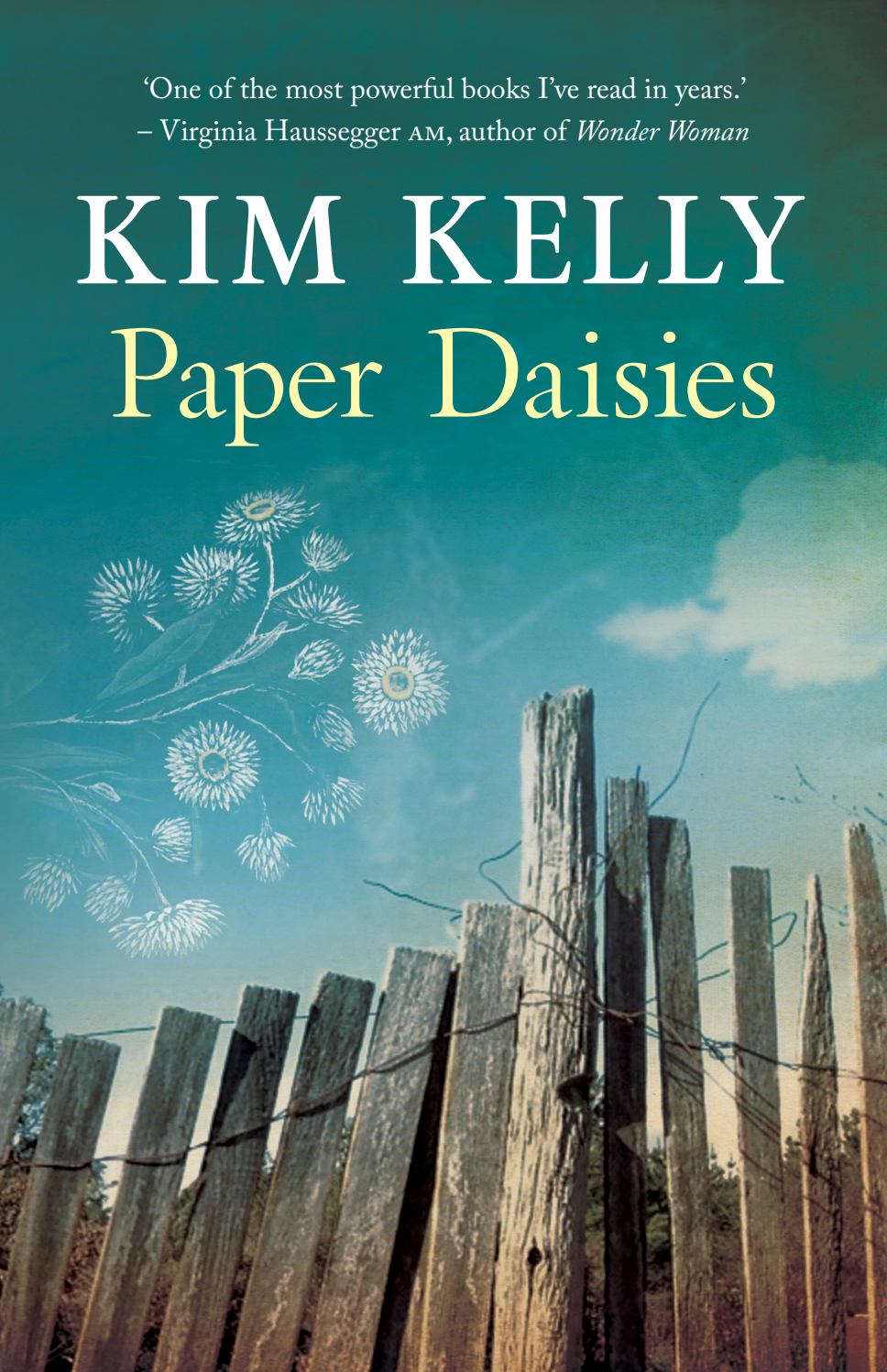
‘One of the most powerful books I’ve read in years.’
– Virginia Haussegger AM, author of *Wonder Woman*

KIM KELLY

Paper Daisies



Paper Daisies

KIM KELLY

brio BOOKS

HOOROO

Become who you are!

Thus Spake Zarathustra

BERYLDA

'Time, gentlemen,' the examination supervisor calls from the top of the room, but my pen already rests, my physics paper completed four minutes ago. I dare a glance across to my right: Doug Jefferies is scribbling out a last answer to the final question on magnetism, even as he is closing the booklet, pretending he is not still writing. Bert Hughes in front of him runs his hand through his hair, breathing out the tension with a cocksure snort, stretching out his legs beneath the desk. I barely breathe at all; I keep my hands flat to the desktop, either side of my work, for I am not a gentleman.

I am the only one of my kind in here, and the supervisor, a fusty old frock-coated curmudgeon, reminds me of this with a sneer as he whips away my paper; as swiftly as he manages an avuncular nod of, 'Good luck, Jefferies,' for my neighbour. Only fitting, I suppose, as Doug is the nephew of one of the members of the professorial board.

The door is pushed open and thirty sweaty gentlemen rush out as bright summer midday rushes in, a stream of light piercing this dark-panelled tomb.

'Miss Jones.' A straggler reaches across me to hold the door. Clive Gillies-Wright. He grins his certain medal-winning grin. 'How'd you go with all that, eh?'

'Fine. Thank you.' I step past him and into the sun. My examinations are done. Literature. Latin. Biology. All fine. I can't wait to shove my results in Uncle Al– Don't think about him. Look into the sky, brilliant blue above the chimney pots, and breathe in all my small but certain achievements thus far. Enjoy this moment: here, now. Today, the fifth of December, 1900. I am a student at the University of Sydney, and next year I will be admitted to Medicine – at last. I shall not fail. *Nearly free* . . . my sister Greta whispers to me on the breeze, across the miles between us.

And now, across the quad lawn, only a few yards away, in the cool shade of the cloisters, here is Flo. My friend. Waiting for me. But she's got lost in her book, sitting there on the stone wall, getting a numb bum.

At the clatter of the sweaty thirty heading towards her, she looks up and sees me; she waves, shouting out, 'Bryl! Oi – over here!'

Her voice rings around the pillars and flags and I laugh. Flo, darling Flo McFee – medal-winning indelicate. Fabulous.

BEN

'Mr Wilberry – sir? Excuse me?'

It's Gregham, at the door of the herbarium, assistant to the chair. I suspect he's come with another instruction from Dubois himself. What does our esteemed Head of Botany want now, perchance? That we deem wattle a weed? Or perhaps the eucalypt – all five hundred of its species? Sheep don't fatten or fleece well enough on it so let's dig it up and burn it, *oui*? I should like to send Gregham off with a message for Dubois: Bugger off. Go back to where you came from, Professor Jean-Pierre bloody Continental trespasser.

I rub my eyes, take a moment before I turn around. I blink down through the looking glass on the bench, set above the native specimens of *Viola betonicaefolia* and *hederacea* I've just pulled out – examples for my end-of-year general extension lecture on differentiating indigenous species from those introduced, such as the common European *odorata* – which actually is a weed. Dubois has already made his annoyance at this lecture known: *What is this knowledge for, should I venture to ask? Flower arrangements for the Christmas holiday, oui?* No, it is knowledge for the floral record, for posterity perhaps – if the sheep should damn well eat them to extinction. It's been a battle all this year, since he arrived. A battle which *conservation*

fanatics such as myself will possibly lose in the long run; but I'm going down fighting, in my way.

Gregham clears his throat behind me.

I clear mine too; can't keep the man waiting.

I turn around and see he's holding out an envelope. Perhaps Dubois has finally gone above Professor Jepson, our faculty dean and my ally, and had the chancellor agree to my sacking – which I will have overruled. He doesn't know how things work in this country – not at all. This continent may be large, but its principles are simple. One doesn't sack a Wilberry – you arrogant little Frog.

'I'm sorry, sir,' Gregham says, and he does look sore.

I'm about to tell him not to worry about it, it'll soon enough be sorted out, but he adds: 'I'm sorry – I read it. By accident. The telegram, I –'

He leaves his stammering there as I open it. And I know what it is. I see it in Gregham's sorrowful eyes as clearly as I see it typed out across this page in my hand:

RETURN HOME A.S.A.P. IF YOU CAN. YOUR MOTHER IS DYING.

Mama. My dear Mama. So this is it; her time has come. This telegram is from her doctor, Doctor Blaine. Not unexpected – it's been her particular battle all this year, a slow battle for her life – but the blow is not easier for knowing that. The cancer is finally having its way. And I've got to get to Brisbane to her – now. Got to get home to Queensland. And I am here in Melbourne, a thousand miles away.

I push past Gregham at the door, and I run.

BERYLDA

'Here – look.' Flo opens the flap of her tote to reveal the amethyst glint of a half-pint flask. 'Gin.'

'Oh no you don't,' I warn her off. Post-examination fatigue is coming quickly upon me, beginning at my knees: I'm not sure I'll make it all the way across the grounds of University Park back to Women's College without a feeble feminine rest. I'm not getting up to no good tonight.

'Oh yes we do,' Flo insists. 'We've got the Wonderland party – for Clive. Don't you remember?'

'Oh. Yes. Now you mention it.' Clive Gillies-Wright, who will undoubtedly win the Physics prize and probably the Higher Maths prize too, is having a going-away party. Really going away – to the Transvaal. Deferring academic excellence for a year on the veld hunting Boers with the Scottish Horse Regiment, doing his duty for Queen and Country.

'You can't rat out, you're Alice.' Flo elbows me and I'd fall over my feet but that she scoops me along, that same elbow now under my arm, her hand squeezing mine conspiratorially.

'I won't rat,' I say, as if she'll hear anything else. Her shoulders are broader than mine and she's half a foot taller. But I won't rat, as I usually do with ra-ra rugby boys' things; I'd usually rather stare at the wallpaper, alone in the common

room. Clive's all right, though; I should say hooroo, fare thee well. I ask her: 'Where'd you get the booze?'

'Hoddy.' She leans into me, pressing me with her warmth for her youngest elder brother, Hodson, who's articled-clerking now at the family firm, McFee & Packhorn, in the thick of the Phillip Street legal fraternity. She's adored and indulged by all three of her brothers, all lawyers, wanting their little sister to join them at the profession too, and jealousy pricks at the thought. Her family is perfect; mine is – Don't think about that.

'Hoddy is a very naughty boy,' I say. 'What if you get stupid on the hard liquor and someone takes advantage?'

She pulls a maniacal, cross-eyed face at me: 'I should be so lucky!' She laughs at herself: even tipsy she's intimidating to boys – perhaps especially then – and she doesn't care. Her laughter fills the distance across the park and winds around the squat, square convent-like tower of Women's. For a moment I am scooped up and away along a string of her tight golden curls escaped from under her hat. She is as curly as I am straight.

'Besides,' she says, leaning into me again, but serious now, 'Hoddy just told me the cadavers in the Legislative Council are most definitely not going to consider the bill again before the summer break.'

The Women's Franchise Bill. I'm not much surprised but Flo is taking it personally, as she does these sorts of things. She glowers over at St Paul's as we pass it, as if the boys who reside there are responsible, as if we're not attending the Wonderland party there for Clive tonight. She rails the rest of the way back to our digs, about the attorney-general, misnamed Wise, having killed the bill last Wednesday before it got a proper hearing in the Upper House: 'Is New South Wales going to be left the only colony where women have no voice at all – in

a *Federation*? In less than a month we'll be a state, a proper *state* – with no women's *vote*.'

Like the entire rest of the world, bar New Zealand, and South and Western Australia, and I must suppress my ambivalence: voting is the least of what I want for women; for me, and for my sister, Gret. But I can't tell Flo half of any of that. Not now. Not yet. One day I shall confide in her, though, speak of the depths. When I am sure of her confidence. Maybe next year –

'We can't lag Victoria – my God,' she rails on up the path. 'What if they get female suffrage in Melbourne before here? What disgrace would *that* be?'

'I'm sure they won't get the vote before us.' I laugh, uncaring of that ever-enduring inter-colonial sport, the Sydney–Melbourne tit for tat, and my laugh is such a distant bell it can hardly have come from me. A cloud swoops across the sun and I can only see Uncle Alec smashing down the women's vote, should he win the Bathurst seat in the New South Wales parliament next year; he will smash it down with a blithe and easy wave amongst the men, behind closed doors, stepping out of the House with a rueful smile, pretending his hands were tied. Resentment swoops through me, a black crow's wing. I would not have had to endure this first year of Arts – the humiliation of compulsory literature, of Shakespearean sonnets and snide Pope, soppy Keats and femicidal Browning – if he hadn't forced me to. Alec Howell: stamping me with the suggestion of some kind of failure before I even set foot in this university. No one does a year of Arts any more before admission to Medicine – no one capable of sitting the Medical entrance exam, at least. No one like me. I will be twenty by the time I return here to begin my future properly in the new year, my sister's future, too; I am too young to vote, should that

ever be permitted, but old enough to strike out along the path that must be ours: free of him. *But Berylda, you must be sure you are up to the challenge*, he said, in holding me back this year. He always sounds so reasonable. Don't think about him. Don't let him intrude. Don't let him spoil this day.

'Oh Bryl, listen to me going on and on,' Flo squeezes my hand again. 'I must need a drink.'

I squeeze back. 'Me too.'

BEN

'Welcome aboard, sir. Ah –' The crewman looks at my ticket; he might be the captain for all I know or care. 'Mr Wilberry, is it?'

'Yes.' I just want to get past him, get on, get going. Get this steamer on its way. Mama: the very thought of her stops time altogether.

'One of *the* Wilberrys?' the chap is asking.

'Yes.' There's only two of us: Pater and me, and it's infamous Pater this chap is referring to. He must be a Queenslander, I suppose; this is the *Arawatta* to Cooktown. I've taken it a dozen times over the years, at least, and I was fortunate to get on it this afternoon, with only an hour to spare.

'Well, I'd better make that a special welcome aboard then.' The chap touches the brim of his cap. Hands me back my ticket, with some other load of waste paper.

I keep pushing past him, up the gangway to my cabin. As though I might make this ship go faster, if I keep moving. I throw my bags on the bunk in the room, a room to myself, thank God. My heart is belting around like a lost dog. Wait, Mama, wait for me.

'Sir.' Another chap behind me, a soft rap at the open door. 'Dinner is served at seven thirty, if that is suitable for you. Will

you join the captain or do you prefer to eat alone? And, um – roast beef or fish pie?'

I look down at the wad of paper still in my hand, half crushed: my ticket and, behind it, shipboard information, what appears to be the cargo list above my fist, should I care to know that we are carrying: *137 cases of beer, 423 bags of onions, 73 cases of cheese, 42 kegs cream of tartar, 191 bales of chaff, 730 bags of rice, 215 cases of starch, 55 cases of currants, 60 cases of naphtha, 48 bags of oats, 27 packages of drapery, 30 cases of soap, 10 cases of brandy, 25 packages of tobacco, 30 reels of barbed wire, 7 horses, a quantity of circus gear* . . . A quantity of circus gear?

'Sir?'

'What?' I ask the chap still waiting at the door, but I don't turn to him.

'Dinner?'

'I'll eat here, please. Just a cheese sandwich and bottle of beer – nothing else.'

'Right you are, sir. Stout or –'

'Not concerned – you choose.'

'Of course, sir.' He leaves, closing the cabin door behind him.

I pull open the curtain at the window above the little writing ledge and stare out at the docks, at the confusion of steamers and punts, of business going on and on. It's a cold, grey summer evening as we move out of the Yarra and make for the sea, a wind blowing up from Bass Strait, from Antarctica: a Melbourne specialty. This city that is still so foreign to me, even after ten years: an imposing stonewall of a metropolis built with gold rush cash, long gone now, which manages to be both grandiose and bleak at once – like the weather.

It will take three days, weather willing; three days to get into Brisbane. Round the broken bows of Victoria, up the

interminable coast of New South Wales – this continent is far too large. Mama, wait for me.

BERYLDA

Flo is at the kitchen table, her back to me, a white powder puff pinned above her tails – Hoddy's tails. She is a living, breathing outrage. Her powder puff is bobbing, as are the long white ears she has made from an old petticoat and wire, as she chops away at a cabbage.

She glances over her shoulder, all painted whiskers and pink-carmined nose, ringlets swinging, and I'm already laughing as she says: 'Can you hurry up and start shelling those peas, Alice, or we're going to be late.'

Who could argue with that? I tie my apron on over my blue dress and at least my costume is complete too. I'm Alice mostly for my size: the smallest.

As I sit to begin rapid shelling, I ask Flo: 'What dreadful thing are you making tonight, then?'

'Oh, just ordinary cabbage noodle stew,' she says, *chop chop*. 'But with peas, for something different.' Her ears bob emphatically.

I laugh some more. 'Mm mmm.' As if she doesn't frighten boys enough, she's also a strict vegetarian, on conscientious grounds – her whole family are. Exuberant, gin-swilling, vegetarian Christian Socialists. Is there anything more outrageous? She's been trying to get a Vegetarian Society going on campus

all year, but so far I am her only acolyte, and that's just for loyalty's sake.

'No one else will eat that gloop except for you, Flo.' Margie swishes in, her auburn tresses piled high in an impossible pompadour: our Queen of Hearts. 'You should be banned from contributing to supper – forever and always – never mind occasions at St Paul's.'

'Oh!' Flo pretends offence and shrugs, 'Each to their own,' before brandishing her knife at the bowl of oranges and limes at the other end of the table. 'Margie, hurry up and start on the fruit, will you – for the punch.' Which will be lethal, with the addition of Hoddy's contraband – don't even think it too loudly lest our strictly teetotal Miss Macdonald, our dear principal, suspect the no good we are up to. Miss Macdonald will not be joining us this evening, though: as a Master of Arts in Archaeology herself, she has a faculty dinner on, oh stroke of fortune, and she's put Margie, third year honours in Logic and Mental Philosophy, in charge of us all in her absence – madness. All twenty-one of us here at Women's.

Soon our little communal kitchen is full of swishing and bustling and laughter, all girls together, and I do so love it here whenever it's like this, so full of colour and fun. Jayne is a vision in purple and yellow braided bathing costume, black whiskers and ears – the Cheshire Cat; Phylly, in a vast, bright red crinoline, spotted all over with discs of brown paper, is the magic mushroom. Jen starts playing her guitar somewhere amongst us; she will win the French Medal this year. I could stay here in Women's College forever, sit here at this table pulling pod strings forever, if I were allowed. But a terrible wave of longing and dread sweeps through me at the notion: that I might not return to Bathurst one day. How could I ever think such a thing, of abandoning my sister there, to deal with

him alone? I must book my train ticket – I'll do that tomorrow. I must.

'Berylda Jones, how beautiful you are as Alice – stand up.' Jayne is grinning over me, turning to Eva Marie to say: 'Isn't she? Look at her.' Faces look at me, towering over me, even as I stand, and Jayne is asking, 'How on earth do you cope being so pretty, Berylda? Do you even come from this world? Your complexion, your eyes – you are an unusual thing. Where did you get your loveliness from?'

The longing and the dread sweeps through me again. I feel the blood rush to my cheeks, but I am stone. I cannot reply to Jayne. But I don't have to.

'Keep shelling those peas!' the White Rabbit shouts above her noodle soup, and my smile returns at her command.

Soon enough Margie is herding us all across the lawn towards St Paul's, with our pots and trays and punchbowl, and the boys are thrilled to see us, all whistling and carrying on. I have two cups of punch – it's delicious. I even let Clive Gillies-Wright kiss my hand when he finds me. He says something to me about this morning's exam having been full of tricks, but I'm not listening; I'm hoping he doesn't get shot on the veld, or get dysentery. He is a nice boy. He's dressed as the Hatter, a rainbow of ribbons wound all around his topper, but with green tights and gold brocade tunic he's at least half Romeo. If I were a nice girl, we might have something to talk about, reason to dance.

But that's by the by, and I am tired now. Well and truly tired, right inside my brain and in my bones, the tricky physics of exhaustion has me. As the piano starts thumping for a song and all the sweaty ra-ra in the room starts up in earnest, I make my excuses. I don't need to be here, I know how things will go: there will be fantastical tales told of Mafeking and Her

Majesty's gunships, unanimous envy of Clive's impending adventure, uproarious jokes told about sending over a football team instead to sort out the enemies of Empire over a beer-guzzling contest, and Doug Jefferies, who is already eating one of the brown-paper discs off the bottom edge of Margie's mushroom, will soon be up on one of the tables, smashing a plate or two, before stumbling outside to fall into the lake, or some similar thing – upon which the college warden will call the occasion to a halt five minutes before curfew at ten p.m., reminding us all that such casual frivolities as this will be banned in future if students do not comport themselves appropriately and respectfully as young ladies and gentlemen.

'Hooroo, fare thee well, good luck.' I tap Clive on the back of his shoulder, and I flee, as Flo mouths to me through the crowd: 'You rat.'

I am. Single-minded, and necessarily so. The night is my only chaperone as I tread back across the lawn. I shall read myself to sleep, as usual: finish the chapter on the circulatory system from the copy of *Braithwaite's Surgical Anatomy* I smuggled out of the undergraduate med library in my skirt a week ago. *Just browsing*, I told the librarian's doubtful glare: *I'm hoping to get into Medicine next year.* Just 'borrowing' a book I'm not allowed to have.

BEN

'So you bothered yourself to come home after all, did you, son?' Mama smiles at me from her bed, in her elfish way. She is a small sweet bird; she can't be dying. But she is. She is too small against her pillows. I can see that her breath pains her even as the opium tonic is easing her way. 'My dear bear.' She holds out her hand to me, and I fall to my knees beside her: relief that I am here; guilt that I was not here all this time. I haven't been home since winter break, since June; she wasn't so bad then; yes she was. 'Ben, please.' She holds my head to her smallness. 'Don't cry.'

I wasn't, until she said the word. Now I cry like a small boy, into her pillow.

'Hush.' She pats my head. 'My Benjamin bear, it's all right.'

I struggle to regain my senses. In June, we went riding out along the line of Capricorn, out from Eleonora at Jericho, as we do every winter break, when the weather is best there. We ride out along the dusty ochre plains, towards the Jordan, her hat flying off the back of her head as she brings her horse up to a gallop, daring me after her. Every year, since I was a small boy. She can't be dying. Eleonora Trenton Wilberry: my mother. Ellie. Mama. But she has been dying all the while since June; since before then. She told me all about it

that day, and the certain prognosis.

'Ben,' she says into my hair now. 'I'm very pleased that you are here. I'd like you to do something for me, on your way back down south, if you can.'

'Whatever it is, consider it done,' I tell her, but I can't yet look up.

'There's a bloom,' she says, and she pauses, the pain too much. I would tell her not to talk, but she must tell me what she wants me to do. I wait for her to continue, and after a moment she does. 'It's *Helichrysum* – of some kind, I think,' she says. 'I don't know what species. It's on the farm, at Mandagery. I would see it every January, when I was a girl, by the creek. It was the first paper daisy I ever saw, though I didn't know what it was back then. Go and find it for me, will you, Ben? And bring some back for the garden here. I always meant to . . .'

She is half-dreaming through the opium, but she must tell me more. I ask her: 'What does it look like, Mama, this bloom – what colour is it?'

'Oh, you won't miss it, Ben,' she says and I can feel her smile radiating through her hand on the back of my head. 'It's red, a little pompom of flame at the centre; rows and rows of raylets all around, spearheaded. Like small red suns. Woody stipes – a bit like *elatum*. But so red. Get some, will you? I don't think the farmer will mind, do you? Who owns that property now? Do I know that? Or have I forgotten? I wish John hadn't sold the farm when Father died. Oh Ben, but I'm looking forward to seeing Father again, and Mother too. In a little while. Don't worry, my sweet bear, they will look after me. They always have.'

Have they? They married you off to Pater, didn't they? And a man called Bentley has the Trenton place at Mandajery Creek, although for all my rambling across the country I've

never been there myself – it's somewhere in central New South Wales. Where the female breeding stock is better, apparently: less chance of accidentally marrying someone with a bit of black in them, than in Queensland. And still I can't look up at Mama. Anger has me for this little while, at all she has had to contend with; at all she has been denied. By Pater. Who is right now out at our property, at Jericho, breaking in a new manager. Because that's what you do when your wife of thirty years is dying. Eleonora: name a cattle station after your pretty wife and tame her, and forget her. When he bothers to get here, I will tell him what I think of him, once and for all. Tell him what I should have long ago: that he's a selfish bastard. He's the reason I live in Melbourne and only come home twice a year; when Mama – when there's no longer a reason for me to come home, I won't come home at all. Not for him.

'Promise me? Promise me, Ben?' she asks.

'I promise.' I will find her bloom and bring it back here for her, and then I'll –

'Don't disappointment me, Benjamin. And heaven knows, you've been such a disappointment to me.' She tugs at my hair, to make me look up: she is having a joke with me even now, with her wry smile, one I can't help returning. She loves that I am a botanist in Melbourne; she is as proud and pleased as a mother could be at that. She places her small bird hands either side of my face and adds: 'A perennial disappointment, you are, my son – every time you fail to bring a girl home. Aren't there any girls down south? None at all?'

'It would appear they have somehow failed to see me in their midst,' I try to joke, for I am a large and lumbering person, not easy to miss. I try to laugh but it's a strange, dull noise that comes from me. Because I am a disappointment to her: she has been asking me this question for the past two years, yearning

for grandchildren, any children, to fill this empty house. I am twenty-seven years old, nearing twenty-eight; I have no excuse for this disappointment, except that it seems I am not equipped for that part of life. I only have to look at an attractive young lady and I become an imbecile.

'I'm sorry, Mama,' I tell her. I am sorry in every way.

'Hush with sorries, Ben. You have nothing to be sorry about. I made you. You are perfect. Your time will come. She will be perfect too.' Mama closes her eyes. She seems to sink further into the pillows; shrinking before my eyes. She murmurs something else, but I don't understand her.

'What is it?' I ask her. 'Tell me.' Tell me every last thing you must.

She sighs; a shallow, rasping sigh. She doesn't open her eyes, but she murmurs along a breath: 'Don't argue with your father, Ben. Walk away from him, as you have always done. Walk away . . .'

She doesn't speak again. She sleeps, and she doesn't wake. I watch over her, but she will not wake.

I watch her breathe.

'Nothing more to be done, Ben.' Doctor Blaine is at the door. 'If the pain should disturb her again, I can administer the drug by hypodermic syringe. She will feel no more pain if I can help it, let me assure you.'

Assure me? I cannot be sure if any of this is even real. I know all of the facts of the matter, of course: that Blaine had thought for so long it was only a stomach ulcer, as had Mama, and by the time the tumour was detected, it was considered too large, too risky to operate. They had a go at the X-ray treatment, to no avail; I had a go at researching this far-fetched cure and that, to no avail. Blaine said it would be a matter of months, or perhaps a year, maybe two; it was never easy to predict, except

in its ultimate result. But now that the inevitable is occurring, I am lost to these facts. All facts but one: my mother is my light, and she is leaving me.

I sit with her and watch her breathe. I hold her little sparrow hand all through the night and into the dawn, until she breathes no more.

'She is at peace, Ben,' Blaine says as he checks to find it true. 'She is with God.'

She is gone.

I walk out into the garden. Her garden here at Indooroopilly, in lush, evergreen Brisbane. My mother's beautiful creation, of poinciana, jacaranda, her melaleucas by the river, and her drifts of *Helichrysum* there – *elatum*. A host of small white angels swaying on the warm breeze against the wide green river. In full bloom. They fill the house, they are the stars of all of her arrangements, her beloved paper daisies, her everlastings. They will fill the vases at St Andrew's too; every summer they do, by her hand, and now they will appear on altar and casket for her.

No. She cannot be gone.

She should have been a botanist. *Oh but you can't be a botanist north of the border, wouldn't matter who you were*, she'd wave away the suggestion. *No such silly thing as botany in Queensland, dear, you know that.* No such thing as a university in Queensland, either.

I plunge my hands into the cool of the river as though this might cool my pain, hush the sound that is breaking from me now.

Another sound belts through it anyway. Pater's team of four careering up the drive for the stables. The bastard has bothered to come home.

BERYLDA

I wake with the bell for prayer: it's seven forty-five. But I stay in bed, pretend I'm asleep for a little while longer, not that anyone goes to prayers with any regularity, except Margie and Jayne, and they're not here anyway. They've gone home; one to Tamworth, the other to Caboolture, somewhere north of Brisbane, far, far away. And those who haven't gone home yet have all left for the river, at Lane Cove, for the boat races.

All but Flo, who remains here with me. She's not attending the races on protest, because the women's rowing club remains debarred from competing. Darling Flo, I can hear her turning the pages of her newspaper, propped up in bed, sipping her morning cocoa. She remains here because I remain here, I'm sure. Her family only lives a short ferry trip away across the harbour, at Waverton; she resides at college because her parents want her to discover her independence, on her own. Her parents actually *want* her to. Such an incredible, foreign idea to me. Perhaps one that might not have been so odd, had my parents not – Oh God, don't stray there.

I open my eyes and look up at the curtain, at the sun streaming through the muslin, pale gold light, shimmering hot already. I should get up or it'll be a sticky old walk across to Grace Brothers at Broadway, to the bargain table sales: the

reason I've given for my hanging about so long after the exams. So that I can buy Greta her Christmas present, something as dear as she is to me; something as sweet as she is, but womanly, too. She is twenty-two; how did she turn twenty-two this past year? In all my delaying, how does anything happen? But it's true enough that I must also wait for the Grace Brothers sale, quite genuinely, because I am running out of my pitiful allowance; I'll have to sell a book or two as it is: *A Study of the Novel* and the biblical *Anthology of English Verse* can sacrifice themselves. And I shall purchase that train ticket today, Greta darling, I really shall. If it's not too hot to walk all the way to the station, at Redfern – perhaps this afternoon.

'Oi sleepyhead – listen to this,' says Flo from her bed across the room. 'News from Hill End – that's out your way, isn't it?'

'Yes, it's not far from Bathurst.' Don't remind me: *Bathurst, Bathurst, Bathurst*, and Hill End is another cloudy dream in itself. 'What's news?'

She reads over a yawn: '*A Chinese herbalist, by name of Dr Ah Ling, has purportedly cured a man of a malignant tumour. The tumour, in the upper arm, of local miner, George Conroy, was said to have burst from the skin after the application of an herbal poultice, thereafter returning full function to the arm and relieving totally the man's previous agony. The cure was achieved without surgery or any modern therapy for the treatment of such cancerous growths. When asked about his condition, Conroy would only say, "It's a miracle! And he never charged me nothing but what you would pay for a draught of Woods Peppermint or a bottle of beer. Nothing!" Curiously, none who were approached in the town seemed to be able to say precisely where this miracle worker Ah Ling lives, except that it is in a thatched hut on a tobacco plantation, somewhere in the wilderness between the Hill and Tambaroora.*'

'Sounds interesting,' I say absently. I just don't want to

think about getting on that train, of returning to that district at all. Oh bum – I spy on the night stand – I am yet to return *Surgical Anatomy* to the med library, too.

'Sounds amazing!' Flo scrunches the paper at me. 'You should try to meet him, over the break – go and ask him all about it. It sounds positively revolutionary!'

'Yes, Flo.' She has me laughing before I am properly alert. 'That's precisely what I'll do. Start a medical revolution over the holidays. In Hill End. With a mysterious Chinaman.'

Chinaman: the word clangs in my ears for a heartbeat before: 'Oh my!' Flo jumps up, looking at the time, aghast, ringlets flinging. 'Get up, lazybones – get dressed. We've got to be the first at the bargain tables if we're going to get the best stuff. Hurry up!'

'I'm hurrying.' I am laughing still more as I rise. 'What on earth do you want at the bargain tables?' Flo doesn't want for anything.

'I want the most dreadful stuff imaginable,' she says. 'A great big splashy hat, specifically, for Federation Day. Something that even Mother will disapprove of.'

I would ask her why but I know the answer: yesterday the *Evening News* proclaimed that at present we ladies are far more concerned about procuring charming hats and gowns from Grace Brothers than we are about the 'birth of the nation' or 'the women's suffrage question'.

I think I might just have to procure for myself something a little splashy, too.

BEN

'Cut your hair, son – you look like a sheila,' Pater greets me after he's finished conferring with Blaine about the particulars of Mama's death.

Don't argue with your father. No, I won't; neither will I have my hair cut. I walk away.

Into Mama's sunroom. He doesn't follow me. I sit at her desk and pull out her current notebooks: her calendar of the garden, address book, birthday book, correspondence folders, and her diaries, her pages and pages of observations, day after day:

> *The honeyeaters seem to have stayed long into the season, well into summer. Last summer. Lists for Christmas dinner and table settings, and: Ben looks so very well. A little thinner than he should be perhaps, or perhaps that's a mother's imagination. He's big enough, as always. He seems sad, however. I cannot bear that he should ever be sad. But he's a human being, so there's nothing to be done about that, I suppose. He'll get along all right. They all do, don't they? God, please send him someone to cherish beyond me. A good match. Joyfulness. He was such a joyful child.*
>
> *Rain remains incessant . . .*

Not a cloud in the sky today. I stare into the sky until I can no longer see.

Time is marked by the opening and closing of the front door. The undertaker and his assistant come and go, taking her away with them. Then comes Reverend Ainsley, the new vicar, whom I don't really know, so I don't move from Mama's desk to greet him. Then a cohort of the Queensland Parliament arrives – the hardest boiled Protectionist cohort. I hear their voices, possibly half-a-dozen of them. 'John, John, bad luck. So sorry to hear about Ellie, old man. So sorry.' And that dispensed with, the commiserations quickly fall to what will be the certain death of the colony after the first of January, when the newly formed Commonwealth conspiracy of southerners will rob Queensland of its trade tariffs and its Kanaka slave labour force. I can't hear Pater's responses; perhaps that's my imagination. He is never quiet on such issues: he is the Minister of Agriculture, self-proclaimed despot of Central Queensland, and you've never heard hypocrisy until you've heard John Wilberry decrying the injustices of the proposed Immigration Restriction Act. How else do you break a shearers' strike unless you can bring in black slaves?

Their voices rise, the drone of massive, overgrown wasps. 'What *is* this Australia for?' I hear one above the rest. 'We will never agree on taxation rates – we can't even agree on a standard railway gauge. The only state that we will become is one which is destroyed. We're still getting back up from the collapse of '93. It is insanity.'

Insanity. Whose fault was the collapse of '93? Melbourne bankers, who have only one goal in mind: to ruin Queensland, by withdrawing capital, provoking all manner of strikes, which only in turn encourage the nuisance that is the Labor Party,

and push up the cost of wages. Whereas in God's country, shearers and stockmen and canecutters should work for free, because they are so bloody privileged to be allowed to be Queenslanders at all, and any such thing as a federal bank is satanic. I can't sit here a moment more. I shall go out to the greenhouse; I shall look over Mama's trays of seeds.

'Ben.' I am stopped halfway across the back verandah. 'Benjamin, isn't it? Sorry to hear about your mother. The worst.' My eyes are blinded looking back into the shade; I see the shape of the head, bald, and a voice I vaguely recognise, now asking me: 'Still at the roses and all that?'

'What?' Roses? For a second I don't understand what he's referring to, as I'm not particularly interested in roses, and then when I do understand him, when I hear the trace of mockery, I walk away, into the greenhouse, and I shut the door behind me.

'Ben – Ben, old matey.' I hear Cos, my old matey, at the window. Cosmo Thompson. My oldest friend. Bothered to turn up, good on him. But by now I can't speak at all. I am flicking through Mama's packets of seeds: carnations, coreopsis, cornflower . . . 'Come round when you're ready,' he says. 'We'll get nicely schnigged.'

I nod. Yes, I will want to get nicely, arselessly drunk soon. After the funeral.

One hour folds into the next until the sun is rising again and I am dragging on a suit. I am not much a part of the day; it's all more of the same, but with Protectionist party wives, and some Labor members of the Legislative Assembly, good on them for bothering. Faces, hats. Shaking hands I barely touch. I have more to say to the *elatum* in the brass vases. I stare at the casket: willow wood and silver plate; she'd have liked the wreath: Mrs Farenall designed it, she and Mama

were friends, laughing over teacups and dividing boat orchids for winter. Cos whispers in my ear before I rise to give the eulogy: 'Doesn't matter what you say. Say whatever you must.'

A handful of words: 'Eleonora Trenton Wilberry might have been a brilliant botanist, but as it was, in her horticulture and floral artistry she was an inspiration to many, not least to me. A tireless worker for the church and for her community, had time and circumstance allowed her to do more in her own right, only God knows what contribution she would have made to the botanical record. I am certain it would have been an invaluable one. Her garden was the outward reflection of her soul: bright, all-embracing, and ever joyful. She was my mother. Farewell.' At least that's what I meant to say.

Whatever I have said, Pater waits until after the burial to get into me for it. He waits until all are dispersed, heading to their carriages. We are not ten yards from where Mama lies in the ground, when he says: 'You are a shame to me, son. A bloody embarrassment – you always have been.'

I look at him square on for the first time in I don't know how long. We are very alike in basic construction: large, heavy muscled, bullish. But different in every other way. I might get into him, right here, right now, if it wasn't for Mama, and the more of her that is in me.

'You are not returning to Melbourne,' he says, and he's been wanting to offload this for the past two days. 'If you're not going to take an interest in the property, then you will at least do your time with the QMI – and you will do it this coming year. You are leaving in January.'

With the Queensland Mounted Infantry. No, I am not. I am not going to South Africa for this bastard's misguided sense of honour: where to kill, to tame, to press your will is to win, and winning is everything.

'I'm not making any more excuses for you,' he says, narrowing his eyes at me.

I narrow mine back: he doesn't need to make any excuses for me, it's a volunteer force, even if Queensland treats it like a compulsory sport – like the rugby. Got to be better than the New South Wales Lancers. Got to be the first ones on the troopship to Cape Town – pick me, pick me – that desperate to impress Mother Britannia. I want to tell him that I'm not surprised he's embarrassed. But that's just Queensland, isn't it. Terrified that Federation will rob them of their colonial army, and they'll all have to muck in under the one flag, with all those sheilas from the south, too – Jesus Christ, even Tasmanians. As though this land we're standing on right now wasn't called New South Wales itself forty years ago. As though Pater forged the boundary single-handedly in some bloody battle – one he is still waging in his permanently belligerent mind. I don't say anything: there is too much to say.

'What's wrong with you?' He does look bewildered now, and old. He is old: he's sixty-two. And I suppose he is lost in his own kind of grief – at my intransigence. 'You can shoot, you can ride, you can do both at the same time, making daisy fucking chains as you go. You are a Wilberry. You will do your duty. Fuck. You will do as you are bloody well told.'

Except that I am possibly more Wilberry than I will ever care to admit: no man tells me what to do. A strange feeling comes over me, a kind of deflation; perhaps it's pity for him.

He says: 'If you go back to Melbourne, I'll cut you off. I'll disinherit you.'

I say: 'Go on then.' And I walk away. He won't disinherit me; he can't anyway: I'll sue him for all he owes Mama, for all that is my legal right to her estate – to every Trenton penny held in trust. If he knows anything about me, he must know

I'd do that, on principle.

'Coward,' he says at my back.

Because he doesn't know me at all.

'Don't you walk off,' he calls after me. 'I need you to sort out the staff at the house.'

Sort out which of the servants should stay and which now should go? Today? Wouldn't want to waste a penny there, would you. There is some desperation in his voice, some pain of his own. He can have that all to himself. I keep walking away.

I set off for Cos's place, only a mile from the cemetery, at Woolloongabba, and the weatherboard sprawl of the town through here numbs me again. It's a very pleasant area. Pleasant. Sleepy. Torpid. And my feet know the way, even if my mind doesn't know where it's going. Where am I going? To Cos's, to the Swamp, which is the name of Cos's place, for it sits by a marshy bog, stumbling distance from Brisbane Cricket Ground. He'll be here by now; he didn't come to the burial. And here I am now, too.

At the gate of the Swamp the callistemon are suddenly magnificent – ordinary *viminalis* but their screaming scarlet bottlebrushes are blooming as though they are also insane. They love this swamp. They are so prolific they almost conceal the house, consume it, except for the roof. What a sight they make. As does the house: a Brisbane original, built by his grandfather when there was nothing much else around and the old man was just a spud farmer looking for a brave woman and a more suitable crop. This is a place that Mama has never seen, though; I would never have brought her here, as much as she always found Cosmo entertaining. I wonder if she sees me now.

'Wilber, is that you?' Susan's face appears by one of the verandah poles at the front door; she wipes her hands on her apron and beckons me in. 'Cossie's out back – he said you might

come.' Her large dark eyes are full of compassion but she says nothing more, only leads me through the door and down the hall, not quite his wife, not quite his housekeeper, not quite black, not quite white, not quite his at all, but always his muse.

He is in the studio, the back room of the house, stuffing his pipe. He looks up at me from amidst the mess of his life: two easels on the go, a riverscape and a Susan, papers and books everywhere, paint splatters on the walls, the floor, the windowsills, his taxidermied native cat, Kevin, by him on the sideboard, standing guard over his brushes. Good old Kevin, curator of hanging offences here at the Swamp. And I feel my face smile for the first time since I got home. I breathe out. And in again: this house smells of the river; it's part of the river. I look through the row of windows at the back wall, to the mess of lilli pillies and black wattle and birdsnest fern that make no attempt to be a garden all the way down to the massive bunya pine, where the bog becomes a creek.

Cos presses a rum into my hand. 'Get that into you.'

I toss it down my throat, don't even taste it, and I reach for another.

The sound of small children is coming from the kitchen: Tildy and Ted, it must be, the twins, banging pots and pans: one of them runs in half-naked and giggling, and wearing a pot as a hat. They were babies in a basket the last time I saw them; the first time. 'Come back here, scallywag!' Susan calls and the little brown bottom wobbles back out.

I say to Cos: 'They've grown.'

He rolls his eyes. 'Not fast enough.' He scratches his beard and says: 'So. What do you want to do, apart from drink? What can I do for you, my old Wilb?'

'Not a lot,' I say, but there is something I must do and fairly quickly; all I want to do. 'I'm leaving in the morning,' I

tell him, and then I ask him: 'You don't feel like coming on an expedition with me, do you? Bit of a ramble? I wouldn't mind having an artist along.'

'Where to?' He regards me warily, chewing on his pipe.

'New South Wales – out to Mama's old property, past Bathurst somewhere. Looking for a plant. *Helichrysum*. Possibly. A daisy, of some kind.'

He makes a face of disgust. Brisbane Cricket Ground is a long way to go for Cos these days, and I can see its telegraph wires from here. I shouldn't ask him to come with me; can't go anywhere with Cos without him making a mess of some kind. But I don't think I want to be alone on this ramble; and I've got to go. It's not only the promise I have made to Mama; I've got to get away from here. And he is my best old matey, and the very best botanical illustrator I know, when he can be bothered doing something for me.

'Hm.' He stares at me for a moment, over his pipe, before replying: 'Why not, hm? Embrace fate. *Amori fati*. Say yes?' He turns to Kevin on the sideboard: 'Say *yes*, hm?' And I've not got the slightest idea what he's talking about. 'We only go round the wheel once, don't we?' He turns back to me. 'Once and eternally: might as well make it interesting, and stop you from doing anything ridiculous. Keep you from harm.' He scratches his beard again, suspicion and sympathy in his squint: 'You all right, old chum?'

'No. No, not really,' I must admit.

He gives me a nod now and he asks: 'Read any Nietzsche yet?'

And I laugh, and I tell him: 'God, no.'

In my mind, I'm already back on the waves, on the steamer south. Where are we going? Sydney first, we'll stay at the club, at the Union. See where I am, where we are, from there.

ALSO BY KIM KELLY

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Sunshine
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‘One of the most powerful books I’ve read in years.’

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At Christmas, 1900, university student Berylda Jones is heading home from Sydney to Bathurst, and with customary reluctance, for ‘home’ is where she and her sister Greta live in quiet terror, under the control of their sadistic Uncle Alec.

Berylda has a plan this time, though, to free herself and Greta from Alec for good – if she can only find the courage to execute it.

On New Year’s Eve, that plan begins to take fire. Just as Alec tightens his grip on the sisters, a stranger arrives at their gate – Ben Wilberry, a botanist in search of a particular native wildflower, with his friend, the artist Cosmo Thompson.

So begins a journey that will take them all deep into the rugged wilderness of the old gold rush country of Hill End in search of a means to cure an unspeakable evil.

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