses I'd taken to the service and put them on. One day soon grief would catch me out. Removed from my dimmed world, I conducted the first arrivals to the living room. The air there was cold and flower-scented. I wondered if I ought to light the fire. No, this wasn't a cosy occasion. And it seemed wrong to set a match to the kindling wood and logs stacked there weeks before by Heath. His ghostly hand pointed to the wood box and its residue of offcuts from the furniture factory. He always liked a bargain.

As the room began to fill, I recognised faces familiar from photos sent up with the Christmas cards. Joe wandered in, and I saw Alex making himself useful as he passed out beer or sherry glasses. My two sons were like beacons in that crowd of strangers. A few

people I did know in a casual way, as acquaintances from Heath's working life or as guests I'd met in the course of his public life. Marcus and Marian Griffin, recently back from America, had just arrived and sent me an encouraging wave. I began to work my way towards them, waylaid by consoling words and passing impressions – a whiff of sherry breath, the scented brush of a powdery cheek, Willard's bristly moustache as he kissed me and asked about his brother's last days. The room was heating up and, with its flowers and greeting cards, taking on a weird sort of gaiety. Voices were raised as hatted and costumed ladies made vigorous conversation, and men with the fierce eyebrows of old Scotsmen clutched their beer and went into huddles.

Marcus kissed my cheek and Marian took both my hands in a gentle press of sympathy.

"I'm glad you came," I told them. "Thought you might still be away."

"Shocking news, Barbie. Can't say how sorry we were to hear."

"You know you can count on us. Anything at all we can do to help ..."

They had been occasional guests when Heath suggested we entertain. He and Marcus had sometimes performed together. I remembered they had been working on several of Beethoven's violin sonatas together before Marcus accepted a university exchange posting for a year. With his long, lined face, domed forehead and untidy frizz of white hair, there had always been a touch of the mad professor about Marcus. He was a born joker but now he wore the sad expression that always settled on his features when he was lost in performing. Marian was one of those quiet, committed Christians who never attempt to proselytise but live by the tenets of their faith. I knew I could depend on her

for support. I had only to ask. How could I explain to them both how distant I felt; how impossible it was for me to express grief at present? I changed the subject.

“When did you get back? It hardly seems any time since you were telling us your travel plans.”

“Yes, at that dinner of yours. Must be a year ago? Your writer friend was telling us about Israel. Interesting woman ... Ruth Pokroy, I think her name was?”

“I noticed her at the funeral,” added Marian. “We said hello. She said she wasn’t living in Newcastle now.”

“She moved to Sydney. So, did you get to see the Holy Land?”

“Unfortunately, no. Marcus would have risked it if I’d really pressed him but there was the usual unrest. In the end we settled for America. We could only scratch the surface, naturally.”

Marcus began to warm to a description of a disastrous campervan vacation and I was relieved. One can only stand so much sympathy.

Helen called everyone through to the dining room where a generous spread awaited. As cups and plates rattled and the din increased, Sophie beckoned me. She wore her most disgruntled face as we stepped into the music room.

“Who are all these gross people, Nan? Where have they come from?”

“They’re Heath’s relatives. Most of them live in Melbourne.”

“A walrus called Willard practically ordered me to put on a concert for them. *So you’re the little prima donna? Yuck!*”

“Your grandfather was proud of you. You know that. I expect he told people how well you played piano.”

“I’m not a performing monkey!”

“We must simply put up with this, Sophie. People have travelled a long way and they need to farewell Heath too.”

“Poor Nan! You must hate all this fuss.”

“It’s what has to happen.” Actually, I knew Helen was quite right. One can’t reject the social customs of one’s own place and time. The formal acknowledgement of graduations, weddings, births and deaths dignified the flurries in life’s quiet stream. “This will soon be done with and you can get packed up. You do want to go with Joe?” I knew she did.

“Won’t you be lonely?”

For the first time all day, tears filled my eyes. I knew I had only to say I wanted her to stay and she would give up her precious time with her father. “I need some time alone. But I promise I’ll come up and pay you all a visit soon.”

Unburdened, she gave me a quick hug. “Nan, I will play, but only if you want.”

“Heath would have liked that.”

Sophie’s willingness helped jolt me into a small show of my own. I waited until the interest in the eats and drinks had waned, then stepped forward. I thanked people for coming and spoke briefly about Heath. I acknowledged his long career in music, his stoical acceptance of illness, his lack of complaint right up to the end. I explained that Sophie had been his star pupil, mentioning her recent music awards and future plans to study at the conservatorium when she finished school. Success was a pleasant topic and people surged into the music room, where the grand piano stood forlorn as a pet whose

owner has gone on a long vacation. Sophie seemed calm. Only I, knowing her so well, felt she was nervous. No doubt she wanted to impress her father. She didn't need sheet music. Adjusting the stool, she composed herself before the keyboard.

A silence must be heard before it may be broken. When the room was quite still, she raised her hands. An elegant and stately sarabande stepped out. In its measured bars I heard a note of merriment; Heath and Sophie were never solemn, even when taken up with the rigors of advanced examination study. I'd hear peals of laughter sometimes.

She played for ten minutes, avoiding the *bravura* she could employ to such effect in *eisteddfods*. A fledgling professional, she judged both mood and capacity of her audience. After Schumann's delicate *Traumerei* there was a Chopin waltz in minor key. As the haunting notes faded, her eyes sought Joe. He was applauding warmly but she didn't return his smile; she lowered the piano fall before she stood up. I had never seen a pianist do that at the end of a performance. There were tears in her eyes. She must have just realised her grandfather and mentor was dead.

Joe and Sophie, with a six or seven hour drive ahead to Bingara, were on the road early next morning. I stood in the breezy sunshine and waved them both goodbye, promising I'd consider a short holiday with them soon. They had a good day for travelling. Flocked clouds straggled across the faded blue sky as I wandered up to the house. I could hear the melodious echo of the windchimes I'd given Heath years ago. They'd hung in the doorway of a shop we'd passed (one of those New Age places stocked with crystals, essential oils and handmade cards) when he stopped and touched the big pipes thoughtfully. *C Pentatonic?* His quizzical glance invited me to join his game. In those

days we were still close. I went back later and bought them for him as a surprise gift. He hung them from the peach tree. When the southerlies blew up their echoes changed to an annoying jangle; if they were particularly intrusive I'd silence them with a good firm knot of string. *You've throttled my poor chimes, Barbie!* Once the rain stopped he'd pad across the wet lawn to set them free. I'd watch from the window, enjoying the line of his long torso, mentally sketching a quick impression of the tall figure in blue jeans and maroon jumper, the neat beard tipped as he adjusted the pipes and checked they were to his satisfaction.

As I reached the door, I heard that hollow music toll. Heath and I had been together for almost four decades. However disillusioning the last few years had been, a host of painful moments lay ahead of me. The illness had helped me switch off. A crisis supplies its own strength. A machinery of doing carries one along. The dying achieve very little rest, it seems to me. There were professionals to see, clinics to attend, treatments to endure, hope to shore up, relatives to keep informed. Heath's funeral might have been the climax to all that effort, but it was far from an ending between us. Our actions had yet to be unravelled. Oh, not to each other. It was too late for that. Heath had never understood why I did what I did. I doubt I could have found a logical explanation anyway. It was simply a gut reaction on my part and, whatever I meant to achieve, it failed to change either Heath or myself in any constructive way. Now Heath was dead and I certainly wouldn't get off scot-free. Hurt and bitterness could only hold back the tears so long.

The house was silent. No Sophie, swooping through her scales and arpeggios. No Heath, crackling the pages of the *Sydney Morning Herald* as he munched his cornflakes. Within the hour I found myself glad to hear the shouts of children in the street, or the

grinding of a quarry truck as it reached the hill and changed down. Heath might be gone yet there he was in every room. His empty chair faced me across the breakfast table. His lime-scented cologne stood half used on the bathroom shelf. Awry by the back door were the sandals he'd mended with superglue. I found the button I'd meant to sew on his pyjama coat and the game cards from the cereal packets. In pastel bloom, his late-winter sweet peas witnessed his last-ditch effort to work in the garden between the bouts of chemotherapy. Already yesterday's bunch drooped in the pottery vase.

I spent a long time taking my bath and dressing. Time dragged until I had to check the wall clock to see if the batteries were low. I brought in the mail. There were a few bills, a kindly note of sympathy from one of Heath's pupils, and his endless sweepstakes document from *Reader's Digest*. I used to tease him. One respects intelligence and admires talent but sometimes it is childishness one loves. I opened the envelope. It was something to do. There were stickers to be stuck, certificates to be filed and an imitation key for the lucky winner of the BMW. There were all the endorsements Heath used to read aloud to me, pretending to be cynical. *Cash giveaway! Nest-egg! Fabulous holiday!* He used to laugh at their marketing ploys but kept sending for their atlases and travel videos. I glanced at the glossy promotion. Heath would certainly have laughed and tossed the page to me. *Almanac of the Uncanny*. No, not really his style.

He'd tossed out mystery along with his Catholic upbringing. His family blamed me; to those certain minds I'd weaned him from the fold. But Heath had defected before he met me. He kept up the pretence for a while. At Christmas and Easter when we visited his parents there would always be cross-examinations about Mass and Holy Communion. I

couldn't understand why he was so evasive, and asked why he didn't simply say he no longer went to church.

"Once a Catholic, always a Catholic."

He would smile, but I thought he sounded superior. The truth wasn't something to joke about. I felt he ought to be honest about his beliefs. His mother's assumptions made the visits awkward. I would go home confused, with a husband turned into a ranting, resentful son.

"Why all the secrecy? You're an adult. You must know what you believe."

"You can be so naïve!" He'd turn and walk away from me. I was just another interfering female like his mother.

When it came out, as it had to, that he'd left the church, a rift developed and it never healed. His visits home became more and more sporadic. His parents moved away when his father retired. Heath felt rejected, though he didn't say much. After that, he made it clear he would stick to verifiable facts. *Reader's Digest* sweepstake notwithstanding, this was one time he'd have sent the envelope marked NO. He didn't want to hear about ESP, telepathy, near-death experiences. He had one definition for the occult and supernatural. *Hocus-pocus!* I could watch TV shows about hauntings and mysterious visitors from outer space if I liked. He would remove himself, pointedly, to read or work at his computer.

Yet a certain amount of illusion coloured his idea of himself, as is the case with almost everybody. Heath was a musician and teacher, yet he could assume other identities and talk like an expert on topics I felt he had no training in. He fancied himself as an *entrepreneur*; I'd overhear him from time to time, taking calls from investment agencies,

even as far afield as Hong Kong and Singapore. They would be promoting some great business opportunity that somehow filled me with apprehension. *How would those people get our telephone number, Heath? Oh, word gets around.* I didn't like the sound of it but he handled the finances. The little bit of cash I earned with my painting was mine to use as pocket money but I wasn't invited to take part in any serious handling of money. Just one of Heath's old-fashioned ways, I told myself. My psyche knew better. Just another reason to resent him and, eventually, to punish him.

How sad the end to our long marriage! Heath was a ghost now, if only in my mind. I wandered out to my studio. I expected the orderly litter of paints and brushes and the lingering smells of turps and linseed would still my thoughts. An unfinished landscape stood propped on the easel. It was months since I'd been able to work at anything more than hasty impressions snatched and recorded in my sketch book. No, I wasn't to escape him, even here. Among the art books were several Heath had given me. My pastels were arrayed in the wooden trays he'd designed and built one holiday when the urge to learn woodwork had come over him. In my mind's eye he materialised, carrying a pottery mug steaming with the good coffee he could brew. He nodded encouragingly, set my drink down where I couldn't send it flying with a careless gesture, and off he went. Unless invited, we didn't intrude when the other was at work. He'd had the last word, as always. After so long, he'd upped and gone.

I went back into the garden. *Heath, what am I supposed to do now?* I would have to forge my path alone. We'd become so focused on his illness that there'd been no time to consider me. Now I could tell myself I was free of the hurtful past and our mistakes. In

time I might make my peace and his spectre would move on. He would go, lock, stock and barrel ... But not yet, not while the sweet peas he'd grown still flowered on the vine and their pale pink and lavender petals scented the air where I walked.

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