PROLOGUE

AFTER MY mother died in 2002 it took me a few years to get out all the papers she'd left and look through them. I was afraid it would be a mournful thing to do, but the first exercise book I opened spoke to me as if she was beside me, the warmth and humour of her voice alive still: *I have often thought about writing a book—people do it all the time—it can't be that hard. Up till now I've never had the time or the right pencil but now that I have one foot in the grave it's time to get on with it.* I opened another. There was her workmanlike handwriting saying: *There must be a way of writing a story—I'm going to try this time to write it backwards.*

My mother's many hopeful starts all petered out after a few pages. What she left was a mass of fragments. They often began with the stories about her forebears that she'd heard from her mother. Others were about her childhood. Most were about her adult life, up to

her mid-forties. They taper away after that, perhaps because by then she felt less need to look back and try to understand.

She often quoted Socrates' famous maxim: *The unexamined life is not worth living.* That terse judgment stayed with her all her life, shaping her actions and consoling her when things seemed bleak. Her sense of the past and the great sweeps of change she'd seen made her want to record, and to do more than record—to work out how her own individual life was part of the wider world. That was the urge behind the rich patchwork of fragments I was reading.

My mother wasn't the sort of person biographies are usually written about. She wasn't famous, had no public life beyond one letter published in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, did nothing that would ever make the history books. Just the same, I think her story is worth telling.

Not many voices like hers are heard. People of her social class—she was the daughter of a rural working-class couple who became pub-keepers—hardly ever left any record of what they felt and thought and did. They often believed their lives weren't important enough to write down, and in many cases they lacked the literacy and the leisure time to do so. As a result, our picture of the past is skewed towards the top lot. Their written documents are the basis for our histories, the nice things they owned fill our museums, their sonnets and novels shape our imaginations. In the bits and pieces of my mother's written memories, I had a first-hand

account of a world largely left out of those histories and museums and about which no sonnets, as far as I know, have been written.

Yet her story represents that of a generation of people whose lives were unimaginably different from the lives of every generation of their families before them. When my mother was born, Australia and New Zealand were the only countries in the world where women had the vote. Free universal education stopped at primary school. Very few women worked outside the home. Only a handful of working-class children went to high school. Even fewer went to university or had professional training. Of those, hardly any were women. Even when they did work for wages, women were paid half a man's salary. There was no organised child care. The only reliable form of contraception was abstinence.

By the time my mother's children were growing up, all that had changed. Two world wars, an economic depression, and a series of social revolutions had changed the lives of hundreds of millions all over the world. Many families would know stories like my mother's about their parents and grandparents. Her story is unusual in some ways, but in other ways it's the archetypal twentieth-century story of the coming of a new world of choices and self-determination.

When Nance talked about her life, she often started five generations before she was born. The point of her story was that it was part of a bigger one.

Solomon Wiseman, her great-great-grandfather, arrived in Australia in 1806. An illiterate lighterman on the Thames, he'd been caught stealing timber and, along with his wife and young son, was transported to New South Wales for the term of his natural life. He quickly got his freedom and 'took up land', as the euphemism goes, on the Hawkesbury River. There's nothing in the record about exactly how he 'took up' that land from the Darug people, but the chances are that he was part of the wave of settler violence against the original Australians.

The stories that have come down about him are unflattering. He was brutal to his convict servants and crooked in business. He's said to have killed his first wife by pushing her over the balcony. When one of his daughters became pregnant to the riding master he's said to have thrown her and the baby out of the house to die. Although he became wealthy, he refused to have his children educated, on the grounds that if he sent them to school they'd be humiliated because of their convict taint.

His daughter Sarah Wiseman married an Irishman, John Martin Davis from Cork. Davis was a free settler, but not a wealthy one. He acquired land in the Hunter Valley and the Liverpool Plains, lost most of it in the depression of the 1840s, and retreated with his wife and children to a small holding at Currabubula Creek, in northern New South Wales, not far from Tamworth, where he started a pub. Paddy Davis's Freemason's Arms,

later the Davis Hotel, became a landmark on the stock route to Queensland. The Davises prospered and, as the village of Currabubula grew, they came to own most of it.

Their daughter, another Sarah, married an illiterate Cockney, Thomas Maunder. As a seventeen-year-old he'd been brought out with his family to work on Goonoo Goonoo Station near Currabubula. Goonoo Goonoo was the biggest pastoral estate in the country, run by the Kings, who were descended from one of the early governors. In the family stories Mr King was a hard man to his underlings. Maunder was hardly off the boat, a boy from London who'd probably never seen a sheep, when King made him take three rams—notoriously hard to handle—from Goonoo Goonoo to Quirindi, by himself and without a sheepdog. When Maunder's sister died, Mr King made him dig her grave. Worse than these were the humiliations. If Mr King had to speak to Maunder, he'd say: Stand back, my man, at least two yards. You harbour the flies so!

Thomas Maunder worked hard and made enough money to buy his own small farm near Currabubula. One of his brothers did even better, and made sure his children got the best education the area could offer, at the Tamworth convent. Maunder didn't send his children to school. He kept them home to work as shepherds—children were cheaper than fences. The exception was his youngest, Dolly, born in 1881. As she was reaching school age, one of their neighbours was prosecuted under the new laws for failing to let his children go to school.

Maunder didn't wait to be next and sent Dolly along to Currabubula Public School. Apart from her grandfather Davis, who probably had at least some education, Dolly was the first of her family to know how to read and write.

Currabubula Public School only went up to Grade Six, the end of primary school. Like all the other pupils, Dolly sat in Grade Six doing the same work over and over until she was fourteen, the legal school-leaving age. High school was out of the question. There were only six government high schools in the state and the nearest was two hundred miles away.

When she left school, Dolly wanted to train to be a schoolteacher. Maunder said no. He had enough money to support his daughters until they married. A daughter going to work would shame him. Over his dead body she'd be a teacher!

Dolly fell in love with a local boy, Jim Daly, and would have married him, but he was Catholic and the Maunders were nominal C of E. For a Protestant to marry a Catholic was unthinkable. In any case, Dolly's parents had their eye on someone else.

Albert Russell was born in Currabubula in 1882. He was the illegitimate son of Mary Russell, his father unknown. Like Dolly, he went to Currabubula Public School. When he left at fourteen, he went to work for Dolly's father. He was a big strong man who became a champion shearer. Dolly's mother fancied him as a son-in-law because, she said, no one could cure and slice the bacon the way she liked it except Bert.

Dolly put off marriage for years. Several times she went north to Dorrigo to stay for months on end with a friend from school. Eventually, in 1910, when she was twenty-nine—nearly on the shelf—she had to give in. She and Bert married and set up house on a farm near Gunnedah that Maunder owned, called Rothsay. They worked it as sharecroppers, mostly growing wheat. Bert continued to go away shearing for ready money. A year after they were married, Frank was born.

Frank was nine months old and Bert was away when Dolly found a locked trunk in the shed. She broke it open. Inside were papers about child-support payments that Bert had been making. She recognised the name of the recipient straight away—it was a girl who'd worked for her mother. While Dolly was off at Dorrigo, Bert had been busy with this girl. It was Dolly's mother who'd arranged for the girl and the baby to go away. She'd organised the payments and made Bert keep it a secret. For Dolly that was the worst part, that her mother had tricked her.

When Bert came back there was a tremendous row and he went off again, this time for good. But what could Dolly do, alone on a farm with a baby? She sent word for him to come back. Nine months later, in August 1912, my mother Nance was born.

ONE

THE FIRST memory was of crying too much and being put under her father's arm like a log of wood. He took her outside into the night, the cold struck chill against her face, there was the horse-trough full of water glittering in small moonlight, and her father pushing her head under. The terror of it, the cold black water up her nose, in her throat, choking her. It was only the once, but it was never forgotten.

At Rothsay the heart of the house was a big kitchen with an enormous wooden table and a stove always warm. Her father would leave his boots, heavy with black mud, at the door and pad into the house in his socks. He'd ruffle her hair with a big hard farmer's hand, take her on his knee. Her mother seemed always to be scolding. Always her voice high and angry, a piece of wire cutting through the room. The child's own name came to be an accusation. Nance! Nance!

Outside it was the paddocks, sky everywhere you looked, and a lovely long flowing of days. Sheep in one paddock, cows in another, and the rest ploughed ground with wheat coming up green and tender. Down the hill was the river, the still pool with trees hanging over the bank where a platypus rippled along the surface at dusk, and the place at the end of the pool where the water mumbled over the rocks.

Frank was eighteen months older, like another self, but stronger, faster, cleverer. He killed a snake that would have bitten her, made up stories about pirates, built a cubby for them where they could get away from Dolly. The sounds were different when you were in there, the sun different when it came through the holes and lay along the dirt in bright bars. The peaceful feeling, in there with Frank, safe and quiet. Max appeared after a few years, a new brother. He was only a bundle of clothes with a red-cheeked face, of no interest.

And always the weather like another person, leaning over the household. Rain so thick you couldn't see the shed from the house, and the river turning from a quiet creature lying between its banks to something dimpled and dangerous, rising over the paddocks, the new wheat under the water, trees up to their knees in it and the sheep crying together on a little island. It was frightening, because the grown-ups were frightened. Was the house going to float away? Then the sun blazing again and the water drying up, the river shrinking into a chain of pools, and all the new wheat shrivelling.

Between the floods and the droughts, Nance was five before she saw wheat ready to harvest, each stalk swaying with the weight of the ear, the field rippling gold in the breeze. They woke to a day so hot and still the air was like something solid. All morning a cloud gathered on the horizon and by afternoon it filled the sky, dark with a dangerous green underbelly like a bruise. Then one great blast of wind, and the hail starting all at once, like someone spilling peas out of a colander. Nance saw the white things bouncing off the dirt, the ground writhing under them. Ran out to pick one up, felt them hitting her back, her head, a mean little pain like spite. She picked up a gnarled piece of ice and ran back with it, put it in her mouth, but it tasted of nothing but dirt. Her mother shouting, screaming, for once not at her. Nance could hardly hear her, the roar of the hail on the roof too much even for her mother's scream. Under it the rumble of her father's voice with a note in it she hadn't heard before. Nance looked where they were looking and saw the wheat paddock flinching under the hail, all the stems bowing down, the waving paddock flattening before her eyes into muddy straw.

She and Frank lay that night in their little room listening to their mother and father argue in the kitchen. Seven years! their mother kept shouting. Seven bloody years and not a single bloody bag taken off! Rain or drought or the bloody grasshoppers! Now the bloody hail! Bert rumbling something, Dolly cutting over him. No, Bert, that's it! We're going!

Nance was a week short of her sixth birthday when she and Frank were roused out of bed in the dark. Bert sat her on the edge of the kitchen table and put on her shoes. Then lifted her into the buggy, Frank's arm around her to keep her safe, the cooking pots rattling around in the back, and her mother shouting back towards the house, Goodbye, Rothsay, I hope I never see you again!

They went first to Sydney, to a grocery shop in Wahroonga on the northern outskirts. Bert served in the shop and they lived in the rooms above it, breathing the smell of all the things they sold: tea and bacon, rounds of cheese, boiled sweets, sultanas, biscuits. Adora Cream Wafers! They'd never had them before.

The rich people came down in their carriages. Bert sliced the wire through the cheese, weighed the sugar out into brown paper bags, flipped the rashers of bacon out of the box. He'd be buttering up the customers, Nance heard them laughing along with him. They called him Mr Russell. Oh, Mr Russell, you are a card! She leaned out the window and heard a woman in the quiet street call out to another, Oh, Bert Russell, salt of the earth, isn't he!

Then there was a boarding house, Beach House at Newport, on Sydney's Northern Beaches. It was just Dolly and the children. Bert stayed on in the shop and joined them for the weekends. Newport Public School had stern Mr Barnes, who pounced on Nance to spell *indeed*. It was the strap if you made a mistake, and she

couldn't think how to put the letters together, but Frank rescued her, whispering from behind. Well done, Nance, Mr Barnes said, and the praise was sweet, almost as sweet as having a brother as kind as Frank.

Then they were gone, off to the Crown Hotel in Camden, a village a little way south of Sydney. There was another school, but Nance had hardly started before Dolly told her one night that she would be going in the train tomorrow to Currabubula, to stop with her Auntie Rose's family for a while. That was the way her mother was. Restless, irritable, turning from one thing to another and never saying why.

Being without Frank was lonely, but Auntie Rose was kind and loving. She was more a mother to Nance than Dolly had ever been. They sat together on the back step in the sun of a morning and Auntie Rose slipped each hank of Nance's hair through her fingers to be smoothed away into the plait. Auntie Rose was Dolly's older sister. She'd never been to school. She could write her name but that was all. Uncle Ted didn't own any land, he was a labourer, ploughing or shearing on other people's farms.

Auntie Rose worked from before dawn, when she got up to milk the cow, to last thing at night, when she put the yeast bottle by the fire ready for the next day's bread. It would still be dark outside when Nance woke up hearing her riddling out the stove. She'd turn over, coil herself back into the bedclothes. Auntie Rose would come in and wake everyone for school later but there'd be no rousing, no scolding. The kitchen would be warm,

the fire busy in the stove, and there'd be a good smell of breakfast cooking.

When they all got home from school Auntie Rose had made the butter, fed the skim milk to the pig, worked in the vegetable garden. She mended everyone's clothes on the Singer, turned sheets sides to middle, made aprons and working clothes. Made her own soap, her own boot polish, saved the feathers from the Sunday-lunch chook to make pillows. She bought hardly anything. Sugar, flour, tea: that was about it. Hair ribbons. Red crepe paper to make a costume when Nance was Little Red Riding Hood at school.

At the weekends the children went cray-bobbing in the creek, played jacks in the dust, fossicked for the broken pieces of china they called chainies. Behind the pub was a good place to find them, where someone long ago must have thrown their rubbish. Nance liked the blue-and-white ones best. It was her great-granny Davis who'd started the pub, so the chainies had probably been her teacups and dinner plates.

The school was one room, with a house at the back where the teacher Mr Keating lived. A playground lumpy with tussocks of grass where they played croquet at lunchtime, smelly privies down the back, and next door a paddock where the children who rode in to school, like little Ernie Ranclaud, tied up their ponies.

In the morning they lined up and Mr Keating marched them into the school with a tune on his fiddle. Every week they had to learn some poetry off by heart.

It was usually the big girls and boys he called on, but there came a day when he pointed to Nance. Luckily she'd learned her verse, stood up in her place, and it was as if the words themselves were taking her by the hand and pulling her along.

> *Though the mills of God grind slowly,*
> *Yet they grind exceeding small;*
> *Though with patience He stands waiting,*
> *With exactness grinds He all.*

Good girl, Nance, Mr Keating said. You spoke that with real understanding.

One afternoon when Nance came home from school Auntie Rose said, Pet, your mother's sent word, she'd like you back home. The words were out of Nance's mouth before she could stop them: Auntie Rose, I wish you were my mother! Auntie Rose went on mixing the pastry, her wrists deft with the knife in the bowl, and when she'd turned the pastry out on the board and flattened it with the heel of her hand she said, Nance dear, you know I'd like that too. But your mum would miss you. She rolled for a minute, picked the pastry up and flipped it, looked across the table at Nance. You know, pet, she loves you.

No, she doesn't, Nance wanted to say. Why does everyone have to pretend?

Auntie Rose rolled again, flipped again. You know, pet, she said, things didn't work out for your mother the

way she wanted. Course they don't for most people. Some take it harder than others and your mother's one that takes it hard. She can't help it, pet, is what I'm saying.

There was only the comfortable crackle of the fire in the stove and the little hiss from where the kettle had a leak. Auntie Rose wasn't going to say it, not straight out, but she was telling Nance she knew how difficult Dolly could be. Nance thought, It's all right. It's not just me.

Now come here, pet, Rose said, we'll make some jam tarts. Get the glass, see? Put the edge in the flour so it won't stick.

She took Nance's hand, smoothed it over the pastry, so cool and silky. When you're an old lady like me, she said, with children of your own, you'll show them how to make a jam tart and you'll say, My dear old Auntie Rose who loved me so much, she was the one showed me this.

Nance would have liked to take her chainies back to Sydney, but knew her mother would pounce on them. *What's this rubbish!* She took them across the creek to a fold in the rocks that made a little hidden place where the rain never reached. One day she'd come back and they'd be there.

While she'd been gone, her parents had moved again, left the Crown and taken over the Federal in Campbelltown, a township not far from Camden. Nance had hardly got used to the Campbelltown school before they were off to the Queensland Hotel in Temora, in the wheat belt in the south of the state. It was the grandest pub they'd had.

In the middle of town, with carpet on the stairs and a chandelier in the dining room. Dolly sat behind the till in the red velvet she was partial to. Mrs Russell from the Queensland Hotel, that was something!

The time apart had made Nance and Frank awkward with each other. He was a boy now, playing boys' games with other boys. They were still good mates, but not the one person, the way they'd been before, and Temora Public School was big enough for them to be in different classes.

Nance was nine. Temora was the sixth time she'd been the new girl. Six times she'd been out of step in class: at the last school they might have already done the Rivers of Europe, and here they hadn't started it. For a while she'd be top of the class. But at the last school they might not have got up to Kings and Queens of England, 1066 to the Present Day, and here it was over and done with, and she'd missed it. At lunchtime being the new girl was lonely, unwrapping your lunch and chewing away as if you didn't need company. She knew now that you didn't wait to be asked. Wander over when they got out the skipping rope, join the line as if she'd always been there.

Somewhere between the schools she'd missed Long Division and Lowest Common Denominator, but she was a good reader. She liked poetry best.

There was movement at the station, for the word had
passed around
That the colt from old Regret had got away.

At home they had a Bible and an old red Prayer Book. Bert had a few Westerns beside his bed and Dolly had *Ripley's Believe It or Not!* and every morning the paperboy delivered the *Temora Independent*. Always a big headline with a photo: 'Level Crossing Tragedy', and there was the car on the tracks crumpled up like paper. 'Demented Russian Holds Up Train', a small dark man in handcuffs beside Constable Cassidy caught with his mouth open.

The strain behind every day was Dolly and Bert arguing, never in front of the customers but in the bar after they'd closed up. One evening Nance crept down in her nightie to listen. She could hear her mother going on and on. Not the words but the tone, that scorch. Suddenly Dolly came out, slamming the door behind her, her face crooked with feeling. She caught Nance on the bottom step.

Your father's a rotten bugger of a man, she said. I might as well be dead.

Don't say that, Mum, Nance said. You've still got us.

Oh, Dolly cried, you children! You children don't matter!

Then they were moving again. Frank told her it was because of Benni, the nursemaid who looked after them. Benni was half Chinese, that golden skin. Her mother was ordinary Australian, was how Benni put it. That makes me betwixt and between, she said. Not like you kids, true blue. She had a lovely smile. Frank said, I think Dad's on with Benni. Nance didn't understand. How do you mean, she said. I've seen him, Frank said. Coming out of her room in the night.

Bert and Dolly and Max went to Beckom, a one-horse town twenty miles away. Dolly said the school there was no good, so Frank and Nance stayed behind in Temora. Frank was boarded with Miss St Smith, who took the photos for the *Independent*. Nance was left with the dressmaker who made Dolly her red velvet jackets.

Miss Medway lived with her mother in a little poky house on the edge of town. They were strict Catholics and strict in every other way too. Starting with the moment Nance put her bag on the bed in the sleepout at the back of the Medways' house, it was awful. Miss Medway whipped the bag off the bed. Don't ever do that again, Nance, she said. You'll soil the cover. Her shoes had to be lined up exactly under the bed. In the wardrobe all the hangers had to face the same way. The Medways even had a special way of rolling the socks.

Everything was about your immortal soul and there was grace at every meal and no meat on Friday. There was a Jesus hanging over every bed and He was there again in the corner of the parlour, with a shelf underneath for a candle and a dried-up cross from Palm Sunday. Nance had to go with Miss and Mrs Medway to mass. When it was time for Holy Sacrament everyone glanced at her sitting in her pew with a little sympathetic smile that said, Poor thing, not a Catholic?

Nance was always out of step and Miss Medway or her mother always correcting her. They never hit her. It was the feeling of being watched every moment and worrying that you were breaking one of the rules

that was so suffocating. A few times when she'd done something wrong she tried fibbing. That meant a lecture from Miss Medway about what a wicked sin it was to tell a lie. She sat looking at Jesus all through Miss Medway's lectures. The first few times she was frightened but after a while she thought, Go on, Jesus. Strike me dead.

Now she and Frank became strangers. The playground was divided into the boys' part and the girls' part, and when they caught each other's eye across the painted line she'd see Frank's face go wooden and her own face stiffened instead of smiling. It was as if they both felt they'd get into trouble if they showed they knew each other.

Frank never came to visit her at the Medways' and Nance only went once to Miss St Smith's house, when Dolly wanted photographs of her and Frank. Nance was nine, Frank was ten. Miss St Smith was waiting with Frank on the verandah. Her house was in the good part of town and she was a big confident woman in an expensive-looking pale-blue costume. She had that well-brought-up loud way of speaking. Come along, children, she said. None of those long faces! Frank dear, buck up, won't you? And Nancy, I'll thank you to give me a better smile than that!

The only place she could go to be unhappy in peace was the woodheap. She'd sit there in the dusk, the chooks murmuring around her feet. People were always going on about orphans, she thought. How awful it was for them.

She thought it would be good to be an orphan. At least you'd have the other orphans. And it wouldn't be your fault that your parents didn't love you, because they'd be dead. But why didn't her parents love her? She knew she must be lovable because Auntie Rose loved her, and Frank loved her, even though they'd lost the knack of talking together. Her parents should love her, because parents were supposed to love their children. Instead, she was nothing but a nuisance to them.

She sat on until the chooks gave up waiting for her and put themselves to bed. There was no reason why anything would ever change. Oh, she thought, all my life is wasted!

When she went to Beckom for the next holiday, Bert and Dolly were packing up again. Off to Sydney, her father said. The Botany View in Newtown. Lowered his voice to what he must have thought was a whisper. Been punished long enough, he said and winked.

Dolly was full of how wonderful the Botany View was going to be. It was near the brickworks, thronged with thirsty workers every lunchtime. No house trade, no night work, easy to run. The place would be a gold mine. It was the same story: this time everything would be perfect.

Oh, what a silly thing I was, Nance thought. Sitting on the woodheap thinking it would be forever!

Then it turned out that Newtown was an *unsavoury quarter*. Nance would stay on with the Medways. This time she'd be on her own in Temora, because Frank would be

boarding at Newington College in Stanmore. Max would go to Newtown Public.

When the school year ended she packed her bag to go home for the Christmas holidays. She went out and waited for Bert on the porch. She was ready too early, Miss Medway kept trying to make her come in out of the heat, but she perched on her case watching down the road. And there he was, a big man in a suit she'd never seen before, his familiar face, and the voice she knew. Well, there you are, Nance! His hand on the gate, his smile turned up to her. Something opened in her and the pent-up tears flooded out.

Oh, things could be so simple! It was nothing more than a matter of Bert saying to Miss Medway, I'll be taking Nance back with me. That was all it took.

They all looked different, city folk now. Max loved the public school, the kick-about with a ball at lunchtime. The *unsavoury quarter* business didn't worry him.

Frank hated Newington. The other boys were snobs, he said. A boy told me I was from the sort of family that had to buy their own silver, he said. Would you know what that meant, Nance?

Of course she didn't.

Means it's supposed to have come down in the family, he said. If you have to buy it, you're not good enough.

Nance didn't care what Bert and Dolly would do with her. Anything was better than the Medways'. That was until they told her. She was going to a convent in another

suburb. She'd be a term boarder there, just come home for the holidays.

She was one of two non-Catholics in her class. In the whole school there were only a dozen. When everyone else did the Legion of Mary the non-Catholics had to do their sampler, and when the rest went away for a week on Retreat they had to stay behind with one of the Sisters. Oh, it was wonderful, the others said when they came back. But you wouldn't understand.

Nance wished she could be a Catholic. She'd be happy to believe whatever you had to. Imagine, though, going home and telling Dolly! Not that her mother was religious, but if you were a Protestant you didn't turn.

Up in the dormitory you had to get dressed and undressed under your nightie, otherwise it might be an Occasion of Sin. At the end of the room there was a life-sized statue of Mary holding Baby Jesus. Wherever you stood she was looking somewhere else.

Once a week Sister passed a slate around the class. You were supposed to write down all the good deeds you'd done during the week, but they had to be Catholic things: Holy Mass, Spiritual Communion, Self-Denial. Nance just passed the slate along to the next girl.

Someone had to come to see her every week because her washing was done at home. She supposed it was to save money but it was one more difference that set her apart. Sometimes Frank was sent, stiff in his Newington uniform, embarrassed by the picture of Jesus pointing

to a light shining out of his chest. Other times it was Bert. How's my girl, he boomed, not realising you were supposed to *moderate your voice*. He always brought the same thing: two bars of Old Gold chocolate.

Dad, I'd rather have milk chocolate, she said, speaking quietly to give him the idea.

What's that, pet? Oh, that's all right, Nance, milk next time. But it was always Old Gold, because that was what he liked.

They didn't often have treats at the convent but one Saturday they were to go to a fete at a nearby school. It was a rare privilege to leave the grounds behind the high walls. The trouble was, the day opened wet and stayed wet and the nuns said they wouldn't be going if the rain kept up. The girls spent the morning going in and out of the chapel praying for the rain to stop. Even Nance went in with the others, knelt down the way they did and thought, Please, God, let it stop raining.

Lunchtime came and still it rained. See, Nance said to Maureen, next to her at the table. God's laughing at us.

Maureen said, That's a wicked sinful thing to say, Nance Russell!

Who cares, Nance said. God's not doing anything for us, is He?

Then the surprise: at the end of the meal, Sister stood up and announced that they would all put on their galoshes and macs and get out their umbrellas, because they were going to the fete.

Nance wondered why they'd changed their minds. Then she thought, It's to keep everyone believing. Better to get wet than to grizzle that God didn't answer our prayers.

Oh, what bliss to walk out the big blue gate and along the road where ordinary bustling life was going on! To know that there was still a world out there, and she'd surely get back to it one day.

She'd been at the convent three terms when Dolly and Bert sold the Botany View. They bought a block of flats in Kings Cross and a house in the southern suburb of Cronulla and retired to live off their rents like gentry. They left Nance at the convent. She went to the Cronulla house for the holidays, but it was hard to enjoy because hanging over every day was the knowledge that soon she'd have to go back behind the hated walls.

She'd become a troublemaker. She made the other girls try to prove that God existed. And if He existed, then why hadn't He made the rain stop the day of the fete? She scoffed at the miracles in the Bible and laughed at the plaster saints in the chapel. She had a couple of the girls half convinced. Then someone snitched. She had a frightening interview with Mother Superior: the light behind her so she was a dark silhouette. You are doing the Devil's work, Nance Russell, Mother Superior said. You are sending girls to Hell. God didn't frighten Nance, but Mother Superior did.

That was a Friday, and the next morning Nance went home for a long weekend. She was still shaky from

the interview with Mother Superior. She thought she'd got too tough for tears but she was hollowed out behind her brave front. Once she was home she collapsed. She could hear herself howl, the sort of noise an animal might make. They crowded around, touched her and tried to soothe her. Even Dolly tried to give her a bony hug. At last she told them. Mother Superior said she was sending girls to Hell, she said in a voice gone ropy with crying. Dolly boiled up. How dare she! Who did the woman think she was? The insult of it!

On Monday, Bert went to the convent and got Nance's things. He came back furious. He'd just paid the next term's fees and they wouldn't give the money back. I'll stop the bloody cheque, he said, and went straight to the bank, but Mother Superior had already cashed it.

It was a luxury to wake up at home next day with a throat full of razor blades and a shivering that no blankets could warm. Nance lay in her little room in the Cronulla house, hearing the magpies, watching the shadow of the tree move across the wall. At night when she tossed and turned there was a pair of crickets right outside the window that croaked, now one, now the other, now both at once, like a song. She'd never heard anything so clearly, never heard the breeze in the treetops, the way it whispered to you, never seen how a star looked with a branch moving so it winked on, off, on.

TWO

BERT ASKED around and heard about St George Girls' High, one of the government high schools. There weren't many of them and they were hard to get into. You had to be near the top of the Entrance to High School exam and Nance hadn't sat for it, because she'd been at the convent.

Never mind the exam, Nance, Bert said. I'll get you in. He put on his suit and went off. Came home crowing. These spinster-schoolmarm types, he said. Bit of man's charm goes a long way. Not a bad-looking woman, as a matter of fact.

Spinster schoolmarms they might have been, but these teachers were like no women Nance had ever met. At assembly when they sat on the stage in their academic gowns you could see they were all graduates. She hadn't known that women could have university degrees. They were all Miss, because female public servants weren't allowed to be married. But they weren't apologetic old

maids. They were forthright and confident, spoke with authority. Miss Barnes, the woman Bert thought he'd charmed, gave speeches at assembly where she quoted Latin and Greek as easily as English. She had a fine way with words. The dragons of twentieth-century life are ignorance, incompetence, slackness and disloyalty, she said. Girls, you must dispel them from your lives!

Nance was used to school being dull. The repetitions, the drilling, the chanting lists, everything boring because it was too easy. At the start she sat up the back giggling and whispering. There was a girl, Claire Gannon, who she could tempt. The teachers saw, but there were no detentions, no canings. If you didn't listen and missed something, it was your loss. When Miss Moore asked Nance what *homely* meant in *David Copperfield* and she said *home-loving*, Miss Moore said dryly, Congratulations, Nance, I can see you're making the most of your education.

The hardest maths Nance had ever done was the seven times table but here Miss Cohen was doing algebra. Miss Cohen drove a car to school. Nance had never seen a woman behind the wheel before. A girl who lived near her said Miss Cohen smoked and wore trousers at home. Miss Cohen made no secret of the fact that she spent her weekends betting at the horse races. Girls, she told them, I'm living proof that there's money to be made in mathematics.

Nance began to see that these teachers didn't treat the girls like underlings to be disciplined or animals to be trained, but as unformed versions of themselves.

It wasn't much fun being the rebel no one cared about. It was more interesting to be part of the class, all those other clever girls doing plays in Latin in bedsheet togas, or debating whether or not It's a Man's World. She made friends and for the first time in her life felt part of things. She even got a warm mention in the school magazine: 'A new girl joined us in midwinter and is already proving herself one of our best scholars.' Nance worked hard and did well. Every term she was promoted. After eighteen months she was about to go into the top class.

She loved living privately, not in a hotel, and loved that the family was together for the first time in years. Max was at Cronulla Public School and Frank came home from Newington every weekend.

Bert got Nance and Max up for school, gave them their porridge, made their school lunches. The lunch embarrassed Nance. Her father didn't seem to know what a school lunch should look like. She longed for egg or cheese sandwiches like the other girls but it was always what he would have liked, a working man's lunch: a cold chop with a couple of tomatoes or a big chunk of strong cheese. The other girls would sit around waiting for her to undo her lunch. At first she thought they were laughing at her, but after a time she realised they'd have liked a cold chop now and then.

The doctors thought Dolly's womb might be at the bottom of her moods and always being off-colour, and she had a hysterectomy. It didn't seem to help. She was

in bed a lot of the time. Oh, she was sick. No one knew how she suffered.

Still, she had some good times too. Bert bought a car and she learned to drive, like Miss Cohen. Most Saturdays they'd drive to the races and the children were free to do as they pleased. In winter they took pancake batter in a jar and went into the bush near the house, made a little fire and cooked the batter. Nothing had ever tasted as good, the lemon and sugar running out of the rolled-up pancakes, the smoke easing its way through the leaves, the water that bright wintry blue in glimpses between the trees.

But at home the old tensions were starting up again like a toothache. She tried to hear what Bert and Dolly were arguing about behind the closed door. It was broken bits of sentences but she heard Bert say, You'll have the income from the flats, then something from Dolly she couldn't hear, then Bert again, You can live here and I'll manage. Frank and Max knew something was up too, but the three of them said nothing to each other, as if by ignoring it they could make the trouble go away.

One night Bert and Dolly told the children that they'd bought the Caledonian Hotel in Tamworth. It was the first time they'd bought the freehold of a pub as well as the license. Eighteen thousand pounds. They'd mortgaged everything. We've got the touch, Bert said. Pay off the mortgage in no time.

Tamworth was only ten miles from Currabubula and Nance knew it from staying with Auntie Rose.

She remembered it as a dull and dusty country town. Why Tamworth, do you think, she asked Frank.

It's the salmon-returning thing, he said. You know, going back to the place where they started. Showing everyone how well they've done.

Mrs Trimm had started the Caledonian back in the 1890s and it had always been the top pub in town. Hot and cold water in the bathrooms, a grand piano in the parlour, a lock-up garage. The cheapest room was sixteen shillings a night and a meal there cost four shillings when you could get a good feed at the Greeks' for ninepence.

Bert and Dolly were lucky they'd inherited all the staff from Mrs Trimm, because the two of them were out of their depth. The first week there was a problem with Mrs Chipp who ran the laundry. Dolly had noticed that the starched damask table napkins were ironed only on one side and thought Mrs Chipp was skimping on the job. Marched downstairs to give her a piece of her mind.

Oh, Mrs Russell, didn't you know? Mrs Chipp said. You only iron the napkins on one side, otherwise they'd be slipping off people's laps. It's how it's done in the best houses, Mrs Russell, I assure you.

Dolly was cranky the rest of the day.

Con and Arthur knew everything about the catering trade and ran the dining room perfectly. Quiet men, both of them, each seemed to know what the other was thinking. They were more tactful than Mrs Chipp.

They pretended Dolly knew what a fish knife was and what shape of glass you drank burgundy out of.

In the polo season the bar and dining room were crowded all day with rich people. Honeymooners stayed in the Bridal Suite under a golden taffeta bedspread with a black appliqued crane winding across it. When the famous soprano Florence Austral came through, with maid and manager and accompanist, she sang for the guests in the parlour. Isador Goodman played Chopin and admired the tone of the piano. Jim Anderson and Jack Crawford arrived with a dozen tennis racquets each. Nance was in awe: Wimbledon champions!

Fifty years after Mr King had told Dolly's father to *stand back, my man,* the Kings were still out on Goonoo Goonoo Station, still the local aristocracy. The King girls came up from Sydney for the polo and they loved to scandalise the locals by wearing pants and smoking in the street. Oh, provincial with a capital P, Nance heard one of them say to the other, laughing, tossing her cigarette away without a glance as she got into the car behind the chauffeur.

Some well-to-do Maunder relatives, Dolly's cousins, came to afternoon tea. Nance saw straight away how smooth and polished they were compared with her parents. Those cousins hadn't gone to humble Currabubula Public School and sat in Grade Six until they were old enough to leave. They'd gone to the Dominican Sisters in Tamworth. Hearing their quiet well-spoken voices Nance thought, Is that why Mum kept trying me with the Catholics?

Dolly insisted on giving them a tour of the place. The Bridal Suite, everyone staring at the gold taffeta bedspread. The parlour where Florence Austral had sung. Dolly told them how much it cost to have the piano tuned. How someone had offered her twenty pounds apiece for the firedogs. The Maunder ladies said, Oh really, Dolly. Fancy that. Nance saw that her mother was the only one in the room who wasn't embarrassed.

There were a few Russell relatives too. That was a surprise. Dolly had always said Bert was an only child and his mother was divorced, but here was Uncle Alan. He was a bookie, had a strong voice that filled the bar. His son was another Alan, a tall dark young man with a moustache like a film star and eyes so brown they were almost black. His daughter Rita was a Spanish-looking beauty with pale skin, brown eyes, straight black hair and red lips. Why didn't I get those looks, Nance thought.

Bert was a man arrived at his dream. New dark suit, a lovely piece of cloth. He served in the bar, but there were plenty of workers to take over when he wanted to spend the afternoon in one of the big armchairs with a Western, or out in the backyard with the magpie he was teaching to come back to his fist.

Frank had grown into a tall young man. Nance thought him handsome, but Frank hated his big ears and kept to the side of family photos. He was out at Uncle Willie's being a kind of jackaroo, because he wanted nothing more than to go on the land. Max was now a term boarder at a fancy school in nearby Armidale. He got on

with the rich boys in a way Frank never had, because he was good at running, boxing, anything to do with a ball. Nance missed her friends from St George Girls' High, but having everyone contented for once—they even had a dog, like a proper family!—made up for a lot.

Tamworth High was another government school and Nance thought it would be like St George, except with boys. She felt the difference, though, from the first day. It was back to classes that were too easy. No more algebra, no more plays in Latin. No one was too fussy about things like what *homely* meant. If you got the general drift, that was good enough. Most of the students couldn't wait to leave. Every week another pupil in Nance's class turned fourteen and there was another empty desk.

Being with boys gave the classroom a heavy unsettled feeling, like an undertow. Most of the teachers were men, and if you were on the girls' side of the room it was hard to catch their eye. They think we're all just going to get married, Una said. Don't want to waste their time on us. The undertow could turn nasty if any of the girls beat the boys in a test.

Most of the teachers were fresh out of Teachers' College, working through their country posting so they could apply for a transfer to Sydney. They didn't know how to keep order. The new French teacher was full of innocent enthusiasm. She came in the first day and wrote on the board: *With Every Language Learned, Man Gains a Soul*. Some boy up the back guffawed. The teacher only

lasted two weeks, ran out of class in tears one day and never came back.

Esme told Nance there was no point in learning French, anyway. None of them was going to go to France, and if a French person came to Tamworth they could bloody well speak English. Still, the idea that you could gain a soul stayed with Nance. When it was her turn to read out a sentence in French, she felt her face changing around the new sounds. She did feel different. It wasn't gaining a soul, exactly, but there was something.

Mr Crisp their English teacher was older and knew how to keep order, even when he was teaching them something as sissy as poetry. *Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness.* Yes, Nance thought, that was autumn. The apple tree in the backyard at the Cally, with the wasps in and out of the rotting windfalls and the sad smell of burning leaves, the low syrupy sun along the stubble of Ison's paddock, the pale morning fog hanging over the Peel. Reading the poem was like having a conversation with this man, even though he was a hundred years dead and had never seen Ison's paddock. He'd given words to ordinary things that they both knew, and turned them into slow beautiful music.

The poem about Chapman's Homer made the class restless. *Bards in fealty to Apollo!* What was that when it was at home? Mr Crisp raised his voice and stared down the ones at the back. Cortez was amazed at seeing the Pacific from a peak in Darien, he explained. But the poem was really about Keats being amazed by a poem.

It was like seeing your reflection in the three-way mirror at home, Nance thought, because here she was, being amazed at a poem written by a man who was amazed at a poem.

When Mr Crisp read poetry out loud, they could hear the little shake in his voice. Esme nudged Nance under the desk and smirked. Nance didn't smirk back. She was astonished at the thought: Mr Crisp was feeling the same thing she did, a tenderness towards these words that had the power to make the world look different. It was like a secret handshake. You weren't the only one.

She was fourteen and it was the Intermediate year. It was easy to be top of the class, coasting along on what she'd learned at St George. She did so well in the exam that she got a prize, a leather-bound, gold-embossed *Poetical Works of John Keats*. Bert and Dolly were proud, but Nance thought more impressed by the quality of the leather than the success in the exam. Dolly riffled the pages so the gilt edges gleamed in an expensive way. Then she wrapped it in brown paper to keep it nice and put it in the glass-fronted bookcase.

The day after Speech Day, Mr Crisp came to the Cally and talked with Dolly in the Ladies' Lounge. Nance hung over the banister, right above them. She could see the bald spot on Mr Crisp's head and Dolly's crooked part. She heard Mr Crisp say, Mrs Russell, it would be an absolute tragedy if she doesn't go on. She thought then she'd hear her mother's voice going high and indignant

but Mr Crisp kept talking, his voice a coaxing up-and-down, like a man breaking in a horse, Nance thought. A credit to you, she heard. You and Mr Russell both.

Nance supposed going on to the Leaving would be all right. She didn't know what she wanted, but she knew it wasn't what Esme and Lois and the others were going to do: leave school and help at home or get a job in a shop, till someone came along to marry them. She'd be the first person in her family to stay at school for so long. Frank had done the Intermediate, like her, but he didn't want to go on. Max was no scholar, didn't even want to do the Intermediate.

Nance knew she was never going to be beautiful, but once she knew not to do too well in class the boys liked her. She was lively, ready for a bit of fun, and she was exotic, the girl from the city. Wade Watson walked her home, Ray Brawne held her hand in the pictures, Tom Vidler kissed her after a dance. A handsomer boy than Tom Vidler or a bolder one than Ray Brawne might have got further. She didn't know if she was glad or sorry they didn't try. She'd have said no. Not that she thought it was wicked. It was that there was no way not to have a baby. She didn't want to be hustled into marrying any of these boys.

In summer they'd make up a party, half a dozen boys and girls, with Bert along to make it all right, and go down to the swimming hole. She loved the hot air hanging under the trees, the cicadas boring away into

the afternoon, the silky feel of the water. She'd duck right under and swim along through the tea-coloured water, seeing the rounded stones and the little fish flickering away. Esme and Lois didn't swim, not really, because they wanted to keep their hair dry. They bobbed up and down in the shallow part, only their heads showing. Nance couldn't be bothered. But they'll see, Esme said. You know, the shape of your...you know. Oh, let them! Nance said. Nothing much to see, is there?

A dozen went on to the Leaving at Tamworth High that year: ten boys, plus Una Dowe and Nance Russell. Nance knew that Una was cleverer than she was but old Dowe didn't believe in education for girls and there was no money, so Una was only allowed to go on if she had a job. She had to rush out of school every afternoon to work in the kitchen at the hospital. At least I get a decent feed, she said.

There weren't enough going on to the Leaving to have a choice of subjects. They all did English, Latin, French, Maths, Modern History and Botany. But there was no proper teaching for the senior class. Mr Crisp got them started with *Macbeth* but then his promotion to principal came through and he left for Sydney. The new English teacher was marking time till he retired and his idea of teaching was to make them copy passages while he popped out for a smoke. The Maths teacher left and there was no replacement for six months. They had five French teachers in a year. The Botany teacher was really

a History teacher and admitted in a weak moment that he was reading the textbook every night to stay a page ahead of the class.

In the final year everyone put their names down for a Teachers' College scholarship. Nance didn't know if she wanted to be a teacher, but for a girl there was only that or nursing. She thought Dolly would be pleased but she exploded. Over her dead body Nance was going to be a teacher! She didn't say what she did want for her daughter, and Nance didn't ask. You didn't argue with Dolly when she had one of her rages on.

At the Leaving, Nance got five Bs and a Lower Pass in Botany. That meant she'd matriculated, though barely. The university would accept her. She'd have liked to go, study History and English and more French. But what was the point of thinking about it? You couldn't do anything with History and English except teach, and Dolly wouldn't have that.

Una had a place at the Teachers' College, but no scholarship. Have to go nursing, she said, matter-of-fact. That's the way it is. Had my chance.

Dolly had been talking to the pharmacy man from down the road and he'd told her Nance should do pharmacy. It was a real profession, higher up than being a teacher. It was nearly like being a doctor. Everyone called the pharmacist Dr Cohen, and he wore a white coat and had a doctor's grave manner. But medicine was an expensive five-year degree whereas pharmacy was an apprenticeship. Three years of apprenticeship, and a few

university courses at the same time. For the daughter of pub-keepers, that put pharmacy up the ladder but not out of reach.

And pharmacy was good for a girl. A woman teacher only got half what a man did, and had to leave if she got married. A woman pharmacist got the same as a man and, if she wanted to go on working after she married, she could.

Nance didn't think she wanted to do pharmacy. Fiddling around with smelly things in bottles, standing in a stuffy shop all day listening to people go on about their bunions. But she could see it was as good as done in Dolly's mind. Dolly got Bert to go down to Sydney to see Dr Pattinson of Washington Soul's, to find out about being an apprentice. Not his offsider, mind, Dolly said. You want something done, you go to the butcher, not the maggots on the block!

He came back saying Washington Soul's didn't take any girl apprentices, though a girl might get in with a small chemist somewhere. Good, Nance thought, that doesn't sound likely. Then a man came to stay at the pub, a commercial traveller in pharmacy lines, silver-tongued, buttering up Mrs Russell. Turned out he knew a man named Stevens in Sydney. Enmore, not far from the university. He was looking for an apprentice, wouldn't mind a girl.

My word, Nance, Bert boomed down the table at her, carving into the leg of mutton. You've fallen on your feet there, my girl!

No! was Nance's thought, but how could she say that with her mother at one end of the table smiling for once, and her father at the other thinking everything was settled? And what better idea did she have to put in its place?

Something else stopped her from saying no: it might turn out all right. Tamworth was a narrow world. When you stood up on the top of the hill behind the town you could feel you knew every single person who lived there. It was as small as that, the grid of streets that naked. Up there with Una and Wade one day she'd declaimed to the warm breeze blowing off the plain:

> *Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes*
> *He stared at the Pacific—and all his men*
> *Looked at each other with a wild surmise—*
> *Silent, upon a peak in Darien.*

The others had laughed, and yes, she'd said it as a joke. There was a private joke behind the public one, though: she meant it. In her own small way she might be like Cortez, and find a world bigger than a dusty country town that rode on the sheep's back.