

the first week

A NOVEL 'A horrific incident with far reaching implications shatters Marian's world. What she does with the pieces is both confronting and moving.' – EVA HORNING

Margaret
MERRILEES



the first week



Author photo by Anne Stropin

Margaret Merrilees was born and bred in Western Australia but now lives in Adelaide. Her idiosyncratic essays, which combine fiction, history and social commentary, have appeared in *Meanjin*, *Island*, *Wet Ink* and *Griffith Review*. Margaret is also author of the online serial 'Adelaide Days'. *The First Week* won the SA Festival Award for an Unpublished Manuscript at Adelaide Writers' Week in 2012. Her website is at www.margaretmerrilees.com.

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For our twenty-year-old selves.

monday

The day started like any other, though the cold was bitter. Jeb's water bowl was rimmed with ice and frost crunched under Marian's boot when she stepped off the verandah. She pushed her hands deep into her pockets and curled her thumbs inside her fingers.

Ducking through the fence she wound her way along behind the machinery shed, dodging coils of rusty wire, until she could see the first tinge of yellow canola in the home paddock. Good. They'd sown earlier this year.

Sometimes from here the tops of the mountains were visible, a mirage, a slight interruption to the horizon. Today they were hidden but it was cold enough to imagine snow-covered peaks. The day for a snow trip.

It was a joke between the boys. A snow trip. A bitter joke from years back when Charlie told them at dinner about a school friend going skiing in New South Wales.

'How come we can't go?'

Mac went on chewing. 'You wait long enough, Charlie, we'll have snow here. I've seen it a couple of times. The year I left school there was enough on Bluff Knoll to make snowballs.'

Charlie stared at his plate in silence, radiating defiance.

Brian spoke for his little brother. 'It's not the same, Dad. In the Eastern States they have ski lifts and everything.'

Mac glared. 'Do you know how much ski lifts cost? Eh? Never mind getting there.'

Brian muttered into his plate. 'You stay in chalets right in the snow.'

'Chalets!' Mac slammed his knife and fork down. 'Never mind bloody chalets. You get that wood chopped before it's dark. I'm sick of telling you.'

Not long after that, he took the boys to the Stirlings for a day, his idea of a holiday. They came home scratched and wind-burned, and boasted about climbing Bluff Knoll.

Money was tight. It was background to their lives, day and night.

Now it was money for a tractor. Brian was right about the Ferguson. It was an antique, older than Marian herself. And with Mac gone it was Brian who had to wrestle with it.

Perhaps they could increase the second loan.

Marian turned along the firebreak at the edge of the south-east paddock, leaving the house far behind. Trees closed in along the boundary beside her. Down this side the fence was sagging badly. A couple of posts were almost gone and the wire broken. They'd have to get on to that soon.

Once, not long after Mac died, Marian found a kangaroo trapped in loose wire. There were raw patches in its fur where it had tried to get free, but by the time she arrived it was still, eyes wide with fear, one front leg dangling uselessly. There was nothing to be done but shoot it. She hated the way the body jumped with the impact. Nevertheless, she hefted the carcass into the ute and took it home for the dogs, just as Mac would have done.

She didn't need Brian's help to fix the fence, she thought now. It would be good to have a day off here at the edge of the bush. Jeb was too old to get this far on his own four legs, but he could come in the ute, a better companion than any human. Brian was as bad as Mac, grunting and swearing when the wire tangled or the strainer slipped. But with Jeb she could relax, knowing that he was dozing nearby.

Half a dozen roos lolloped slowly across the paddock ahead of her, paused, heads up, ears twitching, then bent to eat. As she got closer they swung away into the scrub in slow motion.

From here the ground sloped down to the creek where the mist was thickest. In another few minutes she was surrounded, only the fence visible. She walked more slowly, waiting for the cold whiteness to drift higher and disappear. The day would be clear and dry again. The melting frost and the mist were all that kept the plants alive.

By the time she reached the dam wall, she could see the blue of the sky and a pair of ducks beating upward into the last white trails.

Ahead was the low-lying scrub around the creek. Wet grass brushed against her legs as she pushed forward. Here the fence turned at right angles, making one corner of the farm. This had become her daily turning point, time to go back. But today she stopped, took her hands out of her pockets and blew on her fingers. The cold was making her thumbnail ache where the spanner had skidded. Without her glasses she couldn't see the damage, but there was no escaping the dull throb. She slipped her thumb into her mouth. The old familiarity of the action was soothing.

Charlie used to suck his thumb before Mac and Brian stopped him. The little boy was caught between Mac's forceful *only sissies do that* and Brian's superior big-boy laugh. Marian hadn't known how to help him. But they were right, of course. Charlie couldn't go off to school sucking his thumb.

The top wire of the fence twanged when she pulled it. There was no reason not to go on, separate the strands, clamber through. She'd done it a hundred times and sat near the creek waiting for birds, watching the emu families grow up, chicks following dad on longer and longer expeditions.

But it was different now. There was a claim on it. This fence, a fence she'd ignored for years, had taken on new meaning. Where she stood was her land. The other side was theirs. Someone's. Those Noongars from town.

What would they do with it? Any more clearing would be a disaster. The salt was already bad down here.

Marian looked back up the slope and thought, as she did every day, about water, the key, central to everything they did. Without it the soil was nothing. But with the water came the salt. The rain soaked in and seeped out again bringing salt to the surface and acid too in these low-lying areas. Under her feet, under the soil, there were layers, many layers, curved cradles of rock. The curves held the secret water, the aquifer, water flowing around and over itself, groundwater that ran for miles, collecting finally in the Pallinup.

She imagined it as dark silent pools, suspended underground.

You wouldn't guess, just standing on the surface.

Brian had sown lucerne and it was up—a green carpet spread across the paddock, patchy in parts, but not too bad. It was supposed to be deep rooted enough to hold the water down. That was the plan. Two years of lucerne to one of cropping.

But the scrubland was past even that. An old stock trough lay rusting against the fence. In Mac's father's time there was fresh water here. Sheep drank where now the ground was spoilt by tell-tale tidemarks of white.

Saltbush might grow, though it was a strange idea. Saltbush was something that belonged much further out, in the marginal country to the east. But people were breeding sheep that did well on salt. They could try.

How would you keep up with all this if you didn't watch it every day? Those people from town wouldn't have a clue.

It was the last thing she and Brian needed—new neighbours upsetting all they'd done.

Marian turned her back and started for home.

The chooks were grumbling. She let them out of the shed and checked the boxes. No eggs. The late chickens were adolescent and leggy, too young to lay. And the old lady wasn't laying, nor was the Australorp. The Australorp was a present from Michelle, and Marian didn't trust it. All show.

On the way back she was distracted by the veggie garden. The peas needed tying and the birds had pulled the mulch away from the lettuce seedlings. The caulis were big and strong though, and the silver beet would survive anything.

When she stood up she could see Michelle's car across the paddock near the front gate, heading for the other house. She'd be coming home from waiting with Todd for the school bus. You couldn't just leave them beside the road when they were little. There's time for him to be tough later on, Maria said to an invisible Mac.

Once the kettle was boiled she made tea and toast and took it out on to the verandah, ignoring the pip for the nine o'clock radio news. So it wasn't until much later that she saw the light on the answering machine flashing.

Hi. Mrs Anditon? A girl's voice. My name's Sam. I'm a friend of Charlie's. Um ... there's a problem. Charlie might be in trouble. The sound was suddenly muffled, as though someone had put a hand over the receiver, then it cleared again. *I'll ring you back I guess.*

The click of the phone being hung up.

Marian's heart sped. Trouble. What sort of trouble? An accident? But you wouldn't say *might be* if it was an accident. Would you?

She played the message again. The girl sounded nervous and hadn't left a number.

Marian made herself breathe more slowly. If it was anything serious, she would have heard.

Brian had told her there was some way of ringing a number back. But she couldn't remember, hadn't really been listening.

While she stood there, the phone rang again. Marian grabbed at it, breathless, and tried to make sense of the voice at the other end.

As if from far away she heard someone, herself, saying the right things. *Yes. Good. I'll be here.* And then carefully hanging up.

Good.

Whatever it was, it certainly wasn't good.

Marian's knees trembled and she clung to the edge of the kitchen bench.

The girl would ring back. She remembered that bit. *As soon as we know for sure.*

Marian walked out onto the verandah, not knowing where she was going, and stood blindly on the path.

Not Charlie.

Brian was the one who did things. *Action man*, Charlie called him, admiring size and strength. Though when they were older it didn't sound so much like admiration.

They were different. Brian grumbled about chores but got on with them. Charlie came up with endless wild ideas and excuses. And even when it was a treat. Like that time Evie visited and announced she'd take the boys back to the city so they could go to the zoo. Brian went straight to his room, put his pyjamas in a bag and came back to say he was ready. But they couldn't find Charlie anywhere. Finally Marian tracked him down under the tank stand.

'Why are you hiding?'

Perhaps he was scared at the idea of being away from home? But when he came out into the light his eyes were bright and he was smiling.

Taking his arm she pulled him upright, exasperated. 'Do you want to go or not?'

He nodded vigorously. ~~But even when she finally waved them off in Evie's car he didn't speak, just~~ sat in the back hugging his pleasure to himself.

Could the girl on the phone have meant Brian?

No. That was ridiculous. Brian was here somewhere, not in the city. What was he doing? Yesterday afternoon when they were checking the ewes he'd said something about today ...

She'd have to tell him about Charlie ... whatever it was.

Trouble.

Nothing in the garden had changed since the early morning, but now she saw it without comprehension. The straggly wattles, the clothesline, the scuffed dirt near Jeb's kennel, all the comfortable familiarity had vanished.

She stared at the nearest plants, forcing herself to focus.

Hydrangeas.

The leaves were drooping, done for. Useless fussy things they were. They didn't like the frost and they didn't like the heat. They guzzled water all summer. One day without attention, and they wilted. In defiance of Mac's scorn of flower beds Marian had kept them going, and also out of loyalty to some old idea of elegance—a table covered with a lacy cloth, cups in saucers, scones on a dish. In the centre, a perfect hemisphere of pink and mauve petals in a cut glass vase. An afternoon tea party table somewhere else. Somewhere where there was more time and more water.

This morning, anxiety tight in her gut, Marian didn't want hydrangeas. She bent down and yanked the spindly remains. One plant came up, but the other was deeply rooted. It was only when she squatted to get a firmer grip that it came free in a splatter of soil.

Straightening her back, she carried the plants down to the compost heap against the paddock fence and pushed them into the back of the pile. On the way back she saw that she'd dropped one stem on the path. She nudged it with her foot then let it lie.

But she shouldn't be wasting time out here. What if the phone rang and she didn't hear?

The empty house stood in front of her, and in the house, threatening everything she knew, was the phone.

Who was this girl, anyhow?

It must be a mistake. That's what it was. There'd be some explanation. *No, no. That's not what I meant ...*

For a moment she felt every muscle in her body primed for the sound, but the phone was silent, and she sagged again.

How did Brian feel about flowers? Funny that she didn't know, had never asked him. Michelle usually had something by the back door. A pot of petunias, pansies in winter.

All those years Brian had argued with his father as though he hated him. But now that Mac was dead Brian wouldn't hear a word against him. Sometimes Marian started to call her son Mac, and had to pull herself up.

Perhaps it was useful, that fighting. It got things out into the open. Better the anger you could see than Charlie's brooding smile.

Charlie.

She forced her legs to carry her to the edge of the verandah, then turned away again, drifting.

She probably should have made Charlie talk more.

Made him.

All the things his father tried to make him do. Tried and failed.

Not this, though. It's a mistake.

The girl would ring back in a minute and explain everything. Or, better still, Charlie would ring laughing about the mix-up.

If only Mac hadn't died ... but she stopped herself. That thought was a dead-end and she had learned to push it away.

But still, a boy needed a father.

Explosions between Mac and Brian had been common, but not between Mac and Charlie. When they did happen they were worse. Charlie was quick-thinking, circling round his father, taunting. Mac was bigger, an adult, but slow. At first he'd be baffled by Charlie, but then it would turn into fury.

He's only a boy, Marian said to the empty yard, a bright boy. He sees beyond the farm. You can't punish him for that.

Jeb nuzzled at her leg, wagging his whole stiff hindquarters, cloudy eyes beseeching. She bent down and scratched behind his ears.

But Charlie wasn't a boy, not any more. That was the thing.

The back of her mouth felt strange, as though bending over might make her vomit, or faint.

She must check the guns. Brian had the semi-automatic. Surely to God he kept it locked up. There was the old twenty-two. It was a year or more since she'd last seen that.

When she came here, after she and Mac were married, she hated the guns, the sudden shattering of the quiet. But Mac made her learn to shoot, said she had to know how to look after herself, stuck on a farm. What if he was away? He was tense and impatient, she couldn't ask him anything. That wasn't his way of teaching. It was business, nothing relaxed about it. *Guns are not toys*. His whole body would be strung tight until the gun was cleaned and put away again. At first she thought it was her, her reluctance and clumsiness. But later she watched him do the same thing with the boys. *It's the army*, she wanted to tell them. *He doesn't like guns. It's not you he's angry with.* But it would have been wrong to talk about Mac behind his back.

Gradually Marian realised the need for guns, saw what a fox could do, or an eagle ... half-eaten chickens, lambs with their eyes pecked out, a ewe, still alive, with its udder chewed. And then there were the snakes. She made herself practice, endless beer cans on a fence post.

In her second year at the farm there was a spate of deformed lambs. Mac found her nursing one, a big male, alive and perfectly formed except for the bones of its skull. Its brain was hanging out the back of its head in a soft sac. The mother was nuzzling worriedly and Marian, pregnant herself, was horrified. Mac took the lamb in his arms and went behind the shed to shoot it.

'I'm sorry, Marian,' he said when he came back, and he was gentle with the distressed ewe. But Marian had gone numb.

She found herself now at the woodheap and swung the axe. The block of wood split sweetly, but the violence of the impact shocked her, and the sound of the blow.

Too loud.

The feeling was an old one. Don't draw attention to yourself. A childhood hide-and-seek feeling. When you were hidden, then you couldn't tell how close the finder was and you had to keep very still. It was the waiting she hated, knowing that something would soon be expected of her, that she would have to leave the safety of her hidey hole, make a break.

Being the finder was worse though, being the only one in the open, knowing that you were watched and that unseen enemies were working to outwit you. Then the silence was terrible and she would g

flustered, double back to places she'd already searched, turn away just as someone was sneaking home.

The hiding places themselves, the secret places, she liked.

The axe hung in her hand. She couldn't bring herself to swing it again. Putting it neatly back in the drum she went to the kitchen and laid the two bits of wood end to end in the box.

The draining board was piled high with the best china. Cups and saucers, hideous wedding-present vases, casserole dishes too big for one person. There were mice in the cupboard, droppings everywhere, and she'd hauled everything out the night before.

Well it would give her something to do. She ran water into the sink and pushed four cups under the suds.

On top of the pile was a cake dish covered in tiny blue forget-me-nots, one of her mother's few treasures. Not for everyday.

The rhythm of washing and drying was soothing. The pile of clean crockery on the table grew. She dried a vase and started on the wine glasses.

Just an ordinary morning, like so many others. The boys, young again, playing outside ...

A thought swam up into her mind. An old dark thought, unused to the light, a thought about her unreadable baby. *Charlie needs watching.*

She turned the radio on. *Warehouse overload. All stock must go.* An ad for carpets. Who needs carpets? But when she turned it off the silence weighed on her. The numbers flickered on the timer screen as she twiddled to get music. *The green green grass of home.* Better.

That girl, the one who'd rung, sounded very young. Probably she'd got confused and rung by mistake. It was some other Marian with a son called Charlie.

The trilling of the phone cut across Tom Jones.

Marian was gripped by a tight band around her chest, a sudden absence of breath. Her jaw trembled. It was the girl again.

We think you should come ... can you get here by tomorrow morning?

So that was it. There was no mistake.

Marian had the strange sensation, physical, of willing her brain to work, winding it up like an old clock.

She bit at the torn quick of her thumbnail and the sudden pain made her wince. Think, damn it.

What did she need to take?

Someone was mumbling, a monotonous drone. A moment passed before she realised that the sound came from her own mouth. Go to the city. Drive to Perth. Charlie's dead.

No. There was something wrong about that.

Her lungs squeezed shut.

Not Charlie. Someone else.

She should ring Brian. He'd be home for his lunch by now. With her hand poised over the number pad she stopped. Brian and Michelle. A number that she rang every day, more familiar than her own.

Nine two seven ...

She jiggled the button and tried again.

Nine two seven ...

No use. The rest was gone from her mind.

That frightened her more than anything. Shaking, she fumbled the contents of her handbag onto the bench. Pressing the address book open with one hand she dialled with the other.

‘Brian?’

Her voice sounded tight. Clipped, no emotion. She had to hold herself together.

After she’d hung up she felt her way along the bench to the sink, picked up the tea towel and dried the wineglass, seeing as though for the first time the object in her hands. A beautifully shaped glass from the set that her bridesmaid had given her.

Evie.

If only she was here.

Evie always knew what to do.

Marian pulled out a chair and sat down, still holding the tea towel in one hand.

There were footsteps on the verandah, and voices. Marian jumped. How long had she been sitting there? There were things to do.

‘Marian?’

Damn. Michelle and Tara. There’d been no sound of a car. They must have walked. Michelle would want to go over and over it, a family conference. She was a great one for talking things over, always dragging Brian off to classes and marriage guidance sessions. Relationship skills.

‘I’m in the kitchen.’

The screen door squeaked.

Michelle’s hair was ruffled, her face streaky from crying.

Marian was irritated and turned away. Making a fuss. It was better to keep quiet and wait. There might still be some explanation. Perhaps it wasn’t as serious as it seemed.

Tara shuffled up to the table, eyes big in her wide soft face. ‘Gramma?’

Marian swallowed and tried to speak. ‘Hello ...’

She cleared her throat and tried again. ‘Hello, darling.’

Michelle pushed the little girl gently towards the door. ‘Go and play outside, sweetie. I need to talk to Grandma.’

Tara backed out of the door, then stood with her face against the fly wire as her mother spoke to Marian.

‘Brian told me. But it must be a mistake. Mustn’t it?’

‘I don’t know.’ Marian shifted wearily. ‘Maybe.’ It’s not a mistake. It’s true.

‘Jesus. I can’t believe it. I heard it on the news you know, after I dropped Todd off. But I didn’t take any notice. I didn’t think ... well you don’t.’ She perched on a chair. ‘What are we going to do?’

Marian shrugged.

‘Brian says you’re going up to the city?’

‘Yes.’ Marian ran her hands over her hair. Had she brushed it that morning?

‘Will you be all right?’

‘I suppose so.’ She must clean her hairbrush before she packed it.

‘Maybe Brian should go? Haynes rang him to do that job, but he could finish early if you want. He said to ask you again.’

‘No. Someone has to stay here.’

‘It’s unreal.’ Michelle picked up a vase in the shape of a log with a woodpecker at one end. She frowned and put it down. ‘What’s everybody going to say?’

‘Who’s everybody?’

‘Like at work. What am I going to tell them at work?’

Marian stared at her. Michelle’s face reddened. ‘Well it matters,’ she said. ‘And what am I going to tell Mum and Dad?’

‘Oh don’t be ridiculous,’ said Marian. ‘Is that all you can think about?’

‘It’s okay for you. You don’t care what people say.’

Marian took a breath to speak. But what was the point?

Michelle was crying again. ‘Mum was right. I should have thought twice before I married Brian.’

‘What do you mean?’ A needle of anger disturbed Marian’s lethargy.

Michelle paled but was carried into speech by her tears. ‘Well, you know.’

‘No.’

‘Everything that’s gone wrong. Not just this. Money. The farm ... always struggling. And Tara. Being like she is.’

‘Are you saying that’s Brian’s fault?’

‘Mum says there’s never been anything like that in our family.’

Marian was filled with such rage that she could barely see Michelle. ‘How dare you. How dare you blame Brian!’

Michelle flinched, but Marian’s anger ebbed as quickly as it had come and she turned away, not caring.

Before Michelle could speak there was a howl from outside. Both women ran.

Tara had fallen into the dusty sword ferns at the edge of the verandah and was holding her head with both hands and making a high pitched drone. ‘Nananananana.’

‘What happened,’ Michelle demanded, grabbing at her.

‘Bit me,’ the child cried.

Michelle whirled around. ‘The dog,’ she said, ‘that bloody dog.’

Jeb cowered behind Marian, tail down.

‘Bullshit,’ Marian said.

She squatted down by Tara. ‘He was only trying to lick you. Remember? Like last time.’

He wants to make friends, she thought of adding, but speaking seemed such an effort. For a moment panic seized her. Was she having a stroke? But even that thought sank away as she stood up, steadying herself with one hand on the verandah post.

Michelle checked Tara over and pulled her to her feet.

‘We’ll go,’ she said, mouth tight. ‘No point trying to help here.’

‘No,’ Marian said. She knew she shouldn’t let them go like that, but she couldn’t find the energy. All she wanted was sleep.

How could this happen? Why hadn’t she known something was wrong?

Charlie hadn’t rung for ... how long? Weeks. A month or more.

When he first went to the city Marian rang him every week, making conversation, telling him news, asking how he was getting on. Her own first time away from home was vivid in her memory, how lonely she’d been.

If Charlie felt like that, he wasn’t letting on. *Okay*, he’d say. *Yeah*. Or sometimes, in a burst of words, *Mum, stop worrying! I’m fine*.

He started out boarding with a sister of Evie’s, did well in his exams, came home and helped with the harvest, and announced that he’d found his own place.

In the long midnight hours Marian told herself he’d be all right. He was a clever boy and he

manage.

~~Brian was bracing. *Don't hassle him. What can happen? He's too busy with his head in a book to get into trouble.*~~

Marian bit back the list of dangers. Drugs, drink, cars.

Lucky Brian had fixed the ute. It meant she could take the Astra and be comfortable.

Maybe she should get Brian to come after all. But there was the farm. One of them had to stay, him or her. And these days it was Brian who did the bulk of the work.

Anyway he wouldn't care about seeing Charlie, wouldn't have anything to say.

They were friends when they were little.

Michelle disliked Charlie. That didn't help.

Marian stood at the gate of the chook yard. What was she doing?

That's right. Fill the hopper. Check the water.

The second gate, into the veggie garden, scraped against the soil. The hinge needed fixing. But not now. Now there was only time for watering. If she gave everything a good soak, it would be all right for a day or so. The lettuces might suffer though. She knelt down, knees straining, and touched the leaves. The green against the brown soil, rich with compost, gave her no pleasure today. Pushing herself upright she hung on to the tap while a wave of humming darkness engulfed her. She breathed in and out slowly and turned on the tap.

The house. What did she need to do about the house? The kitchen?

The sink was still piled high with the good china. She slid a stack of plates into the lukewarm water then thought of something else. Tins of meat so that Brian could feed Jeb. Forgetting about the dishes Marian wandered over to the table and started a note to Brian.

Jeb. Chooks. Lettuce seedlings. What else? The point of the pencil pressed into the paper, but her hand was paralysed. There must be other things. *If it doesn't rain*, she wrote carefully. They always said that, for luck, to try and outwit fate.

Oh God! The tap was still running on the veggies. She ran outside and wrenched it off, head pounding.

Back in the house she pulled a bag down from the wardrobe and put it on the bed. Pack a warmer jumper. Which pyjamas should she take?

Would they let her stay there with him? But even as the thought formed she knew it was stupid. Not a hospital. It'd be ... where was he?

Her hand was shaking.

She pushed the bag shut and pulled the zip across. Then, realising that she still hadn't put any pyjamas in, she opened it a crack and pushed in an old tee shirt from the chair next to the bed.

There would be somewhere to stay. She could find somewhere. There was money in her purse. Could she sleep in the car.

That idea was comforting. She could always sleep in the Astra.

He wasn't dead.

It took some moments of staring at the clock before she realised that it said four. And she was still sitting on the bed. How could it be four? This was no good.

Stay focused.

The first part of the trip passed in a daze. As the thin winter sunlight faded she dragged her attention

back again and again to the road. Concentrate.

She gripped the wheel tight, hands at ten-to-two.

Before long the world had shrunk into darkness, the night-time trees looming up in the headlights and dropping away behind. Each white post menaced her, then fell away again, mocking.

Normally, driving at night, she would sing to keep herself awake. Singing always made her think of her father, a man who spoke little but knew every song there was.

She opened her mouth. *The bear went over the mountain ...*

The words came out as a grotesque croak, sending shockwaves through the quiet hum inside the car. Heat flooded up into her face. How could she think of singing at a time like this?

There wasn't a lot of traffic. Afterwards she couldn't remember any other cars except hers, alone on the road, pushing through the dark towards the terror.

Must stay alert. Turn the heater off. But she was soon shivering and pushed the lever back on, wriggling her toes and drumming on the wheel to stay awake. She clicked the radio knob, though she knew nothing would happen. It hadn't worked for ages. If only she'd dug out some cassettes.

She drove slowly through a deserted town, spitting on her fingers and rubbing the wet onto her eyes. The coldness kept her awake for another few minutes.

The pull to sleep was a soft downward slide, punctuated with shots of adrenalin when the car drifted sideways onto the rumble strips.

The warning sign for a truck stop flashed up and she made herself pull over. Sleep. She'd have to sleep.

As soon as she shut her eyes, her mind was clearer than it had been all afternoon. A lawyer, that was what she needed. She should have rung Kettleworths. They might have been able to suggest someone in the city.

But she couldn't bear the thought of speaking, couldn't think what she'd say, how the words would go.

Charlie's dead?

Sleep was fitful. The discomfort woke her a dozen times. She turned and twisted and tried to stretch different parts of her body, pulling the sleeping bag closer around her. And each time, in the first moment, half-sleeping and half-waking, she felt the dread lodged like a great hollow box in her chest.

Marian woke with a start.

The city, it changed him. He must have got into bad company.

But he seemed all right, the first year. Something must have gone wrong when he moved out on his own. Who were these friends he lived with?

The windows had fogged up and Marian's feet were numb with cold. Someone was tapping on the glass.

She wiped the window with the end of her scarf and a frowning face appeared.

Sickness snaked in Marian's belly. This woman knew. She'd been sent to ... arrest Marian.

The face was mouthing at her. 'Are you all right?'

Marian wound the window down a crack. 'Sorry?'

'You're parked across the entrance. We thought something must have happened.'

Something must have happened.

Marian glanced around. Trees everywhere, their tops lit by the rising sun. Ahead of her, the rest-stop was a small oasis of red gravel surrounded by bush, connected to the highway by a sandy track.

Sure enough, she had barely made it off the edge of the road and was blocking the track.

'Sorry,' she croaked, then cleared her throat. 'I had to pull over last night.'

The smile she tried for felt more like a grimace. 'I'm all right now.'

The woman seemed unconvinced. 'You sure we can't do anything?'

'No. I'm fine. Thanks for checking.'

'Okay. Drive safely.' The woman backed away, still frowning.

Marian ran her fingers through her hair. If she was going to talk to people later, official people, she should tidy herself up. She had to tell them ... something. She had to fight. Tears pricked the backs of her eyes. He's not a bad boy.

Grabbing a rag from the floor she wiped the inside of the windscreen, then climbed out of the car and stretched, bladder bursting.

She looked round to see if there was any cover. Oh shit. The woman was still there, car just off the bitumen. A bald man in the passenger seat and two kids in the back all gawked at Marian. They were waiting for her to move.

Marian opened the back door, leaned in to wipe the rear window, and backed out awkwardly. Waving with what she hoped was nonchalance, she squeezed into the driver's seat. God, let it start first time. The engine wheezed into life and she pulled out on to the road. The rear vision mirror showed the rescuer lifting her hand in doubtful acknowledgement.

Marian crawled along at eighty until she saw the sign for a roadhouse. Thank goodness. A toilet. And she'd better wash her face, have a coffee.

A frieze of blue dolphins and whales circled the toilet wall. Marian sat and studied them. Each dolphin was chasing a diamond shaped shoal of smaller fish.

Even if she'd been able to keep Charlie at the farm, it wouldn't have been right. Brian was the old son, the farm was his. You couldn't buck that. People tried sharing farms or dividing them. But it didn't work, not without a lot of capital to buy up more land. The old places were barely viable as they were, supporting just one family.

And anyway, Charlie had never shown any interest in farming.

What had he wanted?

Running water into the basin Marian splashed her hair to damp down the bits that stuck out. The cold made her wince. She rubbed her head dry with a handful of paper towels and combed her hair flat in front of the mirror. Mouse. Mouse with grey bits, and there were bags under her eyes. Already she looked the way her mother had at sixty, dry skin on her cheeks and a red tip to her nose.

Perhaps she could get a hat in Perth. Did people wear hats? She didn't want to stand out.

The girl on the phone would be there today, and the others.

Charlie was always vague about who he was actually living with. *Oh ... just friends.*

What if it was some sort of gang thing? Drugs?

The girl had sounded young and frightened, but there would be others. Someone had been there in the background.

What was she getting into?

The roadhouse was an old building converted, maybe a farmhouse. The shop space was small and warm, crowded with shelves and displays. The hot food counter held six anonymous shapes wrapped in white paper and labelled with a sign in scrawled text. EGG AND BACON SANDWICHES.

A girl with sleep in her eyes made coffee. Marian took the cardboard cup and a sandwich and went outside.

The ground fell away steeply, a slope that two boys could roll down, laughing and shouting and kicking their legs. At the bottom of the hill the creek curved into a billabong. The grass on the bank was green and the creek racing. They must have had plenty of rain up here.

Suddenly she wanted her childhood country. The longing was physical, a piercing sensation in her chest. Softer wetter country than the farm, with big trees and the occasional flash of water. Running water, not muddy dams and salt rimmed wetlands. Trees that closed over far above your head made deep shade even in the hottest summer. A forest where you could vanish, slip through the undergrowth like a lizard. Rotting logs that sprouted weird coloured fungus. The drum beat of frogs in a gully.

In the heart of the forest was the mill and a row of small weatherboard houses. Beyond them the hazel scrub grew back in the middle of the old forestry tracks, but you could still push your way along the ruts. These secret highways took Marian far beyond the roar of the mill and any voice demanding that dishes be wiped or little brothers minded. She could slip into another world, the world of ants and beetles and skittering birds. Sometimes a lizard lumbering across the path, blue tongue flicking. Or a snake, tiger or dugite, but they were keener to get away from you than you were to get away from them. Her father told her that. *As long as you don't step on them. Make plenty of noise, he said, and watch where you put your feet.*

But she didn't make noise, not when she was on her own. There was a stillness there. It wasn't silent but noises had different meanings. There were no words.

One time she pushed down through prickly moses to see what was at the bottom of a gully. The sound of water reached her first. Not a lot, but enough to make her disentangle herself and keep going until she came out onto a slope of rock about the size of her bed at home. At the lowest point there was water under overhanging tree. Beyond, the hillside rose steeply. She crawled under the bushes, bent to drink, and saw what made the tinkling noise. A round stone formed a dam and a miniature fall. The water trickled on each side, carving a pool lower down. Hidden by the branches Marian watched the hovering dragonflies. Beyond the leaves a blowfly droned.

Was it still there, her secret place?

Marian held the coffee cup to her face so that the steam warmed her, then set it down on the table and opened her sandwich. It was warm and bulging, made by someone generous. She imagined a bright, cheerful woman.

Would this woman trade lives? Marian could just stay here, beside this creek, serving anonymous drivers.

After a mouthful of sandwich she gave up. Wrapping the rest carefully she took it back to the car and put it on the dashboard for later.

The highway fed her down a narrow valley to the edge of the suburbs and a stream of cars. Morning rush hour. After twenty minutes of honking, crawling and exhaust fumes she came to signs for a new freeway entry. *Kenwick Link*. Should she take it? Impossible to know. There was always a new freeway. Every time she came to the city they'd built a new freeway.

She clung to the original highway, but nothing was familiar except the name. In thirty years the suburbs had been built and rebuilt. Pulling over into a shopping centre car park she sat shivering behind the wheel. This was hopeless. She'd have to leave the car, get a bus or a train.

Evie. Evie would know what to do.

In the phone box her voice came out a croak. Clearing her throat she tried again. 'Evie? It's Marian.'

'Hi, Marian. Um ...'

She was busy.

'Is this a bad time, Evie? It's just ... I'm in the city. I don't know what to do.'

'Are you okay?'

'Yes. I need somewhere to leave the car. I have to ... it's Charlie ...'

'I know.'

Marian was startled. 'How ...?'

Evie cut across her. 'It's in today's paper. You could leave the car here, Marian. But I'm tied up all day.'

'Oh yes. I wasn't expecting ...'

'And I can't ask you to stay.' An awkward silence. 'Sorry Marian. It's Luke. And we've got his brother here.'

'Of course, that's fine.' Marian could hear herself gabbling. 'And don't worry about the car, I'll think of something.'

'Hang on ...'

'Got to go. Bye.' She hung up on Evie's protest and wiped her sweating hands on her pants.

That was that then.

A pile of papers lay outside the newsagent. The front page was taken up by a single story.

Second Death in Supermarket Shooting.

But it wasn't a supermarket in the photo. A sign across the window said *Convenience Store*. Tape was looped across the doorway and something dark was splashed across an ice-cream ad.

They should clean that off.

Turning away she sat on the bench outside a chicken shop. If she waited a while, maybe the traffic would clear.

Early shoppers passed her, men and women rushing to get the day organised. A boy rattled open the roller door of *Toby Rooster* and started pushing a mop around the floor.

Marian went up to the counter.

‘Yeah?’ A row of pimples across his forehead marked the line of his lank fringe.

Brian had pimples. It was years before he grew out of them. Brian had all the teenage troubles—arms and legs suddenly too long, voice either a squeak or a roar, face bursting out in huge eruptions. Not Charlie. For some reason he was lucky, and stayed neat and self-contained. It was odd. There were changes in his body, but the process was steady, not spectacular, as though he managed it while he was asleep.

‘Can I help you?’ asked the boy.

‘Could I get a cup of tea here?’

‘We don’t do tea.’ He started to mop again, but evidently thought better of it and looked at her, eyes more focused. ‘There’s a coffee shop down past the jewellers.’

‘Thanks.’

The tea was hot and Marian drank gratefully. The scone was stale, but she wasn’t hungry anyway and crumbled it in her saucer. Eight thirty. The girl had said ten. Ten o’clock at the Magistrates Court in George’s Terrace.

She could leave the Astra at the station and get the train. That’s what she’d do. The woman behind the counter held her hand out for the money without even a glance. Grateful for the anonymity Marian made her way out past a giant carton advertising iced coffee.

The station was around the next curve, with acres of car park. Getting out of the car and leaving behind suddenly seemed difficult. Her last tie with home and normal. Pulling her bag out of the back she stood irresolute, key in hand.

Get on with it.

It wasn’t such a big decision. The car would be fine here until later, when she’d worked out where to stay.

There was no ticket office, only a machine on the platform. Hearing the rumble of an approaching train she stabbed hastily at the machine. *City. Two zones. One adult.* With nightmare slowness she fumbled for coins. The machine rattled and poked a ticket at her from a slot. She grabbed it and spun round, but the train was only just slowing down. Relieved, she stepped forward.

But the doors didn’t open.

She ran her hands frantically over the shining surface, but there was no sign of a handle.

Dimly, through the graffiti on the window, she could see faces. A young man in a suit was grimacing at her, mouth moving. He didn’t want her to get in. Another passenger pointed at her.

Marian banged helplessly on the metal. ‘Please. I have to get to Perth.’

The first man leaned to one side. The doors slid smoothly open.

‘There’s a button. You have to press it,’ he said. Sure enough, there was a rectangular button to one side of the door.

‘Thank you,’ Marian said, face burning.

The passengers held rails and straps in silence, swaying with the train. There was nothing for Marian to hang on to. She lurched.

One of the strap-hangers steadied her arm. ‘There’s a seat there.’

A woman smiled at her from a wrinkled face and squeezed along the bench to make room. Marian sat down, bottom barely connecting with the seat, holding her bag on her knee. At the next station more people got in. The man standing in front of her was so close that whenever the train jolted his coat swung into her face.

At each station she twisted her head around, but the names were unfamiliar. The stations seemed

new and more were being built.

~~They emerged from the suburbs and passed a cluster of shining buildings big enough for giant~~
Marian peered through the window.

‘It’s the casino, you know,’ said her neighbour. ‘And the dome.’

Marian looked blankly at her.

‘Burswood Dome,’ the woman said. ‘Tennis.’

Marian nodded. Summer TV. Another world. People in holiday clothes going into those clean bright buildings to watch the tennis while she was slumped in the living room, exhausted after the sweat of the day, too tired to get into bed.

The train rushed on across the river, past a ruined building. *East Perth Powerhouse. Soon to be regenerated.*

Soon to be regenerated. It didn’t look it. Broken glass and rusted beams, in a city where everything was new.

Claisebrook. McIvor. Then into the dark of the Perth station and a burst of activity, people pressing towards the doors. Marian stood up and was herded out of the train by a group of girls in maroon blazers, huge packs slung on their backs.

The crowd eddied away to the escalators while Marian stood still, bumped and jostled. Once the platform was empty she could reach the man in uniform near the barricade.

‘Could you tell me where the Ladies is?’

His voice was thick and European. ‘Up the escalator, missus. Over there.’

On the next level four Aboriginal youths in back-to-front baseball caps were laughing and pushing each other. Marian clutched her bag closer.

The *Restroom* was bigger than she expected. Men to the left, women to the right. Two attendants had their heads together behind the counter, poring over a cross-lotto form. One of them caught Marian’s eye and smiled.

‘Fifty cents.’

Marian paid her money and dragged her bag through into a light-filled sitting room overlooking the street. She sat down and stared blankly at the tree outside the window.

If she sat for too long she wouldn’t be able to get up again. She couldn’t stay here all day. It wasn’t a hotel.

A notice board opposite was covered with bright fliers. After a few moments she realised they were advertisements for accommodation. She got out her glasses and moved closer.

Country Women’s Association.

Of course. The CWA. That’s where people stayed because it wasn’t expensive.

1174 Hay St, West Perth.

The women at the desk had finished their cross-lotto form and broke off a conversation about reflux to give Marian change.

The voice at the other end of the phone was matter of fact. ‘Ninety dollars with en-suite. Fifty-five standard with shared bathroom.’

‘Oh standard. Standard is fine.’

‘What time are you arriving?’

‘I’m at the station. But I have to do something first. Can I come up at lunchtime?’

‘Sorry. We shut the office at 11.30. There’s no one here till evening. But I’ve booked the room for you.’

There were lockers here in the Ladies where she could leave her bag, and armchairs where she could

spend the afternoon if it came to that.

But there might be things she had to do. People she had to meet.

She didn't want to think about that.

Tonight was taken care of, that was a relief. When the time came she could just collect her bag and walk along Hay Street to West Perth.

What she had to do now was get to the court.

She shut her bag into the locker. Another bit of home left behind. But all she needed for today was her handbag. It was a process of stripping down.

Outside the station, the morning was overcast. Marian pulled her old coat around her. Should she have borrowed a smarter jacket from Michelle?

Michelle. She shouldn't have lost her temper. But the thought was soon gone, whipped away by the gritty wind.

The address of the court was in her pocket. Somewhere on the Terrace, opposite Government House. There were more arcades than she remembered, but she managed to thread her way through from Forrest Place and emerge into a chasm between towering office blocks. St Georges Terrace. Wasn't it? So she should turn left, to the east. But suddenly she wasn't sure.

She stepped towards a man who was hurrying past.

'Excuse me ...'

But her voice was drowned out by a bus and the man hurried on, briefcase held in front of him like an ice-breaker.

Huddled in the shelter of a building were two young Asian tourists studying a map, not the sort of people Marian would normally talk to.

But they did have a map.

'Excuse me.' She spoke slowly and loudly. 'Do you know where Government House is?'

They made helpless gestures of non-comprehension.

Well of course. They came over here and they couldn't even speak English.

Marian pointed at the map and raised her eyebrows. 'Can I?'

'Yes,' they said eagerly. 'Yes please.' The young man handed her the map.

By rotating it she could orient herself with the station and Forrest Place. Yes. Government House was along to the left, across Barrack Street.

'Thank you very much,' she said handing the map back. But she saw from the confusion on their faces that they hadn't understood. They had thought that *she* was going to help *them*.

Damn. She didn't have time to get caught up with these two. They should have a tour guide or something. Or they could get a taxi. They must have plenty of money.

She moved away, but the young woman held up her hand and spoke. 'Please. Where is Rottnest? The skin around her eyes was creased with the effort of finding the words. 'Boat. Rottnest boat.'

For goodness sake. Why would you go to Rottnest in the middle of winter? Marian looked at the sky. What a terrible day for a boat trip.

But here they were, looking at her as though she was their only hope.

'The ferry. You mean the ferry for Rottnest?'

The young woman smiled. 'Yes. Rottnest.'

Marian took the map again. 'It used to leave from the bottom of Barrack Street. Yes, here it is.' She handed the map back with her finger on the jetties. The young man took the map, but he was looking at her, not at the mark on the paper.

‘Oh come on. I’ll show you. Along here’

Together they walked to Barrack Street and Marian pointed them down the hill. The young couple smiled sweetly and gave little bows, smiled again, and set off into the wind.

Marian had been picturing courts in movies, old stone buildings and wood panelling. But it turned out to be another towering office block. Three men in black leather jackets and dark glasses blocked the entrance, smoking and showing no sign of noticing Marian.

Bikies. It was only bluster.

When she walked around them the doors of the building opened automatically.

Two security guards stood at a table to one side. The larger of the two hitched his belt and stepped forward. Marian clasped her bag. Somehow they had recognised her.

‘Just check your bag thanks, madam.’

‘Oh. Of course.’ She loosened her grip and handed it over. The guard opened it on the table and inserted one large hand, pushing into all the corners. Apparently satisfied, he withdrew his hand, snapped the bag shut and handed it to her.

Marian stood hesitating. ‘Is that all?’

He stared at her. ‘Lifts are over there.’

‘Oh. Thank you.’

The sign beside the lifts was blurred and unreadable. Marian reached into her bag for her glasses, but couldn’t feel them. She stood on one leg to balance the bag on her knee and fumbled inside. The glasses weren’t there.

She walked back to the guard. ‘Which floor is the Magistrate’s Court?’

He gestured towards the sign. ‘Three.’

‘Thank you,’ she said again, for the hundredth time that morning.

The lift doors opened into another world, a corridor bustling with people. Taking a firmer grip on her bag, Marian pushed through to a small reception desk.

‘What name?’ asked the woman brightly through a mouthful of perfect white teeth.

‘Anditon,’ Marian mumbled.

‘Sorry. What was that?’

‘Anditon,’ Marian said, jaws clenched.

‘Oh yes, here we are,’ said the woman, in what seemed to Marian like a shout. ‘Anditon, Charles Thomas. Court thirty-seven at ten. Right down the end there.’ She smiled, but Marian could only see teeth.

People gathered in small tense groups in the waiting area. Marian stood on her own. Five to ten. The doors were still closed.

A man in a suit coat and mismatched trousers came down the corridor. He was grey, eyes sunken, hair grizzled. Even his skin was grey. A knot of people opened out towards him. Marian felt the sudden focussing of attention, a sucking in of breath. One woman stretched her hand out towards the boy next to her. Her son?

‘That’s him,’ the boy said distinctly, face contorted. He walked over and barred the newcomer’s way.

Marian saw it in slow motion, a tableau. A gob of spit formed on the boy’s lips and looped through the air.

A spptt sound, Marian thought. Spit.

The boy and man faced each other. 'That's for my brother, you fucking bastard.'

The man was silent, slime running down his cheek.

The tableau shattered. The door of Court Thirty-seven opened and two policemen came out. The woman hustled her son away before the police reached him.

'Are you Mrs Anditon?' A man in a suit appeared in front of Marian. He held out his hand. 'Simon Ingerson. I'm representing Charles this morning.'

'Those people ...' she swayed slightly.

'Are you all right?'

'He spat at that man.'

'Yes?' Simon Ingerson glanced around briefly. 'Sexual assault case I believe. Must be out on bail. Sorry it upset you. Come inside.'

One foot in front of the other. She remembered being seven and learning to ride a bike on the gravel track behind the house, her father running alongside with his hand on the back of the seat. Wobble wobble. You can do it!

The room was packed with people. Turning back in a panic Marian cannoned into the lawyer. 'What are they? Are they all here for Charlie?'

'I shouldn't think so. No. Long list this morning. Not sure where Charles comes. What say you sit here at the back? He'll come through that door over there into the dock.'

Marian stopped in her tracks. 'No.' Seeing his veiled impatience she tried again. 'I want to see him. Be close.'

The lawyer frowned. 'You won't be able to touch him or anything like that.'

He thought she was going to make a scene.

'I won't say anything. Just watch.'

'Right. Listen, I'll catch you afterwards. There are things I need to talk to you about.'

Marian edged her way past two people sitting in silence. The woman was older than Marian, her expression grim. The man was softer, shoulders rounded. He looked miserable, his face pale and his eyes puffy.

What were they here for?

The man in the mismatched suit had come in behind Marian and sat down next to them. The old man turned towards him, but the woman went on staring ahead.

Of course. They were his parents, the paedophile. Marian's chest tightened with pity and fear. She turned away hastily and found a seat.

The dock was empty, a raised area separated from the public part of the courtroom by glass, but from the official benches only by a low partition. It was a big space. You could fit the old dining table in there easily, with the six chairs and all. Why did they need so much room?

Perhaps there'd be a lot of police.

'All rise.'

A panel in the back wall of the court opened and the magistrate appeared, a tall thin man with grey hair. He seated himself behind the highest bench. 'Please sit down.'

He didn't seem unsympathetic, but didn't smile either, and he was looking straight at Marian. Her heart began to race. It took her a second to realise that she was the only person still standing. Everyone was waiting for her. She sat down with a bump.

The buzz in the room grew in volume again. People shuffled papers. An official in a shirt marked *Security* read from a clipboard. 'Two five six. Johnson.'

A man in the front row stood up, smoothing careful strands of hair across his bald patch. The

clipboard man pointed him forward.

‘Let’s hear the charge,’ said the magistrate.

A gangly policeman stood with his back to the court, held up a bunch of papers and reeled off a string of words that were inaudible to Marian. Was it something to do with Charlie? Had this man been there? But he wasn’t in the dock.

She fumbled again for her glasses, then realised how useless that was. Glasses wouldn’t help her hearing. And anyway they weren’t there.

The magistrate spoke to the accused. ‘You understand the charge, Mr Johnson?’

‘Yes your honour.’

‘And you choose to have the matter dealt with today in this court?’

Mr Johnson nodded.

The magistrate sat back and smiled encouragingly. ‘What have you got to say about it?’

Mr Johnson cleared his throat and shifted from one foot to the other. He was powerfully built, probably accustomed to roaring. The unfamiliar effort to sound polite contorted his whole body. Even from behind the effect was disturbing.

‘It was wrong, your honour. Only he insulted my girlfriend. In the pub.’

Pub? What did that have to do with the supermarket?

‘I shouldn’t have pushed him,’ the big man was saying. ‘I know that.’

The magistrate sat back and looked over the top of his glasses. ‘Fell backwards and hit his head, eh? Sometimes when people hit their heads they don’t get up again. You know that? You were lucky you weren’t you? Because otherwise you’d be here on a manslaughter charge.’

‘Yes your honour.’

This wasn’t connected with Charlie. It was some fight in a pub.

The magistrate turned back to the policeman. ‘Any previous convictions?’

The policeman mumbled.

Marian looked around. The paedophile’s mother was leaning forward with one hand behind her ear.

The policeman had apparently finished what he was reading.

‘Well Mr Johnson,’ said the magistrate, in his headmaster voice, ‘I’m only going to fine you this time. But you’ve got to cut down on that drinking. If you can’t control your temper, then you shouldn’t drink.’

‘Yes your honour. Thank you, your honour.’

‘Wait over there while they sort out the paperwork.’

The security man with the clipboard was on his feet again. ‘Two five seven. Wardle.’

A door in the side wall of the dock opened and a guard ushered an Aboriginal man to the front.

Why was this one in the dock when the last one wasn’t? Perhaps this was more serious. This might be part of Charlie’s business now. Was that it? Had Charlie got mixed up in some Abo thing? Drinking?

The gangly policeman stood up. ‘*Mumble mumble ... drunk ... mumble resisting mumble ...*’

‘Do you understand the charge, Mr Wardle?’

The man in the dock nodded, staring at his feet.

There was a rustle along the official benches and a piece of paper was passed up to the magistrate.

‘Yes, I see. I understand you couldn’t raise the bail?’

Mr Wardle spoke to the floor in front of him. He had to get back to his job. Out from Mt Magnet.

‘In that case, it will only be a fine.’

Nothing about guns. Not Charlie, then.

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