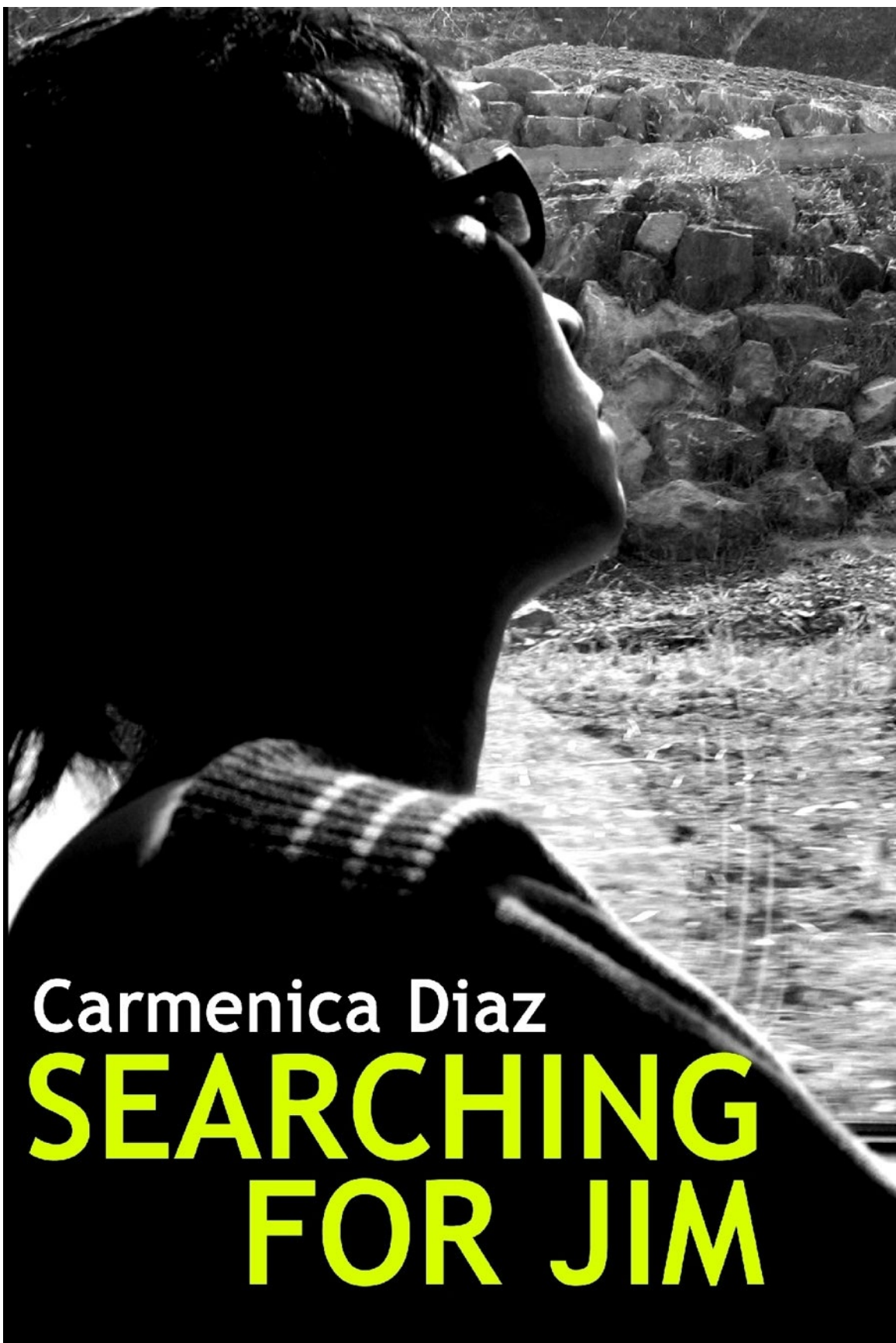


Carmenica Diaz

SEARCHING FOR JIM



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Searching for Jim

Carmenica Diaz

Also by Carmenica Diaz

EROTIC NOVELS

Addicted to Sally

A Little Spice

A Wicked Web

Birthday Boy

Bound To Grace

The Cage

Cruel Ryoko

The Dickson Device

The Possession of Emma

The Humiliation of

Claudia

Kryztal

Legally Bound

Madame Xan

The Maya Twins

Maid To Serve

Maya Twins Revenge

Personal Assistant

Sentenced to Chastity

Shared Mistress

The Submissive Husband

Toys in the Attic

Toys in the Cellar

Forced into Stockings:

An Unconventional Girl

Forced Into Stockings:

Suzie Wang

Forced into Stockings:

The Boyfriend

Confessions of a Cuckold

Natural Selection

Her Kinky Side

Owned by Stacy

Property of Stacy

Goddess Carly

The Seduction of Charity

The Vacation

The Chaste Cuckold

Enslaved

Andrea

Shame

FutureWorld 1: Lingerie

Drone

FEMDOM SERIES

A Henpecked Husband

The Loving Mistress

Mirror, Mirror

Modern Slavery

The Star Society

Village Life

A Different Marriage

Office Chastity

TRANSGENDER NOVELS

Catherine Lawrence

Body Double

Elizabeth Grey I: The

Lady is Waiting

Elizabeth Grey II: Heart

Second Chance

Avenging Annie

Royal Alchemy

Dreamsome

Both Sides Now

Madeline Ryan

Alchemy Discovered

Alchemy Abroad

COLLECTIONS

The Best of Carmenica

Diaz Vol I

The Complete Elizabeth

Grey

Lana & Other Stories

Teasing Tales

Dominant Wives

Dominant Women

Wicked Women

More Dominant Wives

Dominant Wives 3 & 4

All the Dominant Wives

NOVELLAS

Cruel Women 1: A Cruel

& Unusual Punishment

Cruel Women II: The

Cunning Linguist

Cruel Women III: The

Humilatrix

Cruel Women IV: The

Bosses Daughter

Tough Love 1: Naomi

Tough Love 2: Emma

Milked!

A Woman Scorned

Cruel Women VI: The

Revenge Project

Cruel Women VII: A Good

Wife

FIS: Honey

Entrapment

FIS: The Secretary

GRAPHIC NOVELS

Literary Service (With

Indy)

Play Total Control (With

Indy)

Chastity Tease (With

Indy)

The Cuckold's Tale (With

Indy)

Black & White (With

Indy)

Trixie (With Indy)

Captured by Julia (With

Indy)

■

www.carmenicadiaz.com

■

Carmenica Diaz lives near London and writes erotic fiction that is either hard and nasty or soft and tender, depending on her moods.

Ms Diaz commenced writing at the urging of close friends and now has a substantial following of loyal readers.

Her work is in two clear genres – Erotica and Transgender fiction. Carmenica Diaz is, of course, a penname and, in real life, Ms Diaz is an accomplished woman of academia.

When asked to use single words to describe Carmenica, a close friend chose the following – impatient, dominant, arrogant, tender, caring, romantic, hurtful, precise, nasty, supportive, and mercurial.

They are still friends as she told the truth.

Her web page is www.carmenicadiaz.com.

www.carmenicadiaz.com

Searching For Jim

Carmenica Diaz

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One. Wild World.

■

*Now that I've lost everything to you
You say you wanna start something new
And it's breakin' my heart you're leavin'
Baby, I'm grievin'
But if you wanna leave, take good care
I hope you have a lot of nice things to wear
But then a lot of nice things turn bad out there*

*Oh, baby, baby, it's a wild world
It's hard to get by just upon a smile
Oh, baby, baby, it's a wild world
I'll always remember you like a child,¹*

■

1.

‘Can you hear me?’

I blinked but refused to open my eyes completely.

‘I know you’re awake.’

I really did not want to wake up as I felt warm and very comfortable where I was – that dozing moment before you wake up after a really good Sunday morning lie in.

‘How do you feel?’

The persistent voice intruded so, at last, I opened my eyes.

A woman with shoulder length dark hair with lines of grey through it, smiled nervously at me, her eyes wide behind a large pair of black rimmed glasses. A gold chain with a small cameo broach hung around her slender throat.

The fact she was dressed in a white coat with a stethoscope hanging from her neck brought me up with a jolt!

She's a doctor!

I'm in a hospital?

'Relax,' she said softly and then asked again, 'How do you feel?'

'I'm...I'm ok – I...I think,' I replied cautiously, blinking.

Completely disoriented, I looked down at myself – I was in a bed – and wearing a light blue hospital gown.

Definitely hospital! I'm a patient in a hospital.

For the first time, I noticed that there were others in the room. There were people in white coats standing behind the woman who had just asked how I was and I squinted to try to make them out. I thought they were all female, although I couldn't see all of them.

What's wrong with my eyes?

'Can you see?'

The woman doctor – I assumed she was a doctor – asked and her voice was soft

and gentle – concerned.

I licked my lips.

‘It’s a bit blurry,’ I said softly, running my fingers through my hair, pushing it back off my forehead as I tried to understand my surroundings.

Where am I?

What am I doing here?

What happened?

‘We’ll check your eyes later,’ the woman said. ‘Apart from that, how are you feeling?’

‘I’m... I’m a little thirsty.’

‘Of course.’

She turned and signalled to someone in the group behind her and a young woman hurried to pour water from a silver jug into a glass.

‘Thanks,’ I said, giving her an anxious smile. I took a long sip and the water tasted wonderful - crisp and clean.

I took another mouthful and, as I drank, I used the time to try to understand what had happened and where I was. My head was spinning and I was confused and a little frightened. The frightening thing was that I couldn’t remember!

Did I have an accident or something?

‘Do you remember me?’

I turned and looked at the woman and stared at her for a moment. Seemingly, everyone in the room held their breath.

Was she familiar?

Desperately, I searched my mind for memories, trying to remember anything!

‘No,’ I said after a moment, ‘I’m afraid, I don’t remember you.’

I sensed that my answer was disappointing to the woman as well as the group as I felt an inaudible sigh of disappointment rustling through them.

‘Am I supposed to remember you?’ I asked softly, desperate for any information, and the woman smiled brightly.

‘I’m Hester Scott,’ she said, carefully avoiding my question.

Again, she waited for her name to register. I blinked at her, trying to sort through my Swiss cheese mind, wishing I could remember her name but I could not.

‘Sorry,’ I said sadly, guessing they were waiting for my answer, ‘that doesn’t ring a bell either.’

‘Do you remember your name?’

It was a male voice from the back of the room and I squinted past Hester as a man stepped forward so I could see him.

A bald man – I think he shaved his head – in a white coat stepped forward. He was gruff and I saw Hester give him a little frown.

My own name – I should remember that!

I tried to think and, again, everyone seemed to hold their breath - waiting.

‘No,’ I said at last, afraid again, ‘I can’t remember. What has happened to me? Was I in an accident?’

‘Yes,’ Hester said brightly, shooting the man a warning frown, ‘you were in an accident of sorts but you are fine now.’

‘But...but I can’t remember anything,’ I stuttered, ‘I can’t remember my name! What has happened to me?’

Dangerously close to a full bout of tears, I sniffled against the back of my hand as the implications of my situation engulfed me emotionally. Hester moved quickly to slip an arm around my shoulders.

‘You have temporary amnesia...’

‘Amnesia? Do I really have amnesia?’

‘Yes...’

‘Temporary? You mean I’ll get my memory back?’

‘We think so,’ she said carefully.

‘I mean,’ I wailed, ‘I can’t remember my name! My name! Do you know it? What is my name?’

They all exchanged concerned glances. Again, they all seemed to hold their breath.

Hester said carefully, ‘it’s Norah.’

‘Norah?’

More glances and Hester seemed a little nervous.

‘Yes.’

‘Norah,’ I repeated, tasting it in my mouth. ‘No,’ I said after a moment, ‘it doesn’t sound familiar. Are you sure?’

‘Yes,’ she said, looking quickly around, ‘I’m sure it will become familiar.’

‘But...but it doesn’t feel right...’

‘Is there a name that feels right?’ Hester asked softly, watching me intently, and I tried to think.

Something nudged the edges of my mind but I could not nail it down; something or someone drifting on the edges of my addled mind.

‘No,’ I answered, ‘no other name. Norah sounds...I don’t know, different?’

‘I’m sure you will get used to it again in time,’ Hester said. ‘Now,’ she added in a bright voice, ‘I expect you’d love a bath!’

She turned and gestured to some women in pale blue uniforms who purposefully moved forward.

The bald man studied me for a long moment and then quietly left the room.

2.

The bath was lovely and I emerged feeling fresh and clean. Wrapped in a towel, I stared at my face in the mirror, trying to remember.

Is that me?

It was like looking at a stranger's face! And that was exceptionally weird!

I mean, this is my face! I should know it backward and yet it appeared almost foreign.

Critically, I examined my face, trying to see something that would appear familiar. It felt peculiar to be searching what was supposed to be my own face for familiar marks. The face seemed new, a face that was unfamiliar, almost a stranger!

Angular face with a nose that was a little too long for it to be glamorous and my dark hair was short and curly, coming to just above my shoulders. Eyes dark brown and my eyebrows thick and bushy while my lips were full and unfamiliar. There was a small spot – a birthmark – on my left cheek near the corner of my mouth. My reaction to that birthmark was strange, almost surprise as if I was just discovering the mark!

My fingers shook as I lightly touched the birthmark and nose lightly.

I stepped back and looked hard at the mirror.

I'm not tall, beautiful or glamorous but, above all, it doesn't feel like me!

The face in the mirror does not look familiar at all! I don't feel it is me!

It was suddenly terrifying! Would I ever get my memory back, would I see myself in the mirror?

One of the nurses, who had helped me with the bath, poked her head around the door.

‘Everything all right, sweetie?’

‘Yes,’ I said slowly, ‘just trying to remember.’

‘It’ll come back,’ she reassured, ‘it usually does. Now, we have some clothes for you. I expect you would like to be out of the hospital gown. It can be draughty!’

I smiled ruefully at that and followed her into the room.

‘I’m Joni, by the way,’ she said, busy taking clothes from a bag.

I smiled at her and then frowned.

‘I can’t remember stuff, Joni,’ I said worriedly.

She immediately turned and I saw concern in her eyes.

‘I know,’ Joni said quietly, ‘as Doctor Scott said, you have amnesia.’

‘I know,’ I said worriedly, ‘but I can’t remember simple stuff!’ I flicked my curly hair. ‘I can’t remember how to do my hair, for goodness sakes!’

Joni blinked, glanced away for a moment and then smiled brightly.

‘I’ll help you and show you if you like? Luckily, your hair is not overly long. It’s shortish like mine and easy to look after, especially with those tight curls of yours.’

Joni glanced around and I suddenly guessed hidden cameras were watching us.

Why?

‘Yes,’ I said, forcing a smile, ‘please show me. I’m afraid I’ve forgotten everything!’

3.

‘What do you think of that?’

Joni flicked my hair with her fingers and waited for my reaction. She was standing behind me and looking at my reflection in the mirror.

‘It looks ok, I guess,’ I said with a shrug.

‘Just ok?’ Joni teased.

‘I guess I’m not used to this face,’ I said slowly.

‘You will in time,’ Joni said slowly.

For a moment, I sensed she was about to say something but stopped herself.

I turned to look up at her.

‘Do all amnesia patients forget their own faces?’

‘You’ll have to ask Doctor Scott that,’ Joni said brightly. ‘Now, a little lipstick?’

I pulled a face in the mirror.

‘I can’t remember how to put it on. Do I need it?’

‘It can’t hurt. Here, I’ll show you how to apply it.’

I tasted the lipstick on my lips and frowned at my reflection. It didn’t feel right but I blamed my strange confusion on the amnesia.

At least the clothes – faded hipster jeans, slippers and a white top - were comfortable but the bra pulled and felt tight. In short, it was uncomfortable.

‘Where am I, Joni?’

‘Just outside of Manchester.’

‘Manchester? That’s in England, yes?’

‘Yes, it is,’ she said evenly but I saw concern bubble in her eyes for a moment.

The door opened and Doctor Scott walked in.

‘How are you feeling, Norah?’

‘Ok,’ I said with a shrug, trying to become used to the question that everyone seemed to ask.

‘Feel like a walk?’

‘Ok.’

I stood and Doctor Scott watched me as I carefully walked across the floor. I was moving fine but my joints felt stiff and awkward.

‘How long was I unconscious?’ I asked and Joni shot Hester Scott a look and then kept tidying the brushes she had used to style my hair.

‘We’ll talk about that later,’ Hester said with a warm smile. ‘But first, we must get your eyes tested.’

‘Why?’

‘You are squinting when you try to see objects in the distance.’

‘Did I wear glasses before the accident, whatever the accident was?’

‘Yes,’ Hester said after a long moment, ‘you did. Are you really fine to walk?’

‘Yes, as long as we go slowly.’

The corridor was long and painted in a colour an interior decorator would definitely call Antique White. The bleak expanse of white broken by several framed colourful prints, all hanging in a precise line down one side of the hall.

As we walked down the corridor, we passed various other doctors and personnel who all glanced at me, smiled and stepped aside to allow us to pass.

It then occurred to me that something was missing and I stopped suddenly when I realised what it was.

No patients!

‘There are no other patients here!’

Doctor Scott stopped and looked back at me worriedly.

‘I’m the only patient here!’ I said. ‘Is this really a hospital?’

‘It is a research hospital,’ Hester Scott said, taking my arm to lead me down the corridor.

‘But,’ I said stubbornly, ‘I am the only patient?’

‘Yes,’ Hester said softly, ‘you are in this wing. There are patients in other wings. There is nothing to worry about.’

I studied Hester’s face and saw only warmth and concern. The harsh overhead light highlighted the streaks of grey in her hair and I wondered why she didn’t resort to a coloured rinse. Perhaps she wore the grey with pride, a badge of achievement and experience.

‘Isn’t it strange?’ I asked slowly. ‘This hospital has only one patient? Me!’

‘Norah, you are not the only patient in this hospital,’ Hester said firmly. ‘This is a research institution and there are other patients in the three other wings. It is a big place.’

‘But only one patient, me, in an entire wing?’

‘Yes, but there is a reason! This is a research...’

‘When will you tell me what you are hiding?’ I said and she whipped around, her face alive with a startled expression.

‘Wha...’

‘You are keeping something from me, aren’t you.’

‘What makes you...?’

‘I just guessed,’ I said quietly. ‘And there are cameras in my room, aren’t there? You are all watching me! I must be important to someone! It’s like being in my own mystery thriller! Why are you watching me?’

‘It’s for your own well being,’ Hester said quickly.

‘Why?’ I asked quietly. ‘Am I that sick? Am I a plague carrier or something?’

Hester sighed and guided me down the corridor a few steps before stopping again.

‘Norah,’ she said and it struck me that Hester used my name as if she was also unfamiliar with it, ‘we’re not hiding anything. It was felt that it was better to reveal things step by step...’

‘So,’ I murmured, ‘it must be really awful!’

‘No,’ Hester said with a short smile, ‘it’s not that awful but...’

‘But what?’

‘Professor Frankston will reveal all...’

‘Who’s he? Is he the bald bloke that was in the room where I woke up? The one with a grumpy face who scowled at me?’

Hester giggled and for a moment, she appeared young and girlish, but the amusement was fleeting, and the mirth quickly vanished.

‘You certainly do not miss much, Norah.’

‘So I assume he is that bloke?’

‘Yes but I don’t think he would be amused by your description. He’s certainly not grumpy intentionally, just focussed.’

I looked at her intently.

‘Focussed on me?’

‘Yes.’

‘Am I supposed to be frightened of him? Will he hurt me?’

‘No! No, of course not! Everyone here wants to help you.’

‘Then, tell me what happened. How long was I unconscious?’

Hester sighed.

‘You were in a coma...’

‘Coma! Now, that’s bad, isn’t it?’

‘No, not in your case and that will be explained later.’

‘How long was I in the coma?’

‘You were asleep for almost a year...’

‘A year!’

Hester took my arm, quickly steered me into a room and moved me towards a chair.

‘Sit down. I’m sorry to break it to you like that...’

‘A year! I was asleep for a year?’

‘I said almost a year. It was a little over nine months...’

‘Close enough to a year! Wow! I don’t believe this!’

‘Unfortunately, it’s true.’

‘But...but do I have a family? Are they concerned? Did they visit? Will they visit?’

‘Look, Norah,’ Hester said softly, ‘it will all be explained soon. I promise you

that you will know everything within a week and you should not be unduly alarmed.'

'Easy to say, Hester, but this is all pretty alarming! Why a week?'

'We need to complete tests to make sure everything is fine...'

'Is there a problem?' I quickly asked. 'Am I ok?'

'We think so but we need to make sure. Look,' she said with a smile, 'let's get your eyes tested and then we'll begin the other tests. The week will fly, ok?'

'I suppose so,' I said, staring at the white wall.

A year! I have lost a year of my life.

'You know,' I said morosely after a moment, staring at a cheap colourful print of a daffodil, 'I can't even remember how old I am! Or even my last name! I've lost everything!'

'Not everything!'

'It certainly feels like it! I'm struggling to remember stuff! Important stuff!'

Hester didn't say anything and just smiled sadly.

'Things will work out,' she said at last and offered her hand. 'Come on.'

Slowly, I took her hand and rose from the chair.

A year!

4.

‘Is that better?’

I peered through the glasses at the row of letters and nodded.

‘Everything is crystal clear. Do I have to wear glasses all the time?’

The doctor who had examined me and had organised the making of the eyeglasses, nodded. It amazed me just how quickly they had the glasses made.

Without asking me, they had quickly supplied a pair of black framed glasses.

I suppose fashion isn't important to them!

So quickly, a pair of glasses within an hour! It was as if they had a team of people standing by!

I then reminded myself that I was, apparently, the only patient and was the centre of everyone's attention.

Perhaps they did have a team of people!

‘For the time being. Perhaps, in the future you may be a suitable candidate for laser surgery. Until then, you can wear contacts, if you like. Would you like us to arrange contacts?’

‘What did I wear before the accident?’ I asked Hester who glanced at the other doctor and then smiled.

‘Glasses.’

‘Then I’ll stick with these. They might help jog my memory.’

‘Come back if they don’t fit properly and we’ll adjust them again.’

‘I’m sure they’ll be fine.’

I said goodbye and he escorted me to the door. Hester and I walked down the white walled corridor.

‘Fancy a coffee?’

‘Cup of tea would be nice,’ I said and then stopped still. ‘It appears,’ I said slowly, ‘I like tea.’

Hester nodded but didn't say anything.

'Did I like tea before?' I persisted.

'Yes,' Hester said shakily, 'you did. The cafeteria is down this way.'

I watched Hester bring the tray with the coffee and tea to our table. There were a few doctors and other people in the small cafeteria but they all gave us a wide berth.

Who was I before this mysterious accident?

Was I married?

Do I have a family? A mother and a father? Sisters? Brothers? Do I have a husband? Maybe children?

We sat near the window and there was a wide expanse of lawn with a few trees before a footpath through the grounds. Enviously, I watched people walking down the path, focussed on their lives and everyday things.

'When do I get out of here?'

‘When you are well.’

‘I feel ok.’

‘I know but we have to try to get your memory back. I mean,’ Hester smiled, ‘where would you go?’

‘I don’t know but,’ I said jabbing my tea spoon towards Hester, ‘you know stuff about me, don’t you? You could tell me and help get my memory back!’

‘And we will but,’ Hester said gently, ‘it has to be done carefully.’

I wanted to ask why but decided against it.

She’s right – where would I go? I don’t even know how old I am, what my last name is!

‘How old am I, Hester?’ I asked as I poured a dash of milk into my tea.

Hester watched me and then forced a smile.

‘We believe you are twenty five.’

‘Believe?’ I frowned. ‘My age should be the same, surely? I mean, it doesn’t change after a coma, does it?’

‘It seems you like milk in your tea,’ Hester said, pointing at my teacup.

‘Yes,’ I said absently, ‘I do – just a dash – and no sugar.’

Startled, I put my hand to my mouth and looked at Hester.

Hester reached over the table, took my hand and squeezed it.

‘It’s a good sign, Norah,’ Hester said brightly. ‘Your memory is returning slowly. We’ll do a few tests and, if everything is ok, we’ll tell you what we know.’

I nodded and stirred my tea.

It suddenly sounded a little scary.

I had battled the nervousness since waking up, and now a feeling of apprehension that stayed with me for every waking moment. I was also afraid!

Hester appeared to be also lost in thought and I surreptitiously studied her while she sipped her coffee.

Is she concerned that I may remember something I shouldn't?

Were we lovers?

Eww! I'm not a lesbian, am I? God, I couldn't!

It occurred to me that Hester and I may be related but I quickly dismissed that notion. Even I could see that we did not have any physical similarities.

I just have to wait until they tell me the entire story!

Something about Hester made me trust her and I believed that she would tell me the truth.

And, I trusted Joni the same way.

Somehow, the thought that I trusted both Hester and Joni did make me feel better.

‘Do you want another cup of tea?’ Hester asked suddenly. ‘I’m having another coffee.’

‘Thanks,’ I said with a smile, ‘I’d like another tea.’

5.

‘The questions will appear on the screen and you select the answers from five multiple choices. Once your selection has been made, you can’t change it.’

‘Why not?’ I said with a frown.

Doctor Baldwin smiled earnestly.

‘We want to see what your initial response is. There are two hundred questions...’

‘Two hundred! Cripes, I’ll be here for yonks!’

‘It won’t take long,’ he said encouragingly. ‘Are you ready?’

I nodded grumpily.

‘Just click on the start symbol with the mouse and it will begin.’

Baldwin left and once the door closed, I clicked on the start symbol.

The question filled the screen.

The Capital of France is:

Rome

Washington

Paris

France does not have a capital

France is a city

I clicked C and waited until the next question appeared on the screen.

Only 199 to go!

6.

‘This test is rather a little more complicated, I’m afraid,’ Baldwin said with a nervous smile.

‘When do I get the results from the one I did yesterday?’

‘I’m afraid that’s up to Professor Frankston,’ he said, flicking through some papers.

‘Did I pass?’ I asked cheekily, flicking my hair from my eyes.

Hester chose that moment to walk into the room.

‘How are you, Norah?’

‘Fine,’ I said with a shrug.

‘Hair looks nice,’ she said, ‘and I like the top.’

‘Joni gave it to me. Do you have any of my clothes here? I mean, my clothes I wore before the accident, whatever the “accident” was,’ I added with another

cheeky smile.

Baldwin and Hester gave each other another one of those strange looks, the small careful looks I was now noticing everywhere.

It was obvious they were keeping something from me, something big but I knew I wouldn't find anything out until Professor Frankston chose to reveal it all.

'So, what's this test all about?' I asked finally.

'It's subject specific...'

'What subject?' I quickly asked.

'Scientific and what not,' Baldwin said nonchalantly.

'Scientific?' I asked, curiosity rising. 'Was I involved in science before my mysterious accident?'

'Norah,' Hester said firmly, 'do the test! There's one more after this and that is it!'

'So, if I do it, when does Professor Frankston make an appearance and tell all?'

‘The day after tomorrow.’

‘Really?’

‘Yes, if you complete the next tests and the medical examination results are ok.’

‘Right! Then let’s get on with it, yes?’ I said sunnily.

7.

‘This is Doctor Miller,’ Hester said, introducing me to the stout woman in a tweed suit who nodded to me.

Her eyes flickered behind the gold eyeglasses she wore and I wondered how Doctor Miller got her hair into such a tight bun!

‘Hello, Norah,’ she said carefully, ‘please sit down.’

‘I’ll leave you two to it,’ Hester said, pausing at the door.

‘This is the last test, yes?’ I asked and Hester nodded.

‘It’s not a test, Norah,’ Doctor Miller protested, ‘it’s just a discussion.’

‘Oh,’ I said, ‘so you’re a psychologist or psychiatrist?’

Hester giggled and left, shutting the door behind her.

‘How do you feel?’

Doctor Miller asked the question that everyone asked – Hester, Joni, Baldwin – and it was always the conversation starter.

I decided to be honest.

‘Afraid.’

‘Afraid? Afraid of what?’

‘Afraid of what Professor Frankston is going to tell me.’

‘Why are you afraid?’ Doctor Miller smiled.

‘It’s all unknown, isn’t it?’ I said with a shrug. ‘I don’t know what happened to me, my memory is not returning and that frightens me.’

‘I see. Do you want your memory to return?’

‘Yes! Just because I’m afraid doesn’t mean I don’t want to know! I have to know!’

‘Have to? Why?’

‘I can’t remain in limbo, can I? I have to know so I can begin to regain my memory, rediscover my life. I want to begin, not stay frozen.’

Doctor Miller smiled briefly.

‘I see. My name is Bronwyn, by the way. Your hair looks nice. I understand you had difficulty in styling it?’

‘I had difficulty with the entire fashion thing! I think I was not a girly girl before the accident, if you know what I mean. I’ve struggled with my hair, my bra for god’s sakes! Sometimes, it just feels as if I don’t know what I am doing!’

‘That must be annoying.’

‘Do they teach you that?’

‘Teach me what?’

‘The way of saying things to prompt an answer, a reaction.’

Bronwyn, to her credit smiled.

‘Yes, Norah, they did. It’s a useful technique, don’t you think?’

I smiled, despite my inner nervousness and fear.

‘Yes, it is. Yes, to answer your question, I find it annoying! I struggle with mascara!’

‘You look fine now.’

‘Joni has been great! She’s very patient and has helped me a lot.’

‘Has she become a friend?’

I stared at the wall, lost in thought.

‘Yes,’ I said after a moment, ‘I think she has.’

‘Think?’

‘I’m confused about an awful lot of things, Bronwyn. Is that normal?’

‘Confusion is a way of making your brain work things out.’

‘What does that mean or is it just psycho mumbo jumbo?’

She laughed.

‘It means that your subconscious is working through issues.’

‘Well,’ I murmured, ‘I wish it would bloody well hurry up!’

8.

‘You’re meeting Professor Frankston tomorrow, Norah,’ Joni said, riffling through my wardrobe. ‘What do you want to wear?’

I shrugged.

‘Whatever.’

‘Jeans, I suppose,’ Joni said with a mock frown at me, ‘and, let me see, something unusual like a T-shirt?’

‘You’re teasing me.’

‘Well, Norah dear, you do wear the same thing everyday. Don’t you find it boring?’

‘I find it comforting,’ I said slowly and Joni immediately looked concerned.

‘Then, wear the jeans! The blue or black ones?’

‘Joni,’ I said slowly, ‘are you my friend?’

She stopped and looked at me.

‘I hope so,’ Joni said slowly.

‘You know everything about me, don’t you?’

She nodded slowly.

‘Don’t worry, I’m not going to ask you,’ I said with a bitter laugh. ‘I understand that the great Professor has to give me the news!’

‘It’s for the best,’ she murmured. ‘We can talk afterwards, if you like. I mean, after he tells you.’

I looked at her and saw nothing but concern in her bright blue eyes. Idly, I wished I had blonde hair like hers. I noticed that her eyebrows were shaped and her ears had small gold studs in the lobes.

My eyebrows are thick and unmanageable and my ears aren’t pierced. Isn’t that strange?

‘I’ll wear something else tomorrow,’ I said suddenly. ‘You choose.’

‘You don’t have to, Norah...’

‘I know but I should get out of my comfort zone.’

‘Ok,’ Joni said slowly, ‘how about this blouse and this skirt?’

She held the items up and I shrugged.

‘Ok but do I have to wear high heels?’

‘No,’ Joni laughed, ‘I don’t think that would be a good idea yet!’

Two. Oh Jim 1.

■

Oh Jim, how could you treat me this way

Hey hey

How could you treat me this way?

You know you broke my heart

Ever since you went away

Now you said that you love us

But you only make love to one of us

Oh Jim, how could you treat me this way

You know you broke my heart

Ever since you went away²

■

1.

Professor Frankston looked me up and down for a moment when I nervously walked into the small meeting room. He then stood and I noticed he had two thick folders in front of him on the long mahogany table.

‘Norah,’ he said in a deep voice, ‘please sit down.’

I slowly sat, smoothing my skirt under me, and Hester sat on my left side and Joni sat on my right.

‘I asked Doctor Scott to attend and Doctor Martin also insisted on being present.’

He almost glowered at Joni who smiled calmly at him and slowly winked at me.

Doctor Martin? I thought Joni was a nurse. I guess she didn’t say; it was just my assumption.

Still, I felt compelled to say, ‘you’re a doctor, Joni?’

‘Yes,’ she said, sensing something. ‘Didn’t you know?’

I shook my head.

‘No, I thought you were a nurse.’

‘There are no nurses here,’ Hester said quickly.

I shrugged and turned my attention to Professor Frankston who had been studying me carefully.

‘Isn’t it about time you tell me what’s going on?’ I asked him quietly.

‘Yes,’ he said calmly, ‘I think it is. According to Doctor Scott you are in fine physical shape.’

‘That’s good to hear.’

‘In fact you are in perfect physical health.’

I nodded but didn’t say anything, just waited.

Frankston shuffled some papers and Hester surprised me by irritably saying, ‘oh, get on with it, Herbie!’

He looked at her with almost an aggrieved expression and then laid five large black and white photographs on the table.

‘Do you recognise any of these?’

I leaned forward and studied the pictures.

‘That’s the President,’ I said, pointing at one, ‘and that’s the Prime Minister...’

‘Yes,’ Frankston said, ‘although both are not in those positions currently. The others?’

‘That’s Bob Dylan,’ I said resting my forefinger on the black and white iconic photograph. ‘It’s an old picture - from the sixties?’

‘That’s correct. And the other two?’

‘I know that one, I think,’ I pointed at a photograph of a woman. ‘She’s on television? In that hospital show – Grey’s Anatomy?’

‘Yes. And the other?’

The other photograph was of a young man with dark hair and glasses. I felt a slight shiver through me but could not identify the picture.

‘No, I don’t know that one,’ I said. ‘Still, I got four, didn’t I? Was that another test?’

‘That is Doctor James Sanderson,’ Frankston went on, ignoring my comment. ‘He was a junior research assistant here and worked with Hester. He had a curious mind but we did not appreciate what his motives were.’

I sat back, my heart pounding as I sensed the moment had arrived, the moment I would know everything.

Suddenly, I didn’t know if I really wanted to know everything!

‘We discovered,’ Hester said quietly, ‘that James had ulterior motives and was quietly researching papers on DNA alteration while he was working on his assigned activities. He was, if you like, on a quest, to find a way to alter a human being.’

‘Alter?’ Confused, I looked at Hester and then back to Professor Frankston. ‘How?’

‘To change gender,’ Hester said softly, glancing at Frankston.

I looked from Hester to Frankston, attempting to understand the ramifications as Joni silently took my hand and held it.

‘I...I don’t understand,’ I whispered, although I was beginning to.

‘Doctor James Sanderson,’ Professor Frankston said quietly, ‘was you!’

I gasped, hand flying to my mouth as I tried to understand exactly what Frankston was saying.

‘Me?’ I squeaked. ‘Are you saying I was a bloke?’

Professor Frankston looked directly into my eyes.

‘Yes,’ he said quietly.

‘No!’ I cried, leaping to my feet.

‘I’m afraid it is true, Norah,’ Hester said softly, standing to put her arm around me as did Joni.

Slowly, they guided me back into my chair..

‘But...but...’ I stumbled stupidly, ‘I...I don’t feel like a bloke!’

‘The changes are complete,’ Professor Frankston said.

‘James worked on this, unbeknownst to us,’ Hester said quickly, ‘day and night until he had developed a serum that would radically change the gender of the person that was injected with it.’

‘Why? Why on earth would he want...?’

‘It seems,’ Hester said softly, ‘that James believed he was a woman born into the body of a man!’

‘He injected himself with the serum,’ Frankston said quietly, ‘and by the time we found him, it was too late.’

I stared at the smooth surface of the table, head spinning and tried to make sense of the bombshell they had dropped!

‘He...he was me?’ I asked weakly. ‘But...but how?’

‘The changes were slow at first,’ Professor Frankston said and I had the sense he was relieved to be talking about scientific process, rather than personal matters,

‘and, of course, you – James – was in a coma while the changes occurred.’

‘We watched you change in the coma,’ Hester said quietly.

‘It was all documented and recorded,’ Frankston said stiffly, ‘so you can see...’

‘I can’t believe it!’ I muttered.

But, part of me did believe it! Did this explain my unfamiliarity with my own face, my own body?

Frankston, Hester and Joni exchanged worried glances until Frankston cleared his throat.

‘The changes are complete and, can I say, remarkable!’

‘Can you change me back?’ I asked quickly.

‘Do you want to change back?’ Joni asked quietly.

‘I...I don’t know! This is very confusing!’

‘I’m afraid that James left some notes detailing the process,’ Professor Frankston said, ‘but it will take some time before we are ready to test the serum. In fact, it could be years!’

Hester and Joni stood up.

‘Let’s take a break. Let’s get you a cup of tea and we can resume in a little while.’

They gently helped me stand and guided me out of the meeting room.

I was almost groggy as they led me away, my mind reeling.

I was a bloke?

2.

Joni and Hester watched me carefully as I stirred my tea with a shaky hand.

‘Wow!’ I said softly after a moment.

I looked at Joni.

‘That explains why I don’t have pierced ears,’ I said foolishly, ‘why my eyebrows are bushy!’

It was, given the moment and what I had just been told, an extraordinarily stupid thing to say. Hester and Joni smiled weakly and nodded.

‘And why Norah?’ I suddenly asked. ‘Why did you call me Norah?’

Joni and Hester glanced at each other and then Hester said slowly, ‘James left a letter...’

‘A letter? To who?’

‘To me,’ Hester replied.

‘You were friends? Lovers?’

Hester blushed and smiled weakly.

‘Friends, not lovers. Jim wasn’t attracted to women.’

‘What did he say in the letter?’

‘He explained everything and asked that his new name be Norah. Apparently, it was the name he wanted – you wanted.’

Stunned, I stared at her.

‘But...but I’m not Jim...’

‘Aren’t you?’ Hester said gently. ‘Your DNA says otherwise.’

‘I can’t remember anything about him or anything else!’

‘Professor Frankston will explain that,’ Joni said softly.

‘Did you know Jim?’ I demanded and Joni nodded.

‘Yes, I met him when I first came here. He was nice.’

I sipped the tea, my head whirling with the unfathomable news.

I was once a male!

Suddenly, I was aware of both Hester and Joni looking at me with such concern that I was intensely self-conscious.

Abruptly, I stood up.

‘I’m going to my room.’

‘Are you ok? I...’

‘I just need to be alone for a while,’ I mumbled, hurrying to the door.

‘Norah...’

3.

In the safety of my room, I threw myself onto the bed and stared at the ceiling while my mind spun out of control.

I was once a man?

I'm a scientific freak!

But...what happens now?

Unsteadily, I stood up and quickly removed all my clothes. Blinking at my naked reflection, I tried to imagine a male standing in the mirror in place of me!

It was impossible!

Wrapping a robe around me, not caring about the cameras or anything, I threw myself back onto the bed.

Lost in my tumultuous emotions, a complete sense of helpless loneliness swept over me and I wept silently, wept for myself and for Jim!

Oh, Jim,

how could you treat me this way?

Oh, Jim,

how could you treat me this way?

4.

Hester and Joni were waiting for me when I finally emerged from my room.

‘I think I’m ready to hear the rest of the news now,’ I said softly.

They exchanged glances.

‘Professor Frankston has gone back to...’

‘Get him!’ I said firmly. ‘Now!’

‘Ok,’ Hester said gently, slipping a comforting arm around my shoulders. ‘We’ll get him. Joni, could you call him? Tell him it’s urgent.’

‘Sure,’ Joni said and, after giving me a reassuring smile, hurried away.

‘Are you ok, Nor...do you mind me calling you that or would you prefer... something else?’

‘No,’ I sniffed, ‘Norah is fine. What else is there?’ I said bitterly. ‘Jim doesn’t seem to fit me, does it?’

‘I know it’s a shock, Norah...’

‘Shock! A shock! That’s a bloody understatement, isn’t it? Where is that bloody wanker Frankston?’

‘It’s not his fault, Norah,’ Hester said gently. ‘He saved your life many times while you were in the coma.’

Startled, I looked at her.

‘What do you mean? I could have died?’

‘Yes, you were very close a few times. Whatever his shortcomings, Herbie Frankston is a genius.’

I said nothing, just allowed Hester to steer me towards the door to the meeting room.

I sat and waited until Professor Frankston burst in, a deep frown etched on his face. For a moment, I thought he was going to give me a right bollocking for calling him.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said immediately, ‘I was quite stressed.’

He relaxed and gave me what I suspect he thought was a smile and sat down.

‘That’s fine,’ he said gruffly, ‘I understand.’ Frankston shuffled some papers and looked at me. ‘Do you want to ask questions?’

‘Please just tell me what you know.’

He nodded and I sensed he was relieved.

‘First of all,’ Frankston said in a professional tone, ‘the first test...’

‘The multiple choice?’

‘Yes. The results demonstrated that large portions of your memory were retained. You can recall simple historical, geographical and items of popular culture with ease. In fact, your accuracy rate was well in the ninety percent range.’

‘What does that mean?’

‘It means there is every possibility the memories associated with James Sanderson will return.’

I said nothing but my mind was racing.

Did that mean there was an entire separate personality residing within me, just waiting to return?

Frankston looked at me carefully.

‘Those memories will, however, be coloured by the prism in which they are now viewed.’

Puzzled, I looked at him and Hester jumped into translate.

‘That means, those memories will be viewed from Norah’s perspective, not James.’

‘So,’ I said, slightly relieved, ‘there isn’t a personality hidden inside me, ready to take over...’

‘Good gracious, no!’ Frankston exclaimed. ‘That is pure science fiction!’

‘And changing gender isn’t?’ I asked gently and he had the good grace to smile.

‘Point taken, Norah.’ He returned to his notes. ‘The second test was a little

disappointing.'

'In what way?'

'You have not retained the scientific knowledge that James Sanderson once possessed. Somehow, that has been discarded and Bronwyn Miller feels that it will not return.'

'So, I'm not a scientist?'

'No,' he said gravely, 'you are not.'

Somehow that made me feel a little better as it meant that there was another part of me that wasn't Jim.

He looked at me and I guessed he had reached the end of the information he had accumulated. It wasn't, I decided, really not much at all. I wanted more.

'Do I exist?' I asked softly.

Frankston appeared slightly uncomfortable but Hester answered, perhaps recognising the importance of such a question.

‘James Sanderson is dead,’ she said simply.

‘Dead? But...’

‘For the sake of Jim’s family, we had to pronounce him dead. James Sanderson was buried almost a year ago in his hometown in Australia.’

Another little fact they had forgotten to tell me!

‘James was...I...I am Australian?’

‘By birth, although you have lived in England for almost six years before the accident.’

‘Oh.’ I stared at the table for a moment.

‘If he’s dead, I don’t exist, do I?’

Suddenly, I felt like crying.

Professor Frankston looked at me, concern etched deeply into his face.

‘I have DNA proof you exist,’ he said calmly, ‘as well as the fact you are sitting directly in front of me.’

‘But,’ I faltered, ‘what about legally?’

I was avoiding the reality of my situation by focussing on side issues but no one seemed to mind.

‘We’ll take care of that,’ Frankston said firmly. ‘Don’t worry about that now.’

I nodded mutely, head spinning.

‘You mentioned his family?’ I asked softly, head down.

‘Mother and sister,’ Hester said softly. ‘I believe the father was never around. Both mother and sister attended the funeral.’

‘Did...did anyone from here attend?’ I murmured, staring at the table.

‘Doctor Scott and I attended,’ Professor Frankston said and I smiled gratefully to both of them – I didn’t really understand why – but Hester returned the smile.

Silence hung heavily within the small room. I kept staring at the table, head still

spinning and the others waited for me to say something.

I really didn't know what to say.

Overcome with the enormity of everything they had told me and, of course, my situation, I leaned forward and rested my head in my hands.

Hester leaned close, hand resting on my shoulders and whispered, 'it will be fine, Norah, it really will be.'

I guessed it was just something to say.

Oh, Jim, how could you treat me this way?

5.

It was a restless night but I managed to get some sleep towards the early hours.

Hester and Joni came knocking the moment I stepped from the bathroom and I ruefully realised they were probably watching me on the hidden cameras.

‘We thought we’d invite you to breakfast,’ Joni said brightly.

‘In the cafeteria?’ I said sarcastically. ‘How nice!’

‘No,’ Hester said, ‘we thought we’d motor into the village. There’s a cafe there.’

‘Go...go outside?’

‘You don’t want to be cooped up in here all the time, do you?’

‘Well...’

‘Come on, Norah,’ Joni said with a smile, ‘it will do you good.’

6.

‘There’s no point looking around like a nervous cat,’ Hester said with a small smile, ‘all the time, Norah.’

I smiled ruefully and waited until the waitress had placed the tea pot in the centre of the table.

‘I’m just self-conscious,’ I said in a stage whisper after the waitress had gone.

‘Why?’ Joni said. ‘There’s no reason to be.’

Hester poured the tea into the cups.

‘You have to move on with your life, Norah,’ she said, pushing a teacup towards me. ‘You’re a healthy young woman with her life in front of her...’

‘Yes,’ I said bitterly, stirring the teacup, ‘a woman who used to be a man!’

‘Do you remember being a man?’ Joni asked gently.

‘No, of course not! There is this bloody great hole in my memories!’

‘Even when the memories begin to return,’ Hester reminded me, ‘Bronwyn believes you will view those memories as Norah, not Jim!’

Yes, I thought, so she says, but will that be the case? It would be ironic if Norah felt like a bloke in the body of a woman!

‘I think, Norah,’ Hester said gently, ‘we should work at making you feel more comfortable as yourself.’

‘As a woman, you mean?’ I snapped.

‘Do you feel like anything else?’ Joni asked.

‘Well, no...I don’t think so,’ I muttered.

‘I meant we should start planning how you will begin your new life. It could be exciting, Norah,’ Hester said wisely.

I stared at my teacup and pushed my glasses up the bridge of my nose.

‘Will you show me the letter Jim left you?’ I asked after a moment.

‘Yes, of course,’ Hester said softly. ‘It’s back at the hospital.’

I nodded, Joni and Hester watched me as I thought for a moment.

‘I suppose,’ I said after a moment, ‘I should get my ears pierced.’

Joni grinned delightedly.

‘And those eyebrows shaped!’ Joni pounced.

I smiled at them and saw relief in their eyes.

‘Do I have to wear high heels?’

‘Only if you want to,’ Hester said carefully.

‘I suppose we could try them out, see if I feel like a twit or, worse, fall over and break an ankle!’

‘If you break an ankle,’ Joni said cheekily, ‘you’d be in the right spot! We could fix it in a jiffy!’

‘Ha ha!’ I grumped and then smiled again.

What else could I do?

Three. Message to my Girl – 1.

■

*So I'll sing it to the world
this simple message to my girl.
No more empty self possession,
visions swept under the mat.
It's no New Year's resolution,
it's more than that. ³*

■

Dear Hester,

I know that you are probably angry with me but you must know that I had to do this!

I don't think anyone can imagine what it is like to live the nightmare I have lived all my life!

*You tried to understand. The many times we spoke about it, you were always a kind listener and if I was attracted to girls, you'd be first on my dance card!
Thank you for being a great friend!*

First things first!

You will find the notes for this process and the DNA change agent in my briefcase. The briefcase is locked and the key is in my bathroom on the shelf, hidden behind my moisturiser.

If I am dead, hopefully, you may be able to work out what went wrong so you can help other people who are suffering as I was!

*I know the risks but I am confident this will work and I will emerge as I was meant to be. By the way, I expect I will be comatose for sometime and I know that hospital protocol requires a patient's name! *smile**

Please call me Norah! It's the name that I always felt was me!

As I said, I know the risks and there is a high probability I could die!

Out of the blue and into the black!

Hopefully, I'll return to the blue as Norah!

I'm sorry I couldn't tell you what I was doing but I couldn't see any other way out for me. Tell old grumpy Herbie that I'm sorry! Although, I have every

confidence the cantankerous genius will be able to figure out what went wrong if I don't make it!

There were many times when I look back at my childhood in that sleepy town I grew up in and wondered what went wrong with me, why was I punished?

I know now there was nothing wrong with me, I just was! There is just existence and we are what we choose, not something directed by some mythical being.

I've decided to be Norah!

Remember that night we watched old movies and I told you about my life and my wishes? You were so kind and understanding!

Then we watched the old Ghostbusters and laughed at the absurdity of it all!

Well, see you on the other side, Ray!⁴

Love you Hester and thank you so much!

Out of the blue and into the black!

With all my love,

Norah

Four. The Other Side of This Life.

■

*Would you like to know a secret just between you and me
I don't know where I'm going next, I don't know who I'm gonna be
But that's the other side of this life I've been leading
That's the other side of this life.*

*Well my whole world's in an uproar, my whole world's upside down
I don't know where I'm going next, but I'm always bumming around
And that's another side to this life I've been leading
And that's another side to this life⁵*

■

1.

I was weeping silently by the time I finished reading the letter for the third time. Somehow, I managed, with shaky fingers, to carefully fold the creased piece of paper and hand it back to the silent Hester.

She had obviously read the letter many times herself – the creases and thinness of the paper testified to that. The way that she held it, indicated it was, to her, a precious item.

‘Thank you,’ I said and there was really nothing else to say.

Hester nodded and I watched as she carefully placed the folded letter back in her diary as if it was a treasure of a bygone age.

‘What was he like?’

‘Jim?’ Hester stared at the wall. ‘He was kind and generous with a very dry sense of humour. Very Australian in many ways and then, suddenly, something else.’

‘You loved him, didn’t you?’ I asked suddenly and Hester just nodded once. I saw tears shimmering in her eyes.

‘He was a beautiful person,’ she said, smiling through glistening eyes, ‘just as you are.’

‘You were very close.’ It was meant as a question but didn’t come out that way.

Hester answered it anyway.

‘Yes. We spoke about many things and as we became closer, Jim told me more about his...his...’

‘Desire to be female?’

‘Yes.’

‘Was it a shock?’

‘In a way but not in other ways.’ Hester smiled wryly. ‘When he told me, a lot of his characteristics, even gestures made sense.’

‘He...he was very brave, wasn’t he?’

‘Yes,’ Hester said evenly, ‘he was.’

We hugged.

I think I began the hug but it was nice and we both needed the comfort.

2.

‘I told Bronwyn that you read the letter,’ Hester said suddenly. We were sitting on a bench in the garden in the grounds of the hospital after my usual medical examination and tests.

‘Why?’

‘She asked me if I had shown it to you yet. I had to tell the truth.’

‘I understand. I suppose she wants to talk to me about it?’ I said moodily.

‘Only if you want to,’ Hester said, staring into the distance.

I studied the Elm trees and watched a bird on one of the boughs. A gardener was planting seedlings in a freshly raked garden bed and I could hear the distant sound of traffic beyond the walls that surrounded the hospital.

‘Wouldn’t hurt, I suppose,’ I said after a minute. ‘To talk about it, I mean.’

‘No,’ Hester said carefully, ‘it wouldn’t hurt at all.’

3.

‘How did you feel when you read the letter?’ Bronwyn asked.

‘It was strange,’ I confessed.

‘Why?’

‘It felt like it was written by another person and yet it was written by me, I suppose.’

‘Was it?’

‘Was it what?’

‘Written by you?’

‘Not me now but me then! It was a sad letter.’

‘Sad?’

‘Yes. God, Bronwyn, you can be so irritating!’

‘Me? Irritating?’

‘There you go again!’

‘I’ll try not to irritate you, Norah,’ Bronwyn said with a straight face and I smiled.

‘No, you won’t,’ I muttered, ‘you bloody like irritating me! Look, the letter was sad!’

‘Why?’

‘Because...because it was like a suicide note! I wrote a suicide note! If all this is true!’

I sniffled, Bronwyn silently handed me a tissue and waited until I had regained composure.

Then, she silently pushed a pen and a blank piece of paper towards me.

‘Write, “Dear Hester”,’ she said simply.

‘Why?’

‘Now who’s being irritating?’

‘Oh, all right!’

I scribbled the words on the piece of paper. Bronwyn carefully took the paper and studied it for a moment before laying it on the table.

Then she placed a document in a clear plastic sleeve on the table next to it.

‘It’s a copy,’ she said simply and I saw it was Jim’s letter to Hester.

‘Do you see?’ Hester asked.

‘See what?’ I mumbled.

‘The handwriting. Your handwriting is completely different from the writing in the letter!’

Stunned, I snatched the two documents up and studied them.

She's right! They are different. There are similarities but also very dissimilar in other ways!

‘It’s not your letter, Norah,’ Bronwyn said gently, ‘you didn’t write it.’

Tears rolled down my cheeks but I still managed to smile weakly at Bronwyn.

‘Thank you,’ I said huskily.

‘What for?’

‘Don’t do that again,’ I croaked. ‘Just accept my thanks, will you?’

She smiled softly.

‘I accept.’

We hugged for a long moment while I wept.

4.

‘Let’s do something different today, Norah,’ Joni said when I emerged from my room.

‘What?’

‘Well, I thought we could tackle your ears and eyebrows, perhaps other things. There’s a good hair stylist in the village.’

‘Oh. I suppose I did say I’d do it.’

‘You don’t have to,’ Joni said reluctantly. ‘It was just an idea to do something different.’

‘No, you’re right,’ I said a little more brightly than I felt. ‘Let’s go! It’s time I thought about making my way in the big bad world!’

‘Getting your hair styled does that?’ Joni teased.

‘I suppose it’s a new experience, that’s all,’ I explained.

‘That could be a good thing, couldn’t it?’

‘You’re right again, Joni. I suspect you’ve been taking questioning lessons from Bronwyn!’

‘Why do you say that?’ Joni said innocently and then completely spoiled the effect by laughing.

5.

‘You look nice,’ Hester said. ‘New hairstyle?’

‘Just a tidy up,’ I said a little embarrassed, fingering my newly styled hair.

‘Suits you.’

She looked at me for a moment and I saw something deep within her eyes.

‘Do I look like Jim?’ I asked suddenly.

‘In some ways,’ Hester said truthfully, ‘but more in a sister and brother way. There are striking differences as well.’

I nodded, not really wanting to know what the differences were, and put the magazine I had been reading on the chair beside me.

‘You’ve had your fingernails done?’ Hester noticed.

‘I’ve had the works,’ I said ruefully. ‘Ears pierced, manicure, pedicure, waxing from eyebrows to places I don’t want to even talk about! It was Joni’s idea of

having fun! She is really weird, that girl!’ I joked.

Hester laughed.

‘It’s nice to be pampered.’

‘Yes,’ I agreed, ‘it is.’

Hester’s smile slipped away.

‘Professor Frankston wants to see you.’

‘Have I done something wrong?’

‘No, of course not.’

‘What does he want?’

‘I shouldn’t really tell you...’

‘Come on,’ I wheedled. ‘I won’t say anything.’

‘You have to pretend to be surprised.’

‘Surprised? Why?’

‘He wants to offer you a job.’

‘A job? Doing what?’

‘He’s come up with an idea that you could act as a consultant as he tests Jim’s process.’

‘Oh. I don’t really know if I’ll be much help...’

‘I know and so does Herbie. It’s just his gruff way of giving you money so you can begin your life.’

‘Oh,’ I said shocked. ‘I hadn’t really thought of that. That’s nice of him.’

‘He’s a nice bloke. I shouldn’t tell you this either but he’s going to ask you what name you want on your passport and other documents.’

‘Passport? He can do that?’

‘He’s very well connected. What name would you choose?’ Hester asked, obviously interested.

‘I’d have to think about it,’ I lied.

6.

‘Please sit down, Norah.’

I curiously looked around Professor Frankston’s office as I sat. Bookshelves crammed with books, folders and papers, a large cluttered desk and a framed photograph of a woman about his age. I assumed it was his wife. There were no photographs of children.

‘Norah,’ he said gruffly with no preamble, ‘I want to implement the process of establishing identification for you.’

I nodded, waiting.

‘I thought the day you emerged from the coma could be your birthday with the year twenty-five years previously...’

‘That’s rather a romantic idea, isn’t it, Professor?’

He flushed.

‘It seemed appropriate,’ he mumbled, looking away and I felt a little sorry for teasing him.

‘Professor,’ I said formally, ‘I know it’s a little late but thank you for everything you’ve done, especially saving my life.’

Surprised, he looked at me, perhaps trying to see if I was teasing again and then said, ‘Just my job...’

‘I know but I still wanted to thank you. The birth date is a good idea.’

He nodded and cleared his throat.

‘And your name?’

‘Norah Sanderson,’ I said firmly.

I had given it a lot of thought and decided it was appropriate to somehow live Jim’s goal, to be, in some small way, what he wanted.

What was it like, Jim, being you?

Professor Frankston nodded again, wrote in his file and looked at me.

‘Any middle names?’

‘No,’ I said with a shake of my head, ‘just Norah Sanderson.’

‘Fine. I’ll have official documentation including British passport in a few days.’

‘Why would I need a passport?’ I said breezily and Professor Frankston smiled thinly.

‘Oh, I just thought you might need it.’

I smiled softly.

‘You are a very astute man, Professor Frankston.’

‘No, I’m not,’ he said gruffly, ‘Bronwyn told me you may, shall we say, wish to travel.’

I had not discussed this with Bronwyn. I didn’t really know how to discuss my growing thought to travel to Australia to do – what? I really had no idea other than visiting the place where Jim – the old me – was born!

‘I have decided to put you on a retainer,’ he said and raised a hand when I

opened my mouth. ‘No discussions accepted, Norah, it will happen! You will be useful in verifying aspects of my investigation...’

‘I wasn’t going to protest,’ I said with a smile. ‘I was just going to thank you again.’

‘There’s no need to do that...’

‘Yes, there is. Thank you very much.’

7.

I tapped gently on the door and Bronwyn looked up. She smiled when she saw me in the doorway.

‘You’ve had your hair done,’ she declared.

‘Yes. Can I come in?’

‘Of course. Sit down.’

She waited expectantly, smiling calmly at me as I looked around the room where I had discussed much, divulged even more over the past weeks.

‘Bronwyn,’ I began softly, ‘am I crazy to consider...’

‘No,’ she said calmly.

‘You haven’t let me finish...’

‘You are not crazy to travel to Australia to investigate your roots, so to speak. It’s natural.’

‘You are very good,’ I said admiringly. ‘How long have you known I was planning to go?’

‘I didn’t know for sure but guessed that you might want to learn as much as you can about James. It is natural,’ she added. ‘Will you meet his mother and sister?’

‘I’m...I’m not sure.’

‘I’ve prepared a small file for you. It has the details of mother, sister and best friend.’

‘Best friend?’

‘It’s all in there. You can read it on the plane.’

‘You seem so sure I’m going.’

‘Aren’t you?’

I smiled softly.

‘Thank you for everything, Bronwyn,’ I said slowly.

‘Glad to help. Is this goodbye?’

‘I suppose,’ I said slowly, ‘it is.’

8.

‘You have your mobile?’ Joni demanded.

‘Yes,’ I said, answering the question again, ‘for the fifteenth time, I have my mobile and I will call either you or Hester when I land.’

‘Call us both,’ Hester said firmly.

‘All right,’ I said, surrendering, ‘I will call you both when I land.’

The announcement of my flight to Sydney seemed suddenly loud and the three of us looked at each other.

‘How are you going to get to Harlequin Cove?’ Hester asked again.

‘I’ve looked it up on the Internet,’ I said, hefting my bag, ‘I can take a bus from Sydney. If I decide to go, of course,’ I hastily added.’

‘That will take ages!’ Joni declared, ignoring my small disclaimer. I think we all knew I was planning to visit Jim’s hometown. Why travel around the world if I wasn’t?

‘A day,’ I admitted, ‘but it will give me time to think.’

‘Isn’t it winter down there now?’

‘Autumn but I doubt it gets as cold as here.’

‘Are you sure you want to do this?’ Hester asked. It wasn’t the first time she had asked and I smiled softly.

‘Yes,’ I said seriously, ‘it’s something I have to do. I’d better go; I doubt they’ll hold the plane for me.’

Joni seized me in a savage hug and said fiercely, ‘You take care, hear?’

‘I will,’ I said, my voice muffled in her shoulder.

Joni broke away, small tears in her eyes as she gamely smiled.

Hester seized me in a tight embrace.

‘Good luck,’ she whispered. ‘Tell me all about it when you can.’

I nodded, squeezed her tight and then the three of us were standing in the middle of the swirling throng.

‘Thank you both...’

‘Oh, bollocks!’ Joni said, sniffing into her hand. ‘Will you just go and catch your bloody plane?’

We hugged again and then, moments later, I walked down the gate to my plane.

Once on board, I sat nervously, lost in thought as the engines revved.

As the plane roared down the runway and I was pressed back into my seat with the powerful take off, I wondered if I was crazy.

Flying to a foreign land, searching for Jim!

Five. Empty Streets.

■

Though I know that evenin's empire has returned into sand,

Vanished from my hand,

Left me blindly here to stand but still not sleeping.

My weariness amazes me, I'm branded on my feet,

I have no one to meet

And the ancient empty street's too dead for dreaming.⁶

■

1.

There were many times during the flight when I resolved to give up on my pointless quest. I also puzzled over what the so-called quest was!

There's no point, I told myself many times, as I mentally prepared myself to return home, this is a wild goose chase and I don't even know what I'm chasing!

In fact, I almost asked the steward if I could telephone ahead to reserve a seat on the next flight back to Heathrow!

What exactly was I planning on doing once I landed? Would I travel all the way to Harlequin Cove?

And then what?

I used the folder Bronwyn had given me as a device to avoid conversation with the young man in the seat to my right. He smiled at me when I sat down and I just assumed he was being polite or smiling at someone behind me but, I soon discovered, that was not the case.

As I struggled with my bag, he had leapt to his feet to help me lift it into the overhead lockers and I had thanked him quickly and sat down, opening the folder before he could talk.

The take-off prevented conversation and when the plane levelled out, I began reading.

James Monroe Sanderson born in Harlequin
Cove, New South Wales, Australia.

Mother Molly Sanderson, father unknown.

Molly Sanderson made ends meet by running
a small café in Harlequin Cove. She originally
worked in the café while pregnant and then
managed to buy it when the owners retired.

Sister Kirsten Bellows, divorced with two
young children – Jared and Sherrie.

I closed my eyes, leaned back in my seat and silently asked myself again what I
was planning to do.

*Would I walk in and introduce myself to a woman who buried her son a year
previously?*

I am insane to even travel there! I should turn around and go back home!

And there was a question – where was home?

‘Would you like a drink?’

‘Sorry?’ I turned to look at the young man in the seat.

‘You’re English, right?’

He looked at me hopefully and I recognised an American accent.

*Am I? Wasn’t James Sanderson born in Australia? But I have a British passport!
My god, this is so confusing!*

‘Ah, yes, I am.’

I turned back to the folder.

Valentino Moretti, mechanic. He married Carla

Denison immediately after High School but

divorced two years later. No children.

Valentino was inseparable with James all

through school until James left Harlequin Cove

for university. Valentino Moretti attended the funeral of James Sanderson.

I put the folder down again and sighed, my mind confused.

Funeral! James Sanderson is officially dead! What am I hoping to achieve in Harlequin Cove?

‘Can I interest you in a drink?’

I turned and the young man offered me a smile.

‘Ah, no thank you,’ I said, hopeful of retuning to the folder and my thoughts.

‘Are you going to Australia on business or vacation?’

Why is he so intent on bothering me?

‘Just personal stuff,’ I mumbled and returned to the folder.

The words blurred and I closed my eyes again.

What am I searching for? Memories? But are they mine or will they seem to be a stranger's memories?

That was the question.

2.

After managing a little sleep on the plane and watching a movie, I stretched my legs in Bangkok airport before the final leg into Sydney.

More sleep, some food and finally, we landed.

I was wide awake when I emerged from Sydney airport customs. As I walked towards the exit, I called Hester on my mobile, hoping she was awake.

She answered it on the first ring.

‘Hello?’

‘I’ve arrived,’ I said. ‘In fact, I am walking through Sydney airport right now. I didn’t wake you did I?’

‘It’s only nine.’

‘Oh, I have no idea of the time differences.’

‘That’s ok. I’ll put Joni on.’

‘Hi.’

‘Hi,’ I said. ‘You’re with Hester?’

‘We had dinner together. Everything ok?’

Yes. ‘It’s a long flight...’

‘A whole day!’

‘And more!’

‘What on earth did you do for all that time?’

‘It wasn’t so bad. Slept, watched movies. Some bloke kept trying to talk to me on the plane. It was annoying.’

Joni giggled down the line.

‘Was he cute?’

I sighed and rolled my eyes.

‘I wouldn’t have a clue,’ I mumbled. ‘I’d better find a taxi or a bus. The airport is chockers with people!’

‘Have you seen any kangaroos yet?’

‘Joni, didn’t you hear? I’m still in the bloody airport!’

‘Just asking! Don’t get sniffy. I’ll put Hester back on.’

‘Are you still going to Harlequin Cove?’ Hester immediately asked.

‘I don’t know.’ I sighed. ‘No, that’s not altogether true. I’ve kind of decided not to go. It would be stupid, wouldn’t it?’

‘If you say so,’ Hester said carefully and I smiled.

‘You and Bronwyn should form a double act – you could go on the stage!’

‘Now,’ Hester gently chided, ‘don’t be sarcastic.’

‘Sorry. I’d better go. I have to find a hotel.’

‘Make sure it’s a safe one. Sydney is supposed to be dangerous.’

‘Is it? It seems nice to me, as far as airports go.’

Call me when you decide what you’re going to do.’

‘Ok.’

I hung up, stuffed the mobile into my handbag and slung my larger bag over my shoulder.

3.

The hotel I found was clean but a little impersonal. The number of locks on the door to the room was a little off putting but I accepted it as better safe than sorry.

It's a place to sleep, I told myself as I unpacked my bag, a place to rest while I decide what I am going to do.

I had purchased a map of Australia at the airport and I spread it out on the bed and tried to find Harlequin Cove.

God, it's so small it's not even on the map!

I knew where it was, thanks to Bronwyn's folder and I knew I could take a bus to Harlequin Cove. The bus ride would be five or six hours!

This country is so bloody big!

Sighing, I folded the map and put it on the bedside table. Lying back on the bed, I stared at the ceiling and sighed again.

I'm sighing so much; I'm like a heroine in a Jane Austen book! Just make up your mind, girl! Are you going to Harlequin Cove or not!

Vaguely, I could hear the noise of Sydney through the window and I wondered if I should see the tourist sights the next day.

It occurred to me that I really had no interest in wandering around Sydney while Harlequin Cove remained full of unsolved questions.

What questions?

What do you want to find?

I rolled over onto my side and stared at the blank television screen.

Maybe Jim's memories will return, maybe I'll have a past, maybe I'll know more about Jim and, therefore, me!

It was ridiculous trying to justify a ridiculous quest with rational propositions!

Did I believe it was possible I had once been a man?

Reaching over, I dialled room service and ordered some fruit.

Make a decision tomorrow. Sleep on it!

4.

After breakfast, I wandered down to Circular Quay, stared up at the huge harbour bridge and then trudged around to the opera house.

At times, it felt as if I was on auto-pilot and just marking time. Perhaps I was just delaying the inevitable. It was, I realised, time for a decision.

And so, I found myself at a tourist booking office.

‘I was wondering,’ I asked hesitantly, ‘if I could get a ticket to Harlequin Cove?’

The young man behind the counter looked at me quizzically.

‘Harlequin Cove? Where’s that? Is it in Queensland?’

‘Ah, no...I don’t think so...’

‘He turned to a woman at the next counter.

‘Kim, do you know where Harlequin Cove is?’

‘Never heard of it,’ Kim said nasally. ‘Check it out on the computer.’

I tapped my fingers on the counter while he surveyed the computer results of his search.

‘Ok,’ he said slowly. ‘There’s only one Harlequin Cove. It’s a fishing town on the south coast.’

He looked at me as if I was insane.

‘Is that the one you want?’

‘I think so.’ I pulled Bronwyn’s folder out of my bag. ‘It’s in New South Wales,’ I said hesitantly.

‘This is New South Wales, love,’ he said, fingers flying over the keyboard, ‘so that’s the Harlequin Cove you want. You can catch a bus from the bus station or you can fly to Albury-Wodonga and take a bus from there. The bus trip would be scenic, as the bus would travel up the coastline. The bus from here goes down the highway and then onto the coast.’

‘I’ll take the bus from here. Where’s the bus station?’

‘I’ll give you a map. Hey,’ he said, ‘the bus goes tomorrow morning at seven. You want that? Otherwise you have to wait two days.’

‘Tomorrow will be brilliant.’

He handed me the ticket and after I paid him, he said, ‘I can’t book you any accommodation down there so you’ll just have to take what you find.’

‘That’ll be ok,’ I said, slipping the ticket into my handbag.

‘Bit of an adventure, eh?’

‘Something like that.’

5.

I was at the bus station when my mobile rang.

‘Hello?’

‘Hi,’ Hester said, ‘thought I’d call and see what you’re up to.’

‘I’m...I’m at the bus station,’ I said hesitantly.

‘Are you going to the airport? Are you coming home?’

Home? Is that what it is?

‘No,’ I said softly, ‘I’m going to Harlequin Cove.’

‘You’re going to Jim’s hometown? You decided?’

‘Yes. I can’t avoid it. I have no rational explanation why I should go but I just feel I have to go.’

‘I see.’

‘Don’t go all bloody Bronwyn on me, Hester!’

‘Sorry. I was just thinking. You’re looking for something?’

‘Maybe,’ I said defensively. ‘Maybe I’m searching for myself, hoping memories will come back.’

‘I think it’s good,’ Hester said quietly.

‘Do you?’ I asked hopefully.

‘Yes, definitely,’ she said firmly.

I smiled weakly.

‘Thanks, Hester.’

‘Call me when you arrive.’

‘I will.’

‘Have a good trip.’

I slipped the mobile back into my handbag and stared at the list of departing buses as they flicked over on the screens.

So many buses, so many cities!

I need only one.

It then struck me as I walked purposefully down the ramp, that I had purchased a one-way ticket to Harlequin Cove!

I climbed onto the bus and the driver, a small, elderly man in a cap and wire framed glasses looked at me curiously.

‘This here bus is going to Harlequin Cove, Miss.’

‘I know,’ I said, handing him my ticket.

The bus was virtually empty with only five or six other passengers on it.

The driver inspected the ticket and then squinted at me.

Nervously, I pushed my glasses back up the bridge of my nose.

I was wearing jeans, Doc Martens, T-shirt and a coat and I wondered if I looked a little different to the other passengers.

‘Are you going all the way or just to the Naval Base?’

‘All the way to Harlequin Cove,’ I said softly.

‘Harlequin Cove hasn’t got much, Miss, especially this time of the year,’ the driver said, handing me my ticket back. ‘It’s just a small fishing town and the fishing is dying.’

I nodded but didn’t say anything, not wanting to draw attention to my British accent.

He looked me over again and then indicated the seats with a toss of his head.

‘Take a seat, Miss, you can sit anywhere you like. You know it will take six hours to get down there?’

I nodded again.

‘Thank you,’ I said and walked down the aisle to a seat in the centre, just as the driver started the engine.

Sitting next to the window, I stared at the passing scenery as the bus slowly wound its way through the city. At last, we were rolling down a curving highway with the strange greyish coloured Australian forest on one side and farmland on the other.

Small towns popped up and the bus rolled through as I watched people hurrying from cars and trucks, going about the normal business of small rural towns. I noticed that many of the small trucks had dogs in the back and I marvelled at how the dogs remained standing up as the vehicles careened down the roads.

We stopped at a larger town and the bus was suddenly full of Navy sailors – men and women – in their crisp uniforms.

They remained on the bus for just under an hour and then all trooped off at the wire gates of the Naval Base.

At least we must be close to the ocean, I thought, watching the sailors line up for the guards to inspect their passes, perhaps even close to Harlequin Cove.

I rested my head against the glass and stayed that way until I curled in the corner

to try to sleep.

The world outside the bus had no relevance for me. Even though I felt remarkably at home in this foreign land with smiling people with strangely flat accents, I just wanted to arrive in Harlequin Cove.

Somehow, I knew that I needed to see that small town, needed to breathe the air that James had while growing up.

Was his youth my youth?

If so, what memories would this visit awaken?

Was I searching for Jim or trying to discover me?

6.

I was the only one on the bus when it rolled down the main street of Harlequin Cove.

The small town perched on a headland with a vast expanse of ocean as a backdrop.

‘We’re here, Miss,’ the driver called, looking at me in the rear vision mirror.

Wearily, I stood up, slung my bag over one shoulder, my handbag over the other and walked down the aisle.

It was almost two in the afternoon and I felt tired and sticky from the long journey.

‘There’s a guesthouse down by the Royal,’ the driver offered. ‘The Royal is a pub,’ he explained.

‘Thanks,’ I said, standing by his seat and peering through the window.

The main street sloped down the headland and I could see a smaller road branching from it, down to a small half-moon bay where ships of all shapes and sizes moored to a long wooden jetty.

‘Mrs Robinson runs the guesthouse,’ the driver said. ‘She can be a bit cranky at times but it’s not like you’ll be staying with the old battleaxe forever, is it?’

‘No,’ I said quietly. ‘Well, thanks.’

‘Usually I only take people out of Harlequin Cove,’ he said with a grin, grey stubble on his chin, ‘so you’re a bit unusual.’

In more ways than one.

‘Why only out?’ I asked, curious.

‘The town’s dying,’ he said with a shrug. ‘The government is closing the fishing grounds and buying the big operators out as compensation. No such luck for the small guys. Only the small operators left now.’

I nodded thanks and stepped from the bus.

The driver gave me a small wave, closed the door and I watched the bus roll gently down the hill before turning around to drive away from Harlequin Cove.

There were a few cars – mostly small trucks – parked in the main street and I slowly walked down the hill.

This is where James Sanderson was born and was buried! Except he wasn't really buried here!

Strangely, my heart was beating a little faster.

I saw the courthouse and the police station on my right as I walked down the hill with a large store that offered a little of everything. A woman was sweeping the step in front of the store and she stopped for a moment to watch me walk by. She didn't greet me, just watched.

Suddenly, I felt very alone.

A small truck with a black and white Border Collie in the tray drove past. The driver and passenger – both men in hats – watched me curiously as they slowly drove by.

I smelled the coffee on the sea breeze before I saw the café. Painted blue and white with a small covered porch with tables and chairs, the café was nestled between a small clothing shop and a hardware store.

A small yellow flag advertising a brand of ice cream fluttered from the porch post and red and white soft-drink signs were on the bottom of the double doors into the café.

I looked away, suddenly conscious that the café could be the one which Molly

Sanderson owned.

Jim's Mum!

Did I want to meet her?

What would I say?

I hefted my bag onto the other shoulder and walked on.

The Royal was easy to see. As I had smelled coffee on the breeze, the aroma of stale beer wafted by. The Royal was a large two-story building with thick veranda posts and men lounging near the door with pots of beer in their hands.

Their conversation stopped and I felt all eyes on me as I walked past. Staring resolutely ahead, I trudged past, looking for the guest-house as I felt the eyes of the men burning into my back.

A small hand lettered sign, proclaiming “Rooms for Rent” was in the window of the rambling timber house. The pale blue paint was peeling and some of the white paint on the window frames had all but vanished.

I opened the door and stepped into a musty reception room. A quick glance at the magazines on the coffee table, between two ancient armchairs, saw that their date of publication was almost five years ago.

The room smelled of dust, cooking cabbage and old lavender.

Tentatively, I rang the brass bell on the counter.

Moments later, a thin, grey haired woman in a polka-dot housedress poked her head around the corner of the door. Her hair was a cold grey colour and tied into a tight bun that reflected the dim lights like gunmetal.

Narrow eyes peered at me through round glasses as she pursed her lips in an immediate sign of disapproval.

‘Yes?’

‘Are you Mrs Robinson?’

‘Who wants to know?’

‘The bus driver told me...I was hoping I could rent a room for the night.’

Her eyes darted over me but she did not move.

‘One night?’

I nodded.

‘You’re not government, are you? I don’t think anyone would take to another Fisheries person here now.’

‘No, I’m not from the fisheries or whatever you called it.’

‘What are you, then?’

‘Just a visitor.’

She still hadn’t moved and her eyes ran over me once again.

‘No funny business.’

‘I’m sorry?’

‘I don’t take any funny business.’

‘I’m...I’m not sure what you mean...’

‘No entertaining men in here,’ she said firmly and my face coloured slightly as I suddenly understood what she meant.

‘No,’ I stuttered, ‘of course not...’

Finally, she moved behind the counter.

‘You can pay in advance and we don’t give dinner or breakfast. The café does take-a-ways or you can eat there or at the pub. You have to be out of the room by ten.’

‘All right.’

‘You can pay me now. In advance and no credit cards – cash only.’

She snatched the cash from my hand, gave me a battered door key and pointed at the hall.

‘Last one on the right.’

Mrs Robinson looked me up and down again.

And, with that, she vanished back to whence she had come.

7.

The room was cramped and musty. The television didn't work and there was a vague smell of stale cigarette smoke.

I saw no point in complaining and decided that, as it was just for one night, I should just grin and bear it.

It was a relief to be able to lie down and stretch out after over seven hours on the bus. Unlacing my Docs, I kicked them off and lay back, hands cupped behind my head as I stared up at the stained, yellowing ceiling.

Well, I'm here.

Now what?

From what I had seen, Harlequin Cove was very different from Manchester – in fact, from England – and I wondered if James had run away to escape the claustrophobic air of the small town.

Perhaps it wasn't always like this. Perhaps, when he was growing up, it was a vibrant town.

It was a strange thought to think that the woman – Molly Sanderson – who had

given birth to James (and, therefore, maybe to me if I really believed the story) was just a few blocks away.

It was then I knew that all I wanted to do (needed to do) was to see her! I didn't have to talk to her, just see her and know there was someone else on the planet I had a connection to, no matter how tenuous that connection was.

With that happy thought, I dozed lightly until I decided it was time to brave whatever bathroom the guesthouse provided.

I didn't have high expectations but the stained bathtub and the dripping shower head was worse than I imagined.

Still, I managed to enjoy a hot shower and even washed my hair.

Feeling surprisingly better, I dressed in fresh clothes and walked onto the main street. The wind was blustery as the sun sank and I went back inside the guesthouse to retrieve my coat.

Coat zipped up, collar turned up to keep my hair in and hands deep in the pockets, I walked down the main street towards the café.

There was a woman behind the counter but, from my vantage point on the other side of the street, I could not make out her features.

I wondered if that was Molly Sanderson.

Is it her?

Should I go over?

Realising that I may look a little conspicuous standing on the street, I turned and walked back up the hill towards where the bus had dropped me off.

The general store was open so I pushed the door open – bell jangling – and walked inside. An elderly woman at the counter was talking to an equally elderly man in a battered cap. It seemed he had just purchased a newspaper and both turned to look at me as I entered.

Conscious they were watching me, I wandered down the narrow aisle of goods and selected a bag of mixed nuts. There was a small display of fruit and vegetables and I picked a few apples, a handful of carrots and an orange.

Placing them on the counter before the woman, I offered a tentative smile and waited.

‘See you, Emily,’ the elderly man said and, after a quick glance at me, left the store, newspaper folded under his arm.

‘Bye, Todd,’ Emily called after him and turned to me. If I expected a smile, I

would have been disappointed as she just took the carrots and weighed them without a word.

I silently watched her, guessing she thought I was one of the dreaded fisheries people and waited until she had put all my purchases in a bag.

After paying her, I carried the bag to the door.

‘We’re fed up with fisheries people down here.’

‘So I’ve heard,’ I said softly. ‘I’ve nothing to do with them. I’m not even sure what they are.’

Her expression softened when she heard my accent and she actually smiled.

‘You a tourist?’

‘Yes,’ I said, thinking it was the simplest answer.

‘You’re off the beaten track. Any reason you’re here?’

‘No,’ I lied, ‘I got lost.’

‘You staying at the pub?’

‘No, at the guesthouse.’

‘Oh, the pub’s better.’

‘I’ve paid so I might as well stay. Thank you.’

The bell jangled behind me as I closed the door and stepped into the blustery wind.

As I walked past the café, I glanced through the window and saw a young woman behind the counter, chatting to a young man.

Slowly, I walked back to the guesthouse and ate my fruit in my room while listening to the radio. It was one of the few things that worked in my room.

For a while, I browsed the folder Bronwyn had given me and was not surprised to find a copy of the letter Jim had written to Hester in the back. I read it again and then gently put the folder aside.

It began to rain and I listened to the fat raindrops hitting the roof. I turned the light off, pulled the dusty, tattered curtains back and watched the raindrops slide

down the grimy window.

Tomorrow, I'll find a way back to Sydney. I'll get a plane back to England. This entire thing is silly!

I mean, what on earth can I say to her?

Do I really believe I was once a man?

I walked over to the small wall mirror and stared at my face.

‘Hello,’ I said softly, ‘I know you’ll find this strange but I used to be your son except I don’t remember any part of his life or you! I don’t know what it would be like to be a bloke with meat and veg...well, you know what I mean.’

It sounded even dafter when I said it aloud.

The radio was conducting a general knowledge quiz and I lay on my bed listening to it, trying to answer questions until I began to feel sleepy.

Tomorrow, I told myself again, I’ll go back to Sydney!

Six. I Remember Yesterday.

■

There was someone who

was close to you

Someone who held you tight

Before I split the night

And there were laughs and dreams

Hopes and schemes

Long before we knew

There'd be a me and you⁷

■

1.

I didn't bother saying goodbye to Mrs Robinson – I assumed that was the name of the woman who operated the establishment laughingly described as a guesthouse – and I walked into the main street, bag over my shoulder.

The rain had stopped but the sky was cloudy. It was early but there was activity up and down the street. Standing by the pub, I looked down the road that ran to the bay and saw that most of the boats I had seen the day before had gone and I wondered if they were out fishing.

There were a few buildings on the road to the wharf and a larger building near it with “Cannery” painted in faded white lettering on the metal roof.

Even from where I was standing, I could see the windows and doors were boarded up.

There were some cars and small trucks near the café and, before I made a conscious decision to go, I had already walked towards it.

My heart was pounding but I seemed unable to turn my feet away and I stepped onto the small porch. The yellow ice cream flag fluttered near my face as I nervously opened one of the doors.

Faces turned to look at me and the café suddenly fell silent, as it seemed everyone was inspecting me. Their faces were expressionless but I suspected that

were summing me up as one of those dreaded “Fishery” people!

For an instant, I wondered if they were all going to rise to their feet and attack me. However, a young woman behind the counter beckoned me with a smile. She was in a pink uniform dress – slightly faded – and I saw a white name badge on her left breast but I could not make out her name from the door.

‘Come in,’ she called to me. ‘It’s nice and warm in here. Take a seat and I’ll take your order soon.’

I nodded and, as I moved towards the booths near the window, the woman said to the others in a stage whisper, ‘she’s not Fisheries! Emily said she’s a tourist!’

I saw some of the men nod and the conversation returned, newspapers rustling. It was obvious I had already been the object of discussion amongst the locals.

The café felt warm and comfortable and I slid into a booth by the window so I could look down onto the wharf.

As I studied the menu, I suddenly felt hungry and the bacon and egg toasted sandwich sounded very attractive.

With a cup of strong tea!

Putting the menu down, I suddenly looked up and saw an older woman in the

same faded uniform of the younger woman staring at me.

My heart pounded so loudly and so quickly, I felt weak and excited at the same time.

Is that her?

Is that Molly Sanderson?

Why is she staring at me?

I turned to study the wharf, trying to regain my composure, wondering what on earth I should say.

Should I say anything?

Or just leave?

The young woman bustled over, smiled at me and I could read her name badge. Her name was Fiona and I guessed she was about nineteen or twenty.

‘What would you like, love?’

‘I’ll...I’ll have the bacon and egg sandwich...’

‘Toasted?’

‘Yes, please.’

‘Coffee or tea?’

‘Tea, thanks.’

‘Coming up.’

Fiona took the menu, smiled at me again and walked away. To avoid locking eyes with the woman I believed was Molly Sanderson, I stared out the window.

A moment later, I sensed someone standing next to my table.

‘Here’s your tea.’

I turned, my heart thumping and looked up into the curious eyes of the older woman. My heart increased its pulsing speed when I saw her name on the name

badge.

It was Molly!

The mother of James Sanderson was standing just inches from me!

Wait – isn't she my mother?

‘Here’s your tea, love,’ she said in a husky voice and I nervously nodded as I took the mug of hot tea. She placed a small white jug of milk on the table and nodded at the sugar bowl.

‘There’s sugar there, if you need it.’

‘Ah...no sugar, thanks.’

‘Milk?’ Molly asked, picking up the jug.

‘Just a dash,’ I said automatically and her hand holding the milk jug froze for a moment.

In that split second, I saw a parade of unidentifiable emotions storm over Molly’s face and flicker through her wide eyes. I thought she recognised

something but could not be sure.

Then, she moved and poured a little milk into the jug with a trembling hand.

‘Say when,’ Molly murmured.

‘That’s enough. Thank you.’

I looked up and tried to smile but I almost felt I would collapse. The sense of connection, the power of emotion that seemed to draw us together was so powerful, I almost leapt to my feet and hugged her, desperately wanting to hold her tight, to feel her heart against mine!

I couldn’t understand where those feelings erupted from and I offered another shaky smile to hold the moment.

Molly licked her lip and murmured, ‘what’s your name?’

I couldn’t tell her my last name was Sanderson so I mumbled, ‘Norah, it’s Norah.’

Molly’s reaction was extraordinary!

Firstly, she dropped the jug, shattering it on the hard wooden floor and spilling white milk over the dark timber like a puddle of white glossy blood.

Then, she staggered back, face distraught and eyes wide, clutching her chest and moaning, 'No! No!'

I managed to stand as Fiona ran to comfort Molly as everyone in the café stared at the astonishing scene. Then, one by one, the heads turned towards me. Their faces were alive with suspicion and, I suspected, dislike.

Molly shrugged Fiona away, ran from the room and vanished through a door near the counter, leaving Fiona to glower angrily at me.

'What did you say to her?' Fiona demanded, hands on hips.

'Nothing,' I managed to say, still weak from the electrifying moment when Molly and I somehow emotionally connected.

Were my memories returning? I mean, were the memories of James returning?

At that precise moment, the café door opened and a woman about two or three years older than me stood in the doorway. She was wearing a coat over the café uniform and I knew, somehow instantly knew, that this was Kirsten, Molly's daughter and, in some strange way, my sister!

‘What’s going on?’ Kirsten demanded. ‘Where’s Mum?’

‘She’s rushed out, Kirsten,’ Fiona said, glaring at me. ‘She’s upset. This woman said something to her!’

Kirsten turned to look at me, as if seeing me for the first time and I saw her eyes widen with surprise.

‘I’d better go,’ I murmured. ‘I’m sorry but all I said was my name...’

‘Your name?’ Kirsten asked faintly. For a moment, I thought she was going to step forward but, instead, turned and rushed through the door her mother had vanished through moments before.

Fiona watched me as I struggled into my coat and for a moment I wondered if she was going to tell me to stay but all she said was, ‘Mrs Sanderson has had a rough time. She buried her son a while back and hasn’t been the same since...’

‘It’s all right,’ I said, ‘I understand.’

Scooping the bag with my things in it and slinging the strap over my shoulder, I hurriedly picked up my handbag and slipped out the café.

Standing on the porch, I looked up and down the windswept street and wondered what I could do.

The bacon and egg sandwich sounded good, I thought, my stomach rumbling from hunger. Perhaps I can book into the pub until it's time for the bus to come back.

Yes, that's it, I told myself, trudging across the street, I'll go back to England. This entire trip was stupid!

Still, it had been extraordinary to see Molly and then Kirsten! Were they my only connection to James and, in a strange way, my connection to life and the world?

Was I really James?

I was and, somehow, a small part of me believed it, without Molly and Kirsten I am just a shallow and false vessel with no memories, no connections!

‘Wait!’

I turned and saw Molly standing on the street near the café porch. She wasn't wearing a coat and was shivering from the cold and, perhaps, from the after effects of the shock – whatever it was – she had just experienced.

‘I'm sorry,’ Molly called and took a careful step forward as if she expected I would run away.

‘It’s all right,’ I called, also taking a step forward. That one small movement seem to encourage Molly and she took a few steps forward so she was standing close.

‘You’re cold,’ I murmured and she smiled faintly.

‘I’m acting like an idiot,’ she said. ‘Can I explain?’

‘If you want to,’ I said.

Kirsten burst from the café with a coat that I took to be her mother’s in her hands and slipped it around Molly’s shoulders.

‘I think,’ Molly said softly, ‘we owe you a cup of tea. We live just down the street. Would you like a cuppa?’

‘Mum!’ Kirsten hissed, glancing at me. ‘We don’t know...’

‘You feel it, Kirsten,’ Molly said calmly, looking at me, ‘just as I do, don’t you?’

Kirsten looked at me and then looked down at the empty wharf.

‘It’s the white house,’ she murmured, pointing up the hill at a house with bare

trees and a white picket fence. ‘Come up for a cup of tea. Fiona will be right on her own.’

Kirsten looped her arm through her mother’s and slowly, the three of us walked up the hill towards the house.

2.

The house was warm and immediately felt like home. A large enclosed wood heater crackled cheerily in the living room and the kitchen was large with a solid wooden table.

‘Take a seat,’ Kirsten said, pointing at the table, ‘and I’ll pop the kettle on.’

She moved behind the bench and peeled her coat off.

‘Take your coat off,’ she said, pulling cups and saucers down from the cupboards.

Molly sat down at the table and waited until I removed my coat – laid it over hers, a small but cosy act – and I sat down opposite her.

I didn’t know what to say and was conscious that Molly was openly studying me.

‘You’re English?’ Molly asked, eyes on mine.

I nodded.

‘You have nice eyes,’ Molly said after a moment.

‘Thank you,’ was all I managed to say.

‘Did you see her eyes, Kirsten?’ Molly called.

‘I saw them,’ Kirsten said, spooning tea into the teapot. She turned to look at me. ‘From Mum’s reaction, I’m guessing your name is Norah?’

I blinked at that.

‘Well, yes it is...’

‘I see,’ Kirsten said enigmatically. ‘Are you hungry? Fancy some toast?’

‘Toast would be lovely.’

I looked back at Molly who was still studying me.

‘What brings you to Harlequin Cove?’ Kirsten called from the bench. Molly and I continued to look at each other.

‘I don’t know,’ I said truthfully, breaking eye contact with Molly at last.

‘Did you know my son?’ Molly asked suddenly and the silence was stiff and heavy in the room. Kirsten froze and watched us.

‘I knew of him,’ I murmured, trying to avoid Molly’s penetrative gaze.

Her finger tilted my chin back.

‘You have his eyes,’ she said, her own eyes locked on mine.

I moved my head away and stared at the tabletop.

What am I doing? This is insane, isn’t it?

The toaster suddenly popped and I jumped slightly from the abrupt noise.

‘You didn’t tell us your last name?’ Kirsten called from the other side of the kitchen as she poured hot water into the teapot.

‘I think I’d better go,’ I said softly.

‘Don’t go,’ Molly said simply, reaching over to rest her hand lightly on mine.

It felt good, so good I almost cried.

‘How do you have your tea, Norah?’ Kirsten called.

‘She has it with a dash of milk,’ Molly said, smiling softly at me.

Kirsten’s eyes darted over us.

‘That’s exactly how Jim...’

‘I know,’ Molly said to her daughter, eyes still on me.

Silence again as Kirsten slowly walked over and placed the teapot with cups and saucers on the table. Moments later, Kirsten returned with the toast, knives, butter, milk and sugar.

‘She doesn’t have sugar in her tea,’ Molly said softly.

‘But I do,’ Kirsten said, pouring tea into the cups. ‘Help yourself to a piece of toast. The plates are on the shelf behind you.’

I stood up, conscious that they were both watching me, took three plates and placed them on the table.

Kirsten and Molly watched as I poured a dash of milk into my tea and then spread some blueberry jam on a piece of toast.

‘Do you see that?’ Molly said to Kirsten.

‘Yes,’ Kirsten said. ‘No butter – just jam – just like Jim.’

Lost of words, I sipped the tea and then nibbled on the piece of toast.

‘This is nice,’ I said. ‘I’d better go after the tea...’

‘Why?’ Molly asked.

‘I...I don’t want to cause trouble...’

‘You’re not,’ Kirsten said, munching on some toast. After a minute she said to Molly, ‘show her the letter, Mum.’

Molly stood up and said softly, 'I'll just go and get it.'

Kirsten said nothing, just stirred her tea. Somehow, I knew what Molly was going to get and I wondered if I should be here, if I should become involved.

I am already involved! I was Jim or so they tell me!

Molly returned and placed a battered white envelope on the table.

'The telephone rang at three in the morning,' she said quietly, 'and a man told me my son had died in an accident.'

'A laboratory accident,' Kirsten offered.

'He wanted to know if I wanted Jim buried in Australia and, of course, I said yes. He offered to escort the boy and to arrange everything. I was still numb so I just said yes.'

'It was awful,' Kirsten said softly.

'I had always expected such a call,' Molly said softly, head down and fingers clasped together. She lifted her head and looked directly into my eyes.

‘I always knew he had problems,’ she said softly, ‘he told me of them and I wished I could help him in some way...’

‘Don’t, Mum,’ Kirsten said brokenly, ‘don’t blame...’

‘I’m not blaming myself, love,’ Molly said softly. ‘I just wished I could help.’

‘I know, Mum, but...’

‘A few days later we buried him. The people who came with the coffin were nice and said good things about Jim and then they left, left me with this huge black hole in my heart.’

A tear trickled down my face and I longed to hug her, longed to make the hurt just go away.

‘The week of the funeral, this came.’

Molly pushed the envelope towards me.

‘I couldn’t open it for a long time and then Kirsten and I read it together.’

I stared at the envelope, my heart pounding at a huge pace.

It was another letter from Jim!

‘I think,’ Molly said quietly, ‘you should read it.’

‘I...’

‘Please,’ Kirsten said, head down, staring at the table while nervous fingers tapped on the handle of her teacup.

My own hands shook as I picked up the envelope. Slowly, I removed the worn, creased letter and began to read while Molly and Kirsten silently watched me.

Seven. Message to my Girl – 2.

■

No more empty self-possession

Vision swept under the mat

It's no New Year's resolution

It's more than that

No there's nothing quite as real

As a touch of your sweet hand

I can't spend the rest of my life

Buried in the sand⁸

■

Dear Mum and Kirsten,

First, I want to tell you how much you both mean to me,

how much I love you.

*You have been so supportive, so wonderful to me all my life and for that, I will
always be grateful.*

I am sorry I haven't been home that much over the years but things ...well, you know how things are.

Then again, maybe you don't!

Remember when I left? I made the grand statement that I was going to find myself?

Probably by the time you receive this letter you will be told that I am dead. There is a possibility I am and yet there is a real possibility that I am not and, in fact, have been reborn!

Maybe I have actually found myself!

All my life I have been different, struggling to pass as something, some one, I am not in a cruel and unforgiving world. If I am dead, it will be a relief, a final escape from my personal nightmare.

I guess you are both crying now! God knows, I am as well! In case you think the worse, let me tell you I am not talking about suicide and I have not intentionally taken my life!

Over the years, I have been working on a process to transform a male into female! I won't go into details and I know it sounds like a science fiction miracle and that's exactly what I hope it will be – a miracle!

This process hasn't been tested on anyone else so I am the lucky guinea pig!

Hopefully, I will emerge from the coma (necessary to change my entire body and mind) a fully functioning, healthy female – just as I was meant to be!

I predict there will be mental changes and I may not even remember much of my life. It doesn't matter as the rewards are so great!

I know what you are thinking, Mum, but this is my chance!

My only chance!

Mum, Kirsten – I have to do this!

I have no choice, even though I know the risks!

It is best that you think of me as dead! Put me out of your life and remember that I died trying to be what I was meant to be!

And remember that I died happy, happy that I actually had a chance to change, to be who I was meant to be!

I am going to post this and begin my journey.

Thank you for a wonderful family.

Kirsten, I'm sorry I never saw your children but I know they are beautiful, just like their mother. I could not have asked for a better sister!

We are all driven by the important things in our lives. You both know what was important to me.

If this succeeds (and I believe it will) I will finally be me! Me!

At last!

And if a young woman called Norah ever pops up in your life, treat her well – it could be me!

With all my love,

Your loving daughter and sister,

Norah

Eight. Mad World.

■

*All around me are familiar faces
Worn out places, worn out faces
Bright and early for their daily races
Going nowhere, going nowhere
And their tears are filling up their glasses
No expression, no expression
Hide my head I want to drown my sorrow
No tomorrow, no tomorrow
And I find it kind of funny
I find it kind of sad
The dreams in which I'm dying
Are the best I've ever had
I find it hard to tell you
'Cos I find it hard to take
When people run in circles
It's a very, very
Mad World⁹*

-

1.

Tears were rolling down my cheeks when I gently folded the letter and reinserted it in the envelope. Wordlessly, I handed the envelope to Molly who simply pushed a box of tissues towards me.

I sniffled into the tissues and then stood up while they watched and put the soggy ball of tissues in the kitchen tidy.

How did I know it was in that cupboard?

Are my memories coming back?

They watched me as I sat down and fished my passport from my handbag.

Silently, I slid it over the table and Molly and Kirsten leaned together to read it.

Norah Sanderson.

They looked up and I saw hope in both their eyes.

‘I have another letter,’ I said softly. ‘A copy of one, at least.’

Pulling Bronwyn's folder from my bag, I opened it to the letter Jim had left Hester.

Molly and Kirsten read it, nodding softly and glancing at each other.

'We met Hester,' Kirsten said, 'at the funeral.'

'You are Jim, aren't you?' Molly said softly, eyes flashing with hope and knowledge.

'I...I don't know,' I said, fingers toying with the folder. 'I woke up and they told me...'

'Tell us everything, Norah,' Molly said gently.

'Please,' Kirsten added.

I looked at them and they both smiled encouragingly.

Haltingly, I began.

2.

When I finished, Molly's face was alive with excitement.

'I knew it! I knew I felt something when I first saw you!'

'Mum,' Kirsten said slowly, 'we don't know for sure...'

'No,' I said softly, 'I don't know! They told me but I can't remember anything!'

'You knew where the kitchen garbage was,' Molly calmly pointed out.

It suddenly dawned on Kirsten that I had opened the cupboard to put my used tissues in the garbage bin and there was an expression of mild astonishment on her face.

'But...but I don't remember anything else!' I murmured.

'You...you don't remember us?' Kirsten asked haltingly and I slowly shook my head.

'Norah,' Molly said softly, reaching across the table to take my hand in both of

hers, 'did you feel something in the café?'

'When I first saw you,' I admitted.

She squeezed my hand comfortingly and smiled.

'It was a huge feeling,' Molly said quietly, 'wasn't it?'

I nodded and Molly smiled.

'The memories will come back,' she said firmly.

'How...how do you know?'

'I just know,' Molly said with a mother's firm conviction.

'But...but what if they don't?'

'They will,' Molly said.

'It could take time,' Kirsten said slowly.

‘I think,’ Molly said resolutely, ‘you should stay with us for a while.’

‘Mum,’ Kirsten said worriedly, ‘do you think that’s a good idea?’

Molly turned to her daughter.

‘Kirsten,’ she said slowly, ‘I’m sure Norah is Jim!’

I saw Kirsten open her mouth to protest so I said, ‘I’m not sure, Mrs Sanderson,’ I said softly and I could see Molly was disappointed that I didn’t call her “Mum”.

‘I mean,’ I went on, ‘they told me I was...had been Jim... when I woke up but I have no proof! They could be hiding something! It could be some sort of cover-up or trick!’

‘Did you trust the people who helped you?’ Molly asked. ‘You mentioned Hester...’

‘And Joni and even professor Frankston. They were all nice,’ I said, ‘so, yes, I trust them but...’

‘Mum,’ Kirsten said suddenly, ‘we need to get back to the café!’

‘You go, love,’ Molly said softly. ‘I’ll help Norah settle in.’

Kirsten sighed, pushed her chair back and stood up.

‘I guess,’ she said slowly to me, ‘I’ll see you later?’

‘If I decide to leave, I’ll say goodbye before I go,’ I said and that seemed to satisfy her.

‘Leave?’ Molly frowned. ‘Norah, we have to work this out! You have to stay.’

Kirsten rolled her eyes at me with a silent conspiratorial air as she kissed her mother’s cheek and I smiled softly.

Sisters? Is that what we are?

Part of me didn’t believe it but, at the same time, a large part of me wanted it to be true! To have a family, a mother and a sister was tantalising.

Why couldn’t I stay?

Where else would I go?

And yet, wasn't this bizarre? The entire story I had just relayed to Molly and Kirsten had sounded far fetched and very peculiar to my own ears. Nobody else would even believe it!

'See you,' Kirsten said with a wave and, moments later, she had left. Through the window, I saw her walking down the hill towards the café, hands deep in her coat pockets and scarf fluttering behind her.

I watched her until Kirsten vanished into the café and wondered if she really was my sister.

Would this empty feeling inside me go away, would I stop feeling so very alone?

Why couldn't I stay?

3.

Molly led me into the living room and I glanced around at the comfortable furniture clustered around the crackling slow combustion heater, logs glowing on a sea of red embers behind the glass.

An upright piano was in one corner and the television was in the other. Molly reached up and took a framed photograph from the top of the piano.

‘Jim,’ she said simply.

My mouth was suddenly dry as I nervously took the framed photograph. A young man with dark eyes – eyes like mine – smiled at the camera. He wore glasses and his dark hair curled down to his shoulders.

Even I could see the resemblance between the way I wore my hair – even the glasses – and Jim!

I didn’t know what to say and yet I was suddenly overwhelmed with a deep sense of loss. The feeling was so profound and intense, I felt weak and almost dropped the photograph.

‘Are you all right?’ Molly asked, concerned, using one hand to steady me.

‘Y...yes,’ I whispered, ‘I...I think so.’

‘Poor thing,’ she said softly. ‘You’ve been through so much.’

‘So have you,’ I whispered.

Molly smiled gently at me and patted my cheek.

‘I believe you were Jim...’

‘But, I’m a woman! I can’t...’

‘Jim was a woman in a man’s body,’ Molly said firmly. ‘I know the pain he went through. He would be very happy to be you so, Norah, you should be happy.’

I looked down at Jim’s smiling face and then gently handed the photograph back to Molly.

‘I hope I am happy one day,’ I said diplomatically.

Molly nodded, placed the photograph back on the piano and then smiled.

‘Let me show you your room.’

‘Molly,’ I said quickly, ‘do you think this is a good idea? I mean, what will people in the town say?’

‘I don’t care what anyone says! I never have and never will! Now, let’s look at your room. It may bring back some memories.’

I followed Molly down the hall and I wondered if we were both delusional and bordering on insanity.

Was this entire fantastic journey mad? In England when Hester, Joni and even professor Frankston explained the change from Jim to Norah, it had seemed plausible.

God, I had believed it so I had accepted the name Sanderson, for goodness sakes!

Now, halfway around the world in this small house with this woman who was suffering from the loss of her only son, I wondered if we were both looking for something that did not exist.

Was I insane to wish for so much, to yearn for a family that would remove this aching hole inside me and connect me with somebody else?

Am I so wrong to want it?

But, what is the cost to us, the cost to Molly and to me?

4.

Molly stood aside and allowed me to step inside the small room.

A window was on the wall opposite to the door and covered by a thick curtain.

‘Jim liked to sleep in,’ Molly explained, indicating the curtain, ‘even when he was young.’

I nodded and stepped into the room.

A single bed with a homely quilt was next to the window with a battered wooden desk and chair opposite the bed. A small bookcase crammed with books was next to a dark coloured old-fashioned timber wardrobe.

It was suddenly comforting and a deep sense of security enveloped me with a warm silent embrace.

For the first time since I had woken, I felt safe!

I closed my eyes and inhaled, enjoying the sense of safety and warmth that crept through me.

‘I...I feel safe here,’ I whispered, eyes still closed.

Molly didn’t say anything but her hand stole into mine and squeezed.

5.

‘This is my room,’ Molly said, ‘and Kirsten sleeps down the hall with Jared and Sherrie in the next room.’

Of course, Jared and Sherrie!

‘Your nephew and niece,’ Molly said quietly. ‘They’re at school.’

Suddenly, I felt almost faint and stumbled against the wall. Molly supported me and steered me back into the kitchen where she guided me into a chair.

‘Sit down while I put the kettle on. I think you need something a little more than toast. How about scrambled eggs with tomatoes?’

‘I ...I...’

‘You look pale. A good breakfast will do you good.’

I sank back in the chair, took my glasses off and rubbed my eyes.

‘Don’t you think this is very strange?’ I asked at last as Molly cracked eggs.

‘Of course,’ she said, ‘but these are strange times.

I put my glasses back on and looked at her.

Is this my mother?

Yes, I thought, these are strange times!

6.

I woke with a start, my head reeling with the last of the strange dream and looked around the unfamiliar room.

Where am I?

Rain was tapping on the roof of the house and I looked at my wristwatch.

Four. I slept for almost two hours.

After eating the food Molly had cooked for me, we had talked some more – mainly about Jim’s childhood and things he had liked to do in the hope that my memory would return.

It didn’t.

Maybe I don’t have Jim’s memories! Maybe I’m just insane and this world exists only within my own mind!

At around two, Molly had suggested that I take a nap as I still looked pale and drawn. As I was tired, it was an attractive idea and I even allowed Molly to lead me to Jim’s old room.

‘You can just lie on the bed,’ she had explained. ‘The house is nice and warm so you won’t need a blanket. I have to duck down to the café. You’ll be fine?’

‘Yes,’ I had said, ‘I should be.’

Molly had paused at the door.

‘Will you still be here when I come back?’ Molly had quietly asked.

I had rubbed the back of my head and nodded.

‘Yes,’ I had added, ‘I’ll be here.’

‘Good,’ Molly had said simply and left, leaving me alone in Jim’s room.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, I listened intently. The house was silent. I could hear the faint crackling of the fire in the living room and the rain on the roof but nothing else.

It appeared I was alone in the house.

I picked up my glasses from the desk, put them on and slipped my feet into my boots.

My eyes wandered over the books in the bookcase and I flicked through some old science textbooks. None jogged any memories.

Cautiously, I pushed the bedroom door open, stepped into the hall, and made my way into the living room. It was warm and I stood in front of the fire for a few moments, looking over at the piano.

It drew me to it and I walked over and rested my hand on the polished veneer. It felt warm to the touch and I felt a strange feeling quiver through me.

Am I remembering something?

Is the piano connected to some old memory of Jim's?

I trailed my fingers over the piano. I was wondering if I dared open it to touch the keys when I heard the front door open.

‘Hello?’

It was Molly's voice and I hesitantly stood back from the piano as entered the room. She pulled her coat off in and smiled when she saw me.

‘You’re still here,’ she said with relief. ‘Kirsten will be here in a moment with Jared and Sherrie. Do you feel better?’

‘I suppose so. I managed to sleep.’

‘Good.’

Molly glanced at the piano.

‘James used to play that. Do you play?’

‘Ah...I don’t think so.’

Molly nodded and suddenly smiled.

‘Feel like helping me get dinner ready?’

‘Hmmm, I can’t really cook...’

‘You can peel vegetables, can’t you?’

‘I suppose I can,’ I said with a faint smile.

She returned the smile and then asked, ‘you’re going to stay, aren’t you?’

Was I?

Nothing seemed so simple anymore.

‘We’ll see,’ all I said.

‘Then,’ Molly said softly, ‘that will have to do.’

Yes, I thought as I followed Molly into the kitchen, it will have to do both of us.

7.

Molly was supremely organised and, within moments, I was standing by the sink, peeling carrots while she chopped potatoes and trimmed cuts of meat.

The front door opened and I heard the sound of running feet and looked up in time to see a young boy and a girl freeze in the doorway when they saw me.

The boy – Jared, I assumed - was about seven while the girl – Sherrie – was, I guessed, five.

‘Who’s this, Grandma?’ Jared demanded in the abrupt way of small children.

I offered a small smile and Sherrie, finger in her mouth, shyly smiled back.

‘This is Norah,’ Molly said, still chopping.

The door banged and Kirsten bustled in with grocery bags.

She nodded to me and I said, ‘let me help you.’

Kirsten allowed me to take a bag and I placed it on the kitchen bench.

‘Norah is a funny name,’ Jared pronounced.

‘You just haven’t heard it before,’ Kirsten said. ‘Let’s get you both bathed and changed before we eat.’

Kirsten glanced at the vegetable peeler in my hand and asked her mother, ‘everything ok?’

‘Everything is fine.’

Kirsten nodded to me and led the two children out of the kitchen.

‘Did you recognise them?’ Molly asked, filling a pot with water.

‘No,’ I said shaking my head. ‘When did...did your son see them last?’

Molly put the pot on the stove.

‘He never saw them. He left for England before Jared was born. He knew Kirsten was pregnant and always promised to come back to see them but he never did.’

I began to peel.

‘So,’ I said, ‘if he has never seen them why did you ask me if I recognised them?’

Molly shrugged and tipped the chopped potatoes into the water.

‘You were testing me,’ I said as I realised that had been the fact. ‘Weren’t you?’

‘Can you blame me?’ Molly said quietly.

‘No,’ I said after thinking for a moment, ‘I can’t. This is all very strange and...’

‘Why did you come all the way here, Norah?’

‘I...I fought against it,’ I said, ‘I really did but the desire to come here was overwhelming.’

I chuckled softly.

‘I also told myself I wouldn’t speak to you or Kirsten and, who knows, I might have been able to keep that promise.’

‘But I spoke to you, eh?’ Molly said with a wry grin.

‘Yes, then dropped the bloody milk jug!’

We were both laughing softly when Kirsten returned.

‘Where are the little ones?’ Molly asked.

‘In the bath. What are you two chuckling about?’

‘Norah was just saying how she had promised herself not to speak to you and me when I spoiled it by speaking to her.’

Kirsten listened but didn’t say anything, her eyes flickering from Molly to me. Immediately, I sensed a rising tension. Carefully, I put the vegetable peeler down.

‘Perhaps I should go,’ I said softly. ‘I don’t want to intrude.’

Molly was at the oven and didn’t turn around but Kirsten watched me quietly.

‘Where would you go?’ Molly asked, closing the oven door and turning around.

‘I don’t know. The Pub? I could stay the night there and...’

‘You wouldn’t get much sleep,’ Kirsten said with a smile. ‘The fishermen would keep you up.’

She stepped forward and rested her hands on the bench top.

‘Look, this is weird, there is no escaping that but we might as well see where it goes, eh?’

‘But...’

‘You can’t stay at the pub,’ Molly said firmly. ‘It’s not nice and we’ve got room here. Why not stay?’

Kirsten didn’t give me a chance to answer.

‘There’s a bottle of white wine in the fridge. How about you pour us a glass each while I check the kids? You do drink wine, don’t you?’

‘I don’t really know. I haven’t had any since I woke up from the coma.’

‘Then, let’s find out. The glasses are in the top cupboard. I know Mum has been hanging out for a drink!’

‘I have not!’ Molly protested with a large wink in my direction.

‘So you say. I believe you,’ Kirsten said over her shoulder, walking towards the bathroom, ‘but thousands wouldn’t!’

‘You’ll keep!’ Molly said, waving a spoon at Kirsten’s back but I could tell it was all in fun.

I stood uncertainly by the refrigerator and Molly smiled, hand resting on my arm.

‘We’re kind of in this together, aren’t we? Let’s just see where it goes.’

It sounded very rational. In fact, probably the most logical thing I had heard all day.

‘I’ll get the wine, then,’ I said, reaching up for the glasses.

‘Molly beamed at me.

‘Good girl.’

8.

‘You speak funny,’ Jared said while we were eating.

‘Jared!’ Kirsten said, frowning at her son.

‘It’s true!’

‘No,’ I said with a grin, pointing at Jared, ‘you speak funny!’

‘I do not! I speak normal!’

Sherrie looked at me and then dug the spoon into her bowl, seemingly unconcerned with the language debate.

Molly sipped her wine.

‘Norah is from another country,’ she said.

‘Can I watch TV?’ Jared asked, pushing his plate aside and the interest in me had obviously faded.

‘Eat your vegetables.’

‘I have.’

‘Have you? What’s that?’ Kirsten said evenly, pointing at carrots.

‘I don’t like carrots.’

Kirsten didn’t say anything and after a moment, realising he wasn’t going to win, Jared wolfed the carrots down.

‘Now can I?’

‘Ok.’

He left the table and moments later, Sherrie joined him on the floor in front of the television set.

‘Don’t have it so loud, love,’ Kirsten said and Jared turned the volume down.

The fire crackled and I could hear more rain on the roof.

‘Raining again,’ Molly said. ‘You should have come in summer,’ she said to me.

‘I like the rain,’ I said softly, ‘especially on this roof.’

‘It’s what we call a tin roof,’ Kirsten said. ‘Corrugated iron and the rain sounds so loud sometimes.’

‘I like it,’ I said, ‘it’s nice.’

We sat in silence, listening to the rain. The television was in the background and I suddenly felt strange.

There was something lurking on the edge of my mind, a shadow and I wondered if it was memories from James.

‘Did you call him Jim or James?’ I asked suddenly.

‘Jim,’ Molly said.

‘You used to call him James when he was in trouble,’ Kirsten said with a smile to her mother.

‘I suppose I did,’ Molly said with a chuckle.

The humour quickly vanished and both Kirsten and Molly stared off into the distance, lost in memories.

‘Do you really think you’re him?’ Kirsten asked suddenly.

I was taken aback for a moment but managed to say, ‘they said I used to be him. I’m not anymore.’

‘Do you believe it?’ Kirsten pressed.

‘I...I really don’t know...’

‘I mean,’ Kirsten said, ‘you could be a con-artist or something!’

‘Kirsten!’ Molly exclaimed but Kirsten waved her away.

‘No, she could!’ Kirsten turned to me. ‘Couldn’t you?’

‘I suppose I could. Why would I do that?’

‘I have no idea!’ Kirsten said emphatically. ‘But it is weird!’

‘I know,’ I said, looking down at my plate.

We sat in silence until Molly asked, ‘would you like to see his grave?’

I kept looking down, my mind reeling.

His grave?

Jim’s grave?

Or is it mine?

‘What’s in the grave?’ I asked softly.

Kirsten and Molly darted looks at each other.

I lifted my head.

‘If it’s true and I was once Jim,’ I said quickly, ‘what is in the grave?’

‘That,’ Kirsten said slowly, ‘is a good point.’

‘We didn’t see the body,’ Molly said quietly. ‘They said it was better if we didn’t.’

‘If there is a...someone,’ Kirsten said slowly, ‘in the grave...’

‘Then, what am I?’ I finished for her and we sat in silence again.

‘More wine?’ Kirsten said, offering the bottle.

9.

I offered to help wash up – they didn't have a dishwasher – but Molly and Kirsten insisted on doing it. I suspected it was some sort of evening ritual for them, a moment for mother and daughter to connect so I wandered into the small sitting room.

Once again, I was drawn to the piano and for a few moments, I stood looking at it. Kirsten and Molly were laughing in the kitchen and some reality show was on the television.

Slowly, I sat down at the piano and lifted the cover so I could touch the keys.

Jim played this!

His hands were here, just as mine!

I closed my eyes, letting myself drift away, trying to quieten the static in my mind. Of their own volition, my hands moved to the keys and I surrendered to the moment, gave myself up to the darkness on the edge of my mind.

My hands ran over the white keys. My wits soared, searching the corners of my mind for clues but never venturing into that soulful darkness on the perimeter of my psyche, the place that was still a mystery.

‘I thought you said you couldn’t play?’

I snapped out of my trance and, startled, looked around. Kirsten was in the doorway, hands on her hips while Molly hovered behind her. I noticed that Molly was as pale as a ghost.

‘I wasn’t playing,’ I said defensively, ‘I...I...’

‘It sounded like it,’ Kirsten said and her expression softened when she saw I was anxious.

‘That was the waltz that Jim liked to play,’ Molly said, her face still pale.

‘I...I don’t know how I did it,’ I said softly. ‘I just relaxed and shut my eyes, trying to remember stuff and...and...’

‘You just played,’ Kirsten said quietly. ‘I watched you for a moment. You looked like you were in a trance.’

Abruptly, I stood up and closed the lid with a thud.

‘I’m going insane,’ I muttered.

Molly quickly hugged me and, looking directly into my eyes, said, 'it means the memories are there, Norah.'

'I suppose it does,' I mumbled.

What time is it in England?

I need to talk to Hester!

10.

‘You played the piano?’ Hester said incredulously over the telephone. ‘Jim used to play whenever he could. I remember we used to go to this little pub. There was a piano...’

‘It seems I played a waltz that he used to play!’

‘I remember the waltz!’ Hester stopped for a moment as if she was calming herself and then asked, ‘how does all of this make you feel?’

‘Almost insane,’ I replied. ‘Hester?’

‘Yes?’

‘What’s in Jim’s grave?’

There was silence for a long moment.

‘Why do you ask?’

‘It’s simple isn’t it?’ I said quickly. ‘If I am Jim as you all claim...’

‘Don’t you believe us?’

‘It is unbelievable, Hester and I have no proof!’

‘Yes, you do,’ she said quietly. ‘You’re the proof! And the letter! Can you remember your past?’

‘You know I can’t. Hester, what’s in the grave?’

She sighed.

‘Weights.’

‘Huh?’

‘Just weights. It was illegal but we didn’t know what to do. We wanted to give Jim’s family closure. Was that wrong of us?’

‘It might have helped if you told them the truth!’

‘We thought about it,’ Hester admitted, ‘but we decided they wouldn’t believe

it.'

'You know Jim wrote them a letter?'

'No! He didn't! God!'

'He did. They were waiting for Norah to show up!'

'Oh my God!'

'It was a shock to me as well.'

'They...they knew?'

Hester sounded stunned.

'Jim explained an awful lot in his letter.'

'Have you got a copy?'

'No, but I suppose I could get one. Do you need it?'

‘Not really, just curious.’

‘His mother – Molly – approached me because she was waiting for Norah.’

‘Oh my God,’ Hester repeated, although this time she said in softly, almost a whisper.

‘I’m staying with her.’

‘In her house?’

‘I’m sleeping in Jim’s room! It is really weird!’

‘Is anything else coming back apart from playing the piano?’

‘No.’

I stared at the wall and listened to the silent house.

It was just after ten o’clock at night and Molly had suggested an early night when I began yawning.

‘Hester?’

‘Yes?’

‘It’s true, isn’t it? I was Jim?’

‘Yes,’ Hester said softly, ‘you were Jim.’

And, at that moment, I believed her.

‘What are you going to do?’

‘I don’t know,’ I said softly, ‘I really don’t know!’

11.

I felt strange.

The dark clouds sped past the sun – so fast they were a blur – blotting the sunshine and casting a surreal gloom over the landscape.

Summer storm coming!

The raindrops are thick in the clouds, ready to burst upon us like a gazillion water warriors!

Then, I saw him!

He was walking down the road to the wharf, hands in his pockets and strolling as if he didn't have a care in the world.

Clouds were gone for a second and he was bathed in a harsh white light, so powerful I raised my hand to shield my eyes.

So hard to see.

I tried to see his face, tried to squint against the sun but I couldn't, I couldn't see him!

Is it Jim?

Is it?

Oh Jim, how could you...

Oh, Jim...

'Jim!'

I blinked and clasped a hand over my mouth, worrying I had woken the others. Frozen upright in the small bed, I listened to the sounds of the house, straining my ears to hear anyone stirring but the house was eerily silent.

Sighing, I lay back down and pulled the duvet up around my shoulders, tucking myself into my small cocoon of warmth and comfortable security.

It was just a bloody dream!

That's all!

But was it?

Or was it the first of the memories crawling back into my mind like a beaten cat, creeping in to lie in front of the fire.

It began to rain again and the sound of it on the roof was comforting. Snuggling down in the bed, I closed my eyes and willed sleep to come. Dozing slightly, the rain drumming on the roof, in spite of myself, I remembered the strange dream.

But I didn't see his face!

Suddenly, I heard a toilet flushing and guessed that someone was up. A door creaked close and then nothing.

Probably Jared or Kirsten, even Molly.

The noises of a family.

The fire crackled in the living room and the rain was really coming down, drumming a concerto on the roof!

What on earth am I doing here?

Tomorrow was another day! Tomorrow, I have to leave, have to get on with my life.

This is bollocks!

I'm bloody bonkers!

Telling myself to forget it, I rearranged my pillow, lay down and shut my eyes again, ready to listen to the rain until I was asleep.

The dreams in which I'm dying

Are the best I've ever had

I find it hard to tell you

'Cos I find it hard to take

When people run in circles

It's a very, very

Mad World

Nine. Sleep to Dream.

■

*I got my feet on the ground and I don't go to sleep to dream
You got your head in the clouds and you're not at all what you seem
This mind, this body, and this voice cannot be
stifled by your deviant ways
So don't forget what I told you, don't come around,
I got my own hell to raise*

*I have never been so insulted in all my life
I could swallow the seas to wash down all this pride
First you run like a fool just to be at my side
and now you run like a fool, but you just run to
hide, and I can't abide¹⁰*

■

1.

Noises within the house woke me and, after a small shock when I realised where I was, I groggily threw the duvet back. Fumbling for my glasses, I slipped them on and wearily pulled myself from the warm bed. Hugging myself against the sudden chill and still in my pyjamas, I slipped into the living room and sat on the floor in front of the fire.

Someone had obviously raked the ashes and loaded the fire with wood – perhaps that was the noise that had woken me as the fire was roaring, the heat warming the room and the house!

Staring into the flames, I tried to decide my next course of action.

‘Jim used to sit just like that. Mum was always telling him not to sit so close.’

Kirsten was dressed in jeans and a grey fisherman’s jumper with leather elbow patches. Her hair was tied back and she looked a little more cheerful than the previous night.

Searching for something to say, I said, ‘you’re up early.’

‘Got to drop the kids off.’

‘At school?’

‘School? No, today’s Saturday. Don’t tell me you Poms¹¹ send your poor kids to school on a Saturday?’

Knowing she was teasing and I smiled.

‘No, not usually. At least I think not. So, where are you dropping Jared and Sherrie?’

‘At their father’s. It’s his turn.’

‘Oh.’

‘Want to come?’

I brushed a stray lock of hair from my forehead and frowned at her.

What is she offering?

‘We’re not staying at Colin’s,’ she said with a small nervous laugh. ‘Thought I could show you around,’ Kirsten said in reaction to my frown. ‘It was Mum’s idea. Thought it might help your memory. Seeing a few things might jog it into

action.'

Remnants of the dream flashed behind my eyes.

'All right. Can I use the bathroom first?'

Kirsten laughed.

'Of course. Have a shower.'

'Do I smell?'

Kirsten studied me for a moment and then grinned wryly.

'Was that a joke?'

'Kind of,' I admitted.

'Good,' she said. 'You have to keep your sense of humour when things are tough. It's the Aussie way.'

I stood up and walked to the door. Kirsten stood with her arms folded, watching me as I slipped by her.

‘Do you always wear pyjamas with elephants on them?’ Kirsten called teasingly.

‘They gave them to me at the hospital. I never bothered to get new ones.’

‘Maybe you should.’

‘I kind of like the elephants.’

‘Mum’s put the kettle on and making pancakes so don’t take too long in the shower.’

2.

‘Have some more pancakes, Norah. I’ve made plenty.’

‘Molly,’ I said emphatically, ‘I couldn’t eat another one! They were delicious, though,’ I quickly added.

Kirsten emerged with Jared and Sherrie, dressed in their coats.

‘Come on, Norah. We don’t want to be late. Colin goes ballistic if we are.’

‘Mum,’ Jared mumbled, ‘do I have...’

‘Please don’t start, Jared,’ Kirsten sighed. ‘It’s only for one night.’

She squatted down and hugged both children. ‘You’ll have fun.’

Molly glanced at me and then hugged the children when they said goodbye.

‘Get your coat, Norah,’ Kirsten said, ‘it’s blowing a gale out there!’

I slipped into my coat and Molly silently offered me a red knitted scarf and a matching beanie.

‘I knitted them for Kirsten but she won’t wear red,’ Molly explained, shooting her daughter a wounded look.

Kirsten just sighed and silently studied the ceiling.

‘Thank you,’ I said, using the wall mirror to tuck my hair into the beanie. I wound the scarf around my throat.

‘You know,’ I said, ‘it can’t be that cold. Not like back in England.’

‘Does it snow where you live?’ Jared asked.

‘Sometimes, I think.’

His eyes grew wide at that. Kirsten took his hand and pushed Sherrie before her.

‘Into the car, people,’ she said and I followed the little troop towards the door.

‘Will you be back?’ Molly asked suddenly.

I stopped at the door and turned, seeing the hope in her eyes.

‘I think so,’ I said carefully.

‘Good.’

3.

I sat in the front passenger seat and watched Harlequin Cove slide past as Kirsten slowly drove down the main street. The windscreen wipers scooped the small raindrops away and the traffic was minimal. People waved to Kirsten as they passed and Kirsten replied with a small flick of her hand.

‘That’s what the Queen does,’ she said suddenly and gave a little royal wave to an elderly man walking a large black dog in the light rain.

I laughed softly and Kirsten darted me a look but did not say anything.

Moments later, we stopped outside a timber house with a ramshackle paling fence that had seen better days.

The front door was open and I saw a big man standing in the doorway. He wore jeans and a thick woollen jumper that looked to have holes around the elbows, big arms folded across his chest.

Kirsten didn’t give him the royal wave; instead, a short, curt gesture that said much.

‘I’ll pick you up tomorrow morning, kids,’ Kirsten said, getting out of the car.

Both children were sullen and a little sad but they did get out of the car. I watched Kirsten hug them both fiercely and then stood in the rain, watching them walk down the path.

‘You be here on time tomorrow!’

The man – I assumed it was Colin, the ex-husband – bellowed down the path and I saw Kirsten nod.

The door closed behind the children and Kirsten slammed the door when she got back in.

‘He doesn’t really want them,’ she explained sadly, ‘it’s only that people around town will talk if he doesn’t have them occasionally.’

I looked back at the house for a moment as we drove away but said nothing. Kirsten was also silent, staring fixedly through the windscreen, hands tightly clutching the steering wheel.

She kept driving and the meagre parts of Harlequin Cove slipped behind.

‘I thought we’d have a coffee,’ Kirsten said, still looking directly ahead. ‘There’s a place a way down the highway. Do you mind?’

‘No, I don’t mind.’

She was in pain but I didn't know what to do about it. I felt small and useless as well as uncertain.

'You have beautiful children,' I said, unsure what to say. 'Although,' I added, trying to jolly her up, 'Jared is on the verge of being a total smart arse!'

Kirsten whipped her head around, startled for a moment and then smiled slowly.

'Yes, he is.'

She looked back at the road as we passed a large timber truck.

'You know, you sounded just like Jim then.'

'Were you close to him?' I asked softly.

'I tried but he always kept me back. I think he was afraid of letting me in. You know what guys are like.'

'Well, actually – no, I don't.'

Kirsten studied me for a moment and then turned the car into the car park of some shops and a petrol station.

‘Doesn’t look much but they make real coffee! Don’t tell Mum I come here, she would think I was a traitor.’

‘I expect she already knows.’

Kirsten turned the car off.

‘What makes you say that?’

I shrugged.

‘Small town?’

‘Yes, you’re right.’

‘But,’ I added slowly, ‘she also knows you need to find time and space to yourself sometimes.’

Kirsten’s eyes turned onto me again.

‘You see an awful lot, don’t you?’

‘Just trying to make sense of it all. I’m feeling kind of lost.’

Kirsten smiled softly, reached over and squeezed my hand.

‘You’ll find yourself again. I’m sure of it! Come on,’ she said, opening the door,
‘let’s have a coffee.’

4.

‘I had a dream last night,’ I suddenly confessed.

We were sitting by the window, coats off and sipping coffee while watching the highway with its flow of trucks, cars and caravans. I could hear the hiss of the tyres on the wet road as well as the whine of the engines

‘Of what?’

‘It was strange.’

‘Most dreams are. Why was this one strange?’

I looked around the almost empty café and saw the woman behind the counter was reading the newspaper.

‘It was here.’

‘Here?’

‘Harlequin Cove. The road to the wharf.’

‘Oh?’ Kirsten said and I suspected her reply was guarded.

‘Do you think that’s strange? I’ve never been here before and I haven’t been on that road.’

‘Jim used to walk down there a lot,’ Kirsten said softly.

‘He did?’

‘He liked the activity of the fishing boats and...and other things. What happened in the dream?’ Kirsten asked quickly.

‘I was walking down the road to the wharf,’ I recited softly, glancing around self-consciously. ‘It was very hot and I knew there was someone walking towards me. It was a man but I couldn’t see his face because of the glare of the sun.’

Kirsten nodded slowly, fingers playing with the little sachets of sugar and her eyes looking down.

‘I suppose it was Jim,’ I said softly.

‘Why do you think that? It could be someone else.’

‘Who?’ I asked, puzzled

‘Well, the professor you mentioned...’

‘Professor Frankston? No, the bloke in my dream was nothing like him!’

I watched as Kirsten played with the sugar sachets and had the distinct feeling she was hiding something.

However, I decided not to ask.

‘Are you ready to go?’ Kirsten asked and I nodded.

5.

We drove back through Harlequin Cove in silence and then turned left on the other side of town. Although I didn't say anything, I knew we were going to the cemetery.

'Did Jim know his father?' I asked, perhaps to stall the pending visit to the grave.

Kirsten shook her head.

'No. I have a vague memory of him but he left when I was five.'

'You're older than Jim?'

'By two years.'

We drove through the gates of the cemetery and parked the car under tall gum trees.

'Why do I need to see the grave?' I asked when Kirsten turned the engine off. Suddenly, I felt very anxious and my heart was beating quickly.

Kirsten opened her car door.

‘Because,’ she said patiently, ‘it might help you remember things. Come on, it’s stopped raining.’

She stepped out of the car and I fumbled with the door handle. The anxious feeling stayed with me as I stood beside the car.

Kirsten began to walk off without locking the car. Perhaps, in Harlequin Cove, there were no thieves.

‘Come on,’ she said, stopping at a wire fence. ‘You want to see it, don’t you?’

‘No, not really,’ I said softly, not budging.

Kirsten put her hands on her hips and frowned.

‘What’s wrong?’

‘I...I don’t know,’ I said honestly. ‘I feel strange, really nervous and anxious...’

Kirsten took a step forward and took my hand.

‘Do you think it’s because it’s your grave?’

‘I...I don’t...know. Maybe...’

‘Norah, let’s go,’ she said, tugging my hand. ‘Maybe this is what we want! Maybe those feelings show that your memories are returning! Nothing will happen.’

‘How do you know?’ I said petulantly.

‘Because,’ Kirsten said softly, ‘I won’t let it!’

I lifted my head and looked into her eyes.

‘Won’t you?’

She shook her head and smiled.

‘Come on,’ she said softly and led me by the hand through the opening in the wire fence.

6.

The rain began again when I stepped in front of the small headstone. There was a black plaque on the glistening marble but the words blurred and I couldn't read them.

'You're crying?'

I nodded.

'I don't know why,' I sniffled.

Kirsten slipped her arm around me and held me close as we stood in the light rain, looking at the plaque.

'I'm crying too,' she admitted huskily. 'I always do when I come here.'

'He's dead, isn't he?' I whispered. 'Even if it's all true and he changed into me, in a way, he's dead!'

'Yes,' Kirsten murmured, wiping her eyes, 'he's dead.'

We stood in silence in front of the grave, each of us lost in our own thoughts but sharing the moment.

Kirsten didn't let me go until we turned to silently walk back to the car.

7.

Kirsten parked the car in the main street of Harlequin Cove and we walked down the road towards the wharf.

‘Why Harlequin Cove?’

‘Sorry?’

‘Why is it called Harlequin Cove?’

‘Apparently a ship called the Harlequin sank on the rocks on the head back in 1845 or something.’

I looked over at the head, shading my eyes and saw a small white lighthouse.

‘Over there?’

‘Yes. I can’t remember the entire story but many died.’

The rain had stopped and weak sunshine played over us as we walked silently down the sloping road to the long wooden wharf.

Many fishing boats bobbed on the water but it was also clear that there were many empty spaces in the tidy marina. Looking across the curved space near the water, I saw the doors to the cannery were boarded and there was some sort of official sign nailed across the doors.

‘This once was full of boats,’ Kirsten said, sweeping her hand around the small harbour. ‘There was always noise and activity. It was fun.’

‘And Jim would come down here for that?’

Kirsten studied the horizon.

‘Yes. And other things?’

‘What other things?’

‘To catch up with people,’ Kirsten said, offering a brittle smile. ‘Friends and such.’

She pointed at a large tin shed near the pebbly beach on the other side of the wharf. There was a large sign on the shed.

Moretti & Son - Mechanics

‘Jim’s best friend works there,’ Kirsten said softly. ‘Val Moretti.’

I recalled the folder Bronwyn had given me and remembered the name Valentino Moretti.

Kirsten was standing by the steps to the wharf and staring vacantly at a white fishing boat. I think she didn’t actually see it as she was looking deeply into the past.

‘Val and Jim were friends since they both started school. I don’t know what drew them together but they were inseparable.’

She turned and looked at me.

‘Inseparable until just before Jim left for university in Sydney. Something happened, I know something happened but Jim never explained and you can’t get a full sentence out of Val at the best of times. When Jim came back for holidays, he used to sit by the wharf but he never went to the Moretti shed to see Val who was working with his father. I know,’ Kirsten said with a weak smile, ‘because I followed him sometimes and other times I asked him if he saw Val.’

‘Do...you have an idea what happened?’

Kirsten shook her head.

‘No. Before Jim went to England, he came home for a final visit and, after a few glasses of wine, he walked down to see Val. I was glad that they were going to patch things up but it didn’t work out that way. When Jim came back,’ Kirsten said softly, ‘I knew he had been crying.’

Kirsten began walking up the steps to the wharf and I followed her. A man was fishing from the end of the wharf and he greeted Kirsten by name. Kirsten smiled, returned the greeting and walked away from him so, I guessed, we could continue to talk.

‘I think you should see Val, Norah,’ Kirsten said softly.

‘Why?’

‘I think it may help with your memories.’

‘I think,’ I said, leaning my elbows on the rail and looking across the harbour, ‘you believe I was once your brother.’

‘Don’t you?’

‘I’m not sure I do but, after meeting you and your mother...well, I want to.’

‘I understand,’ Kirsten said, leaning next to me.

We watched the seagulls wheel and fly over the water for a while in comfortable silence.

‘I’ve always wanted a sister,’ Kirsten said suddenly.

I turned and smiled at her.

‘You should smile more often,’ Kirsten said. ‘Your face lights up. I noticed it in the car.’

‘I hope,’ I said seriously, ‘one day I’ll have a lot to smile about.’

‘You’re alive,’ Kirsten pointed out.

‘Yes, and I know I should be grateful for that but I’d like to know exactly who I am.’

‘You will,’ she said, squeezing my hand, ‘I’m sure you will.’

She let go my hand and gestured around.

‘I think you’ve seen everything.’

‘Ok,’ I said simply.

‘Let’s go home.’

Ten. My Ever Changing Moods.

■

Daylight turns to moonlight - and I'm at my best

Praising the way it all works - gazing upon the rest

The cool before the warm

The calm after the storm

I wish to stay forever - letting this be my food

But Im caught up in a whirlwind and my ever changing moods¹²

■

1.

The rest of the day and evening was relaxing in a strange way. I helped in the café during the afternoon – not much, just where I could - and, although Molly and Kirsten told me I didn't have to, I could tell they were pleased when I insisted.

The local people, although wary to begin with, soon accepted me when Molly said I was a relative from England.

Everyone seemed to accept that and, although some sensed there was a mystery attached to it, nobody said anything, at least to me or Molly and Kirsten.

Somehow, my relationship with Kirsten had changed and we were in a weird way closer. In my mind, I was sure Kirsten now accepted me as the woman who had “evolved” from her brother.

Molly, I thought, believed it all completely. I was her son come back from the dead as a woman! Somehow, it was easy for her to accept. Maybe because she wanted her son to be alive in some way!

It was bizarre and unbelievable but I clung to the hope that it was true, that I was no longer alone in the world and the strange life I now possessed was meaningful.

I studied my face in the café restroom mirror and once again pondered on the

strange facts.

My small ritual since I had woken to this strange life was to stand before a mirror and stare at my face or, sometimes, stand naked in front of a long mirror and examine my entire body. It was something I had begun in the hospital and I continued to do it when I had the opportunity.

Why?

Firstly, I wanted to learn my face and attempt to see if it had clues to the bizarre birth Hester and the other insisted was fact.

Secondly, was it possible I had ever been male? I certainly could not imagine being male and I would stand in front of the mirror and try to force myself to imagine being a bloke!

It was, I found, impossible.

Of course, I could intellectually understand – imagine a penis and no breasts – but it was more than that! The imagined scenario lasted for a few seconds and I tried to understand what it would be like forever!

That was impossible!

In the café, I watched some of the local men and covertly watched them,

studying their masculine gait, the unshaven faces and the way they sat.

Could that have been me? Could I have been like that?

It was a difficult fact to accept and part of me, I suspect, did not accept it. There was always the theory that Hester and the others had formed a conspiracy, that they had fabricated the entire scenario and that I was born female!

That would explain how I felt, how I was me, but the piece that was missing was why they would do such a thing! What would they gain?

No, the incredible theory that I was once Jim was vaguely real and, at this time, the only theory.

The letters to Hester and Molly were the only proof, along with the complete absence of any memory prior to waking up.

It had to be true, didn't it?

Didn't it?

If it is, why can't I remember anything of Jim's life?

2.

That evening we sat around the table and just talked.

It was extremely pleasant as the conversation rambled and we spoke of everything and nothing.

That night in Jim's old bed, I dreamed of walking down the road to the wharf again. Once again, I could not see the face of the man approaching me in the glare of the sun.

Strangely, I remembered the dream exactly when I woke in the morning. I did some washing and Kirsten lent me a skirt while I washed two pairs of jeans. The tartan skirt fitted well and I wore a black turtleneck pullover, also borrowed from Kirsten, as well as black opaque tights and my Doc Martens.

Kirsten surveyed me with a small frown.

'You look good,' she said, hands on hips.

'Is that bad?'

'No,' she said with a shake of her head and a bemused grin, 'just have trouble getting my head around the entire theory...'

‘It does my head in sometimes,’ I agreed.

‘I suppose it does. I forget to see it from your side sometimes. How are you coping?’

‘As well as I can. I had that dream again last night.’

‘Oh? The guy on the wharf road?’

I nodded.

‘Did you see his face this time?’ Kirsten asked with a studied nonchalance, that was, I guessed, hiding something.

‘No, I didn’t. I guess it was Jim. It’s a symbol or something.’

‘Maybe it is. Come on, let’s have some breakfast. I have to pick the kids up in a little while.’

‘Do you want me to come?’ I asked when we entered the kitchen. Molly was working at the stove and I smelled scrambled eggs.

‘No, you don’t have to. Mum will come as Colin is a little afraid of her.’

‘I can understand that,’ I quipped and Molly pretended to be angry.

‘Don’t get cheeky,’ she said, waving the spatula at me and we all laughed.

3.

Molly and Kirsten drove off to pick up Jared and Sherrie. I waved them goodbye, slipped on my coat and walked slowly down the street of Harlequin Cove. The rain had long gone and the sky was a vibrant blue, a shade of blue I had not seen before.

A few people I had seen in the café nodded to me as I walked down the main street and I nodded in return.

One even called, ‘good morning. Beautiful day, at last!’

‘Yes,’ I murmured, ‘it is.’

The wind teased my hair as I walked and I soon found myself walking down the sloping road to the wharf. There was some activity on the boats and I could see some men and boys fishing on the wharf. A few families carried picnic baskets from their cars to the expanse of green lawn near the road and by the haircuts the men wore, I guessed they were from the nearby Naval base.

Faint music drifted on the wind and I followed it, trying to identify it and stopped suddenly when I saw a white four-wheel drive vehicle parked in front of the shed that housed the Moretti business.

Moretti & Son - Mechanics

Inexplicably, my heart began thumping in a peculiar rhythm.

This is weird!

I told myself to walk up onto the wharf or back up the road but I couldn't.
Peculiarly, I walked to the open door of the shed. As I drew closer, the music suddenly became louder.

There is freedom within, there is freedom without

Try to catch the deluge in a paper cup

There's a battle ahead, many battles are lost

But you'll never see the end of the road

While you're travelling with me

Hey now, hey now

Don't dream it's over

Hey now, hey now

When the world comes in

They come, they come

To build a wall between us

We know they won't win

The large double doors were open and I heard the rattle and clink of tools, then the whirr of something, possibly a drill or some other power tool. Heart beating loudly, I took another step and then another until I was standing in the doorway.

There was a small van in the middle of the shed and an array of tools were scattered around it. The fan was red with gold lettering on the side – Greenthumb Flowers. A pair of legs in faded blue jeans and cowboy boots protruded from the van and I saw the left leg was tapping softly to the music.

Now I'm towing my car, there's a hole in the roof

My possessions are causing me suspicion but there's no proof

In the paper today tales of war and of waste

But you turn right over to the T. V. page

Hey now, hey now

Don't dream it's over

Hey now, hey now

When the world comes in

They come, they come

To build a wall between us

We know they won't win¹³

I didn't know what to say, or, indeed, if I should say anything. Clearly, there was no doubt in my mind that under the van was Val Moretti, Jim's best friend for so many years. Inseparable, Kirsten had said, until something happened when Jim went to University and something else occurred that sent Jim to tears before he went to England.

Kirsten's words echoed in my mind.

"Before Jim went to England, he came home for a final visit and, after a few glasses of wine, he walked down to see Val. I was glad that they were going to patch things up but it didn't work out that way. When Jim came back, I knew he had been crying."

I wanted to turn on my heel and leave, something within my mind told me to do exactly that but I could not go. I was frozen!

My mind wavered and I blinked, as it felt like my mind was shifting, rearranging and sorting. It was extremely weird and I took a deep breath to steady myself.

Suddenly, the feet under the van stopped tapping and I stepped back as the man under the van slid out with a rattle of wheels from the platform he was lying on.

Dressed in a white t-shirt as well as the jeans, the man stood up slowly and looked at me from large dark eyes. His hair was dark and thick, brushed back in a careless way and I was suddenly swept up in a strange mixture of deep and unfamiliar emotions.

Val Moretti – Jim's best friend!

He studied me and I felt awkward and very weird.

‘Hello,’ I said with a anxious smile, flicking my hair off my forehead nervously, ‘I...I just wandered in. Sorry if I disturbed you...I was just walking...and...I guess I heard the music...’

He didn't say anything, just dropped the cloth he had been using to wipe grease from his hands onto a trolley with tools on it and kept looking at me.

My eyes ran over him, taking every detail in. Tall and thin, he gave off an air of lazy energy, as if he could explode into action at any moment. The arms were muscular, the fingers long and the wrists strong and supple.

This is Val!

Why did I feel weird?

Something flickered again on the shaded edges of my mind, something stirring in the dark and I longed to shine light on it, to bring the memories into the open. All I wanted was to know!

To know and to understand!

Val looked me up and down, studying me with a fascination I did not understand.

Why doesn't he say something?

He took one step forward, slender fingers hooked in the loops of his jeans.

‘Crowded House,’ he said.

His voice was deep and mellow, almost smooth with that strange upward inflexion Australians have.

‘I’m sorry?’ I stumbled, folding my arms, forming a small protective wall but I wasn’t sure what I was protecting myself from.

‘Crowded House,’ he said, jerking a thumb at the portable CD player. ‘Don’t dream it’s over. A great song.’

He spoke in short, sharp phrases and I managed to absorb what he was saying.

‘Oh, yes, of course, the song,’ I said faintly.

‘Do you like them?’

‘Them?’ I asked weakly, feeling very, very weird.

What is wrong?

‘The band, Crowded House?’

‘Ah, I suppose so...’

‘You suppose?’ Val asked, eyes twinkling and there was a small smile playing on his face as he inspected me. ‘You have heard them before, haven’t you?’

Had I?

I guessed Jim had but to me the song was new and fresh.

‘I might have,’ I parried, looking away.

That appeared to satisfy him and he moved one more step closer.

‘You’re the English woman staying with Molly Sanderson.’

It wasn’t a question. He expressed it as a known fact and I guessed, in a small town like Harlequin Cove, news travelled very quickly indeed.

‘I’m Val Moretti, by the way,’ he added in that mellow drawl. ‘Val is short for Valentino, not Valerie. Valerie is a girl’s name.’

In that short explanation, I saw behind the years and guessed he had been subjected to merciless teasing at school and it had stayed with him.

Was it a guess or did I know?

Were memories stirring?

He studied me as if he was waiting for a reaction.

‘I know,’ I said brightly. ‘As I said, I’m sorry to disturb you. Just exploring really and...’

‘I know, you just wandered in, brought by the music.’

‘Yes, something like...’

‘It’s what you said,’ he said, ‘when you first walked in.’

Was he laughing at me?

On closer covert inspection, I decided he wasn’t, although he had a strange look within his eyes.

‘Yes, quite. Look, terribly sorry to disturb you.’

Thankfully, I managed to finally move my frozen feet. I awkwardly stepped backward, and then, flustered turned around to face the doors.

‘I didn’t catch your name,’ he called after me.

Because I didn’t give it!

‘Ah, it’s Norah,’ I said, turning my head to face him and I saw something in his eyes for an instant and then it was gone.

‘Norah,’ he said softly. ‘Like Norah Jones.’

I just shrugged, wondering why he would think I would know a local girl called Norah, gave him a small awkward wave and walked from the shed.

My heart was pounding heavily and I almost felt out of breath as I walked up the road away from the wharf, away from Val Moretti!

What was going on with me?

Why did I feel so strange?

I managed to find a seat on the public bench near the small children's play area and I stared moodily out to sea.

Why did I go into that shed?

The strange experience had completely unnerved me and, hands still trembling, I stood up and slowly walked back up the hill to Molly's house.

4.

Jared and Sherrie were playing in the front yard when I walked through the gate. Even though I was still strangely numb, I managed to smile and wave. They seemed much happier than when Kirsten had bundled them into the car yesterday. I guessed they were glad to be home.

I thought of going straight to my room and lying down to attempt to calm myself but decided I should tell Molly of the decision I had made when walking up the hill.

Molly and Kirsten were sitting on the back patio and sipping tea.

Opening the back door, I tentatively stepped out and both turned to look at me.

‘Before you ask,’ Molly said with a smile, ‘the café is closed on Sunday. We have a day off.’

I smiled weakly and felt Kirsten’s eyes on me.

‘Cup of tea?’ Molly asked. ‘There’s plenty in the pot. Get yourself a cup.’

My hands were still shaking when I took down the cup and saucer and Kirsten studied me when I carefully placed it on the small garden table.

‘Where did you go to?’ Kirsten asked softly.

‘Just a walk,’ I murmured, sitting between Kirsten and Molly. Taking a deep breath, I announced, ‘I...I thought I’d go back to Sydney...’

‘Sydney!’ Molly paused in the middle of pouring tea. ‘Why?’

‘I...I thought I’d get a bus ticket. Where do...where can I buy a ticket? I should leave straight away...’

Molly glanced at Kirsten and poured tea into my cup.

‘You’re welcome to stay here, Norah,’ Molly said quietly. ‘I...we hope you would...’

‘Why? Because you think I’m your son? I don’t know if I am Jim!’ I snapped. ‘I really don’t!’

Kirsten gently put her hand on mine and asked softly, ‘you saw Val, didn’t you?’

Molly stopped stirring tea, looked at me, and then glanced at Kirsten.

I looked away and Kirsten gently squeezed my hand.

‘That’s why you’re upset,’ Kirsten persisted. ‘You saw him, didn’t you?’

‘Yes,’ I whispered.

‘And?’ Kirsten pressed.

‘It was strange,’ I said in a low voice, looking at the table. ‘I felt as if I was on the edge of remembering something! It was so close, I felt it but it wouldn’t come.’

‘Memories?’ Molly asked and I nodded.

‘The memories were so near! I could almost feel them!’

‘What did Val say?’ Molly asked in a gentle voice.

‘Not much. He talked about some music group.’

‘What music group?’ Kirsten pounced, glancing at her mother.

‘Crowded something...’

‘Crowded House,’ Kirsten finished.

‘Yes, that’s it.’

‘Jim loved one of their songs,’ Kirsten said softly and I felt a chill in my heart.

‘He...he did?’

Kirsten nodded.

‘He loved it and used to play it on the piano. He even used to sing it. You remember, Mum?’

‘Yes,’ Molly said softly, ‘I remember. He was always humming or singing it.’

‘What...what was the song called?’ I asked falteringly.

At that stage, I thought I knew exactly which song was Jim’s favourite! It had to be the music that drew me to the Moretti shed in the first place.

‘Don’t dream...’

‘...it’s over?’ I asked in a very low voice.

‘That’s it.’

‘I heard that song coming from the shed and, somehow it drew me to the music and...I couldn’t stop...even if I wanted to...’

Molly and Kirsten looked at me with real concern in their eyes. Both were pale and Molly had the knuckles of her right hand to her mouth.

‘It’s true,’ she whispered, ‘you are Jim!’

‘What else happened?’ Kirsten asked, ignoring her mother.

‘Nothing,’ I said, ‘just small talk. He told me his name and I told him mine...’

‘All of your name?’

‘No, just Norah and he said something about some local girl called Norah Jones...’

Molly wrinkled her nose.

‘There’s no girl around Harlequin called Norah Jones...’

Kirsten chuckled.

‘Norah Jones is a jazz singer and pianist, American, I think. She’s famous. You know her songs, Mum.’

‘Oh,’ I said. ‘I thought he was talking about a local...’

‘You don’t remember much at all,’ Kirsten said quietly. ‘Do you?’

I shook my head.

‘Poor thing,’ Molly said. ‘It’ll all come back,’ she said more confidently than I felt. ‘Please stay,’ she asked gently.

‘I’m not Jim,’ I said hoarsely. ‘I’m not! I may get his memories but it won’t make me Jim!’

‘I know,’ Molly whispered, ‘it’ll make you my daughter. Please stay!’

Molly moved to hold me as, shuddering, I dissolved into tears. As she held me and whispered that everything would be all right, I broke into sobs – deep, aching shuddering sobs – and Molly kept holding me, not letting me go.

It felt nice, it felt right!

It felt like home!

5.

Sunday evening was comfortable and as I sat quietly, allowing Jared and Sherrie to run around me, I felt at home. The noise, the laughter, the closeness all contributed to making me feel safe for the first time in a long time.

‘I’ll help out in the café,’ I said suddenly when Jared and Sherrie had gone to bed. The fact they had both tentatively kissed me goodnight almost sent me to tears again.

‘Now,’ Molly said, ‘you don’t have...’

‘I know,’ I said quietly, ‘but I want to.’

‘I have a spare uniform that will fit,’ Kirsten volunteered. Hey,’ she said with a wink, ‘if I have to look like a fashion disaster, so do you!’

I smiled and nodded.

‘All right.’

‘Are you sure, dear?’ Molly asked, frowning worriedly.

‘Yes,’ I said firmly, ‘I’m very sure.’

Eleven. Telephone Line.

■

Telephone line, give me some time, Im living in twilight

Telephone line, give me some time, Im living in twilight

O. k. so no one's answering,

Well can't you just let it ring a little longer

I'll just sit tight, through the shadows of the night

Let it ring for evermore¹⁴

■

1.

‘Hello?’

‘Hester, it’s me. I didn’t wake you, did I?’

‘No, you didn’t. You have to get your head around the time zones, Norah,’ she teased. ‘It’s almost time for morning tea here!’

The teasing tone immediately left her voice, replaced with a quiet concern.

‘How are you, Norah?’

‘Better.’

‘That’s good. Any news on the memory front?’

‘Kind of.’

I told her everything that had happened with Val – the strange feelings, the song, everything. She listened intently without interrupting until I tailed off, not sure what to say next.

‘Does it still feel like the memories are close but just out of reach?’

‘Yes, Hester that’s it exactly! It’s like when you’re about to sneeze but you suddenly can’t!’

‘I see.’

‘Maybe I should just go back to England.’

‘Are you sure?’ Hester asked quietly.

‘No! No, I’m not sure! I’m not sure about anything!’

‘Why don’t you talk to Bronwyn. Do you have the number?’

‘No, I don’t. Why should I call Bron...’

‘What harm is there in talking to her?’

I sighed.

‘Why not; give me the number.’

Hester gave me the telephone number and I scribbled it down.

‘Are you coming home soon?’ Hester asked.

What was home?

‘I...I don’t know.’

‘Talk to Bronwyn.’

2.

I waited, listening to the ringing tone and then, felt nervous when the call was suddenly answered.

‘Hello.’

‘Bronwyn, this is...’

‘Hello, Norah. Hester said you might call. How’s Australia?’

Was she waiting for my call?

‘It’s fine. Did Hester tell...tell you anything?’

‘Only that you might call. Did you want Hester to tell me anything?’

I laughed, in spite of myself, at her technique.

‘Same old Bronwyn!’

‘Not so old, if you don’t mind,’ she chuckled.

I launched into my tale, telling her of the shed, Val, the song – everything!

‘That’s good,’ she said when I finished.

Surprised by her quick verdict, I asked, ‘is it?’

‘Of course. It means Jim’s memories are very close to the surface and will be available to your conscious mind soon. It shows you are on the way to recovery.’

‘But...they will be Jim’s memories! I’m not a bloke!’ I wailed.

‘I know you’re not,’ Bronwyn said, ‘but the memories will be yours just the same. I suppose you’re looking forward to getting those memories?’

Her positive attitude buoyed me. Suddenly, I felt a lot calmer.

‘Yes, in a way I am.’

My mind raced for a moment and, Bronwyn, perhaps understanding that I was thinking things through, said nothing.

‘Bronwyn,’ I asked after a few moments of silence, ‘do you know how long my visa is for?’

‘No, but I can check. Are you planning on staying longer?’

‘Longer than what?’ I countered.

‘Longer than your original intention,’ she said calmly and I pictured her sitting in her room, her face unruffled and comfortable.

‘I suppose I am,’ I said at last.

‘Then it must be beginning to feel like home?’

I thought of Molly and Kirsten, of Jared and Sherrie and, inexplicably, I thought of Val.

‘In a way, I suppose it is,’ I said softly.

‘That’s good,’ Bronwyn said firmly. ‘I’ll find out about your visa.’

‘Thanks,’ I said slowly and hung up.

Twelve. Remember (Walking in the Sand).

■

Remember

Remember

Remember

Remember

“Walking In The Sand”

Seems like the other day

My baby went away

She went away across the sea

It's been two years or so

Since I saw my baby go

And then this letter came for me¹⁵

■

1.

Molly woke me early the next morning as arranged. I stumbled to the bathroom, washed and dressed in the pink striped uniform and took the cup of coffee Molly offered.

The uniform fitted well enough and Molly watched me as I tied my hair back.

‘We’ll eat at the café once we’ve opened. It’s never busy first thing.’

I nodded, pins in my teeth and fixed the last of my stray hair.

‘Will I do?’ I asked, pulling the uniform down and straightening it.

‘You look fine,’ Molly smiled. ‘Best get your coat. We’ll walk down and it’s a little brisk at this time.’

I envied Kirsten still sleeping in her bed but knew she stayed behind to take her children to school.

Molly and I walked quickly down the street and one of the bakers from the bakery was standing outside smoking as we walked past.

‘Hi, Mrs Sanderson,’ he called and Molly waved.

‘Hello, Ronnie. You should give those things up,’ she called, not slowing down.

‘Who’s your friend?’ Ronnie called after us and I kept looking ahead.

‘Norah. My niece from England.’

We walked on and Molly said, ‘hope you don’t mind. It seemed to be the easiest explanation.’

‘No, that’s fine,’ I smiled. ‘Aunty Molly!’ I teased and she grinned self-consciously.

2.

Ivan, the cook, was waiting outside the café and Molly introduced me as she opened the doors.

‘She’ll work you hard, Norah,’ Ivan said with a broad wink and disappeared into the kitchen.

Molly showed me how to use the cash register and how to place orders. I realised it was going to be more intense than the last time I had tried to help. This was for real as it was just Molly and I.

Molly gave me a piece of toast.

‘Think you’ll be ok?’

‘I think so. Hope I don’t make a right mess of it.’

‘You’ll be fine. Just sing out if you’re unsure.’

The door opened and two men in thick coats, wool caps and full beards walked in.

‘Giddy Molly,’ one called as he sat in one of the booths. The other man just nodded and sat opposite his friend.

‘Morning, Bob,’ Molly called. ‘You and Teddy having the usual?’

Teddy, the silent one, nodded and Bob grinned.

‘When have we changed, Molly?’

‘Never but I always ask.’ Molly scribbled the order and slid the piece of paper through the slot to Ivan.

‘You got new help?’ Bob called.

‘My niece, Norah from England. She’s staying with us for a bit.’ Molly smiled at me as I stood awkwardly behind the counter. ‘Bob has coffee while Ted has tea, Norah.’

3.

I began slowly but, as the morning became busier, I felt more and more confident. Even though I could tell locals were cautious with me, they weren't rude and some even smiled and thanked me.

Kirsten arrived a little before ten and as it was quite busy in the café then, her assistance was welcome.

A little before eleven, Kirsten told me to take a break as it would be busy at lunchtime. I didn't feel like eating so I took a take-away cup of coffee outside and wandered down the road, looking in shop windows while sipping my coffee.

The sun had emerged from the morning clouds and the temperature was climbing.

Not really like winter in England!

But did I really remember winter in England?

I shook my head and walked on, wondering if I should remove my coat. Suddenly, I realised I was standing on the road to the wharf. My heart suddenly picked up speed as I placed one foot in front of the other to move down the road to the grassed area with seat.

I'll sit here and finish my coffee, that's all!

Telling myself that was all I was going to do, I sat on a bench and sipped the coffee, studiously avoiding glancing at the Moretti shed.

However, despite my plan, I glanced over and saw a vehicle I assumed was Val's parked in front of the shed. The doors were open but there was no music.

For one strange, wavering moment, I almost got up and walked over to the shed. It was as if something had a hold of me but the surreal feeling passed after a few moments.

I watched seagulls wheeling across the brightening sky and landing around my feet, suspecting I had some food. Their cries were loud and I smiled at their complete and utter devotion to their search for food.

'Sorry,' I said, standing and the seagulls retreated quickly, 'no food today.'

Staring straight ahead and away from the Moretti shed, I plodded back up the road to the café.

'Glad you're back,' Kirsten said with a grin, 'we're getting busy. Where did you go?'

'Just for a walk,' I said tying my apron on, 'nothing special.'

4.

The lunchtime crowd began to taper off and Molly sighed with relief.

‘It’s pretty slow from now on,’ Molly said. ‘Fiona and Sonia come in for the late shift. You can go if you want when Kirsten goes to get the kids.’

I nodded and moved the cleaning rag methodically down the counter. I was rubbing hard when I heard Kirsten say, ‘I don’t believe it.’

The café was deserted and I looked up to see Molly and Kirsten staring out the window at the road.

‘What?’ I asked.

Kirsten looked at me strangely, pointing at a four-wheel-drive vehicle parking in front of the café.

My heart thumped loudly! I had no need to confirm that it was Val’s vehicle! Somehow, I knew, I just knew it was and that he was in it!

‘Is he coming in?’ Molly asked softly. ‘He can’t be, can he?’

‘Why not?’ Kirsten muttered.

‘Well, he hasn’t been here since...’

‘Since when?’ I heard myself ask and Kirsten smiled sadly at me.

‘Since Jim and Val had that first fight. We saw Val at the funeral, of course, but...’

‘He’s never going to come in here,’ Molly finished. ‘Maybe he’s going next door.’

Suddenly, she moved away from the window, hands flying to arrange her uniform.

‘He’s coming in! Look busy!’

Kirsten and Molly began polishing tables and moving salt and peppershakers while I continued with the cleaning of the long main counter. I moved a covered display plate of plain doughnuts to one side while I cleaned and noticed my hands were trembling slightly.

What’s going on?

Suddenly, I felt something, felt something nudging my mind. There were vague flickers like an old film whirling loose and I abruptly felt overwhelmed, felt myself transported and I shut my eyes.

Walking along a beach! It's me! A beach! Val is with me! We're young! Playing in the sand!

The vision left me and I managed to pry open my eyes just as the bell over the door rang. Kirsten and Molly were looking at me with concern and I guessed they had seen me close my eyes.

I gave them a weak smile and returned to polishing the counter with the cleaning cloth.

I heard Val's deep, mellow voice as if he was a long way away.

Focus on the job! Clean the counter! Focus!

‘Afternoon, Mrs Sanderson. Kirsten.’

‘Hello, Val,’ I heard Molly say and it was plainly an awkward moment as they were all very formal.

‘Just popped in for a coffee,’ I heard him say and I looked up as he approached the counter.

Kirsten and Molly no longer pretended to clean tabletops and stood together, watching as Val moved closer to me.

I waited, hands behind my back so he could not see my twisting, twining nervous fingers and wondered what to say if I was capable of speech.

What is going on?

‘Hi, there,’ he said and with a rueful smile, added, ‘hi again. You’re Norah...’

‘And you’re Val,’ I managed to say. ‘What sort of coffee would you like?’

‘You know,’ he said, looking around, ‘I don’t think I’ll have coffee. Perhaps a mineral water instead.’

‘The bottles are over there,’ I said.

He made a show of taking time to select a bottle of water and then returned to the counter. He handed me a note and I rang the sale up on the cash register.

‘You’re English? I’ve heard you are Mrs Sanderson’s niece?’

I didn't answer, somehow not wanting to lie to him.

Val turned to look at Molly and I saw a small frown appear on his face.

'I didn't know you had relatives in England, Mrs Sanderson. Didn't Jim have trouble getting residency because he had no English relatives or connections?'

'He was sponsored by the research institution,' Kirsten said, moving to the counter. I think we all knew she didn't answer his question.

Val looked like he was going to say something else but didn't.

'How are your kids?'

'Fine,' Kirsten said abruptly.

Val nodded and I held out his change.

His fingers touched mine, I felt a strange flicker shiver through me, a sly dance of memories, and I wondered when it was I had been on the beach with Val.

There was something in his eyes and, again, I felt he was going to say something but he didn't.

‘Thanks,’ was all he said and we all watched him as he left the café. When his car had driven away, Kirsten turned and demanded, ‘what was all that about?’

5.

‘You saw something?’ Kirsten asked as we walked up the road to the house. The sky was darkening and the wind was whipping around us. I could see white lines of the waves in the harbour and out to sea.

‘We were walking on a beach. Sand and everything. I was Jim, Kirsten, I was Jim! I mean,’ I stumbled, ‘in this vision or whatever you want to call it, I was Jim. I mean, I knew I was Jim!’

‘You are getting his memories,’ Kirsten said with a crooked grin. ‘What caused it, do you think?’

‘I think,’ I said slowly, as Kirsten opened the gate, ‘it was Val.’

Kirsten froze, hand resting on the gate.

‘Val? Why Val?’

‘I don’t have a clue but the strange feelings and the memories came when I was around him.’

‘Interesting,’ Kirsten said, opening the gate wider. ‘What are you going to do?’

‘I...I don’t know...’ I mumbled as I waited for Kirsten to unlock the door.

‘I think, my girl,’ Kirsten said firmly, opening the door, ‘you have to see Val!’

I said nothing and followed him into the house.

‘Norah,’ she said quietly.

‘Yes?’

‘Val hasn’t been into the café for years!’

‘You said that...’

‘But he came in today!’

Kirsten took my shoulders and stared into my face.

‘I think,’ she said quietly, ‘he feels something as well.’

I looked to the side, trying to avoid the truth of it, head spinning.

‘I think, Norah,’ she said quietly, ‘you have to see him, you have to tell him!’

‘T...tell...’

‘Tell him the entire story!’

‘He’ll think I’m insane! Cripes, I think I’m insane! Bloody hell!’ I snapped, savagely taking my coat off and hurling it into the sofa. ‘This is all bollocks!’

Kirsten grinned and folded her arms.

‘Did that feel good?’ Kirsten asked, nodding at my crumpled coat.

‘Well, yes! Actually it did!’

We both laughed until Kirsten said softly. ‘I have to go to pick up Jared and Sherrie. Go and see him, Norah.’

She walked to the door and smiled sadly at me.

‘Go and see him, Norah! Otherwise you’ll never know!’

Thirteen. Brass in Pocket

■

Got brass in pocket

Got bottle I'm gonna use it

Intention I feel inventive

Gonna make you, make you, make you notice

Got motion restrained emotion

Been driving Detroit leaning

No reason just seems so pleasing

Gonna make you, make you, make you notice

Gonna use my arms

Gonna use my legs

Gonna use my style

Gonna use my sidestep

Gonna use my fingers

Gonna use my, my, my imagination

'cause I gonna make you see

There's nobody else here

No one like me

I'm special so special

I gotta have some of your attention give it to me¹⁶

■

1.

Molly and Kirsten were strangely quiet during dinner. They even sent Jared and Sherrie away from the table as soon as they could and I suspected it was so I wouldn't be disturbed while I was thinking.

It was just after six. Molly and Kirsten liked to eat early because it was helpful with the children. Molly woke so early to open the café so she always liked an early night.

How did I know that?

If I was going to continue to help in the café, I also did not mind the early night and fitted in easily with their rituals. In fact, I felt quite at home.

It was Kirsten who broke the silence.

'I bet he's down there now,' she said quietly.

I looked over at her. There was no doubt as to who the "he" was she was referring to.

'He works most nights,' Kirsten continued, 'since his marriage collapsed. Suppose he has nothing else to do.'

I looked up.

‘What happened to his marriage?’ I asked, immediately curious.

‘Who knows?’

‘Who...who was he married to?’

‘Carla Denison. They were married for two years. It was a long time ago.’

‘Why did they break up?’

‘Things just happen, don’t they,’ she said a little bitterly and I left it alone.

‘He...he doesn’t date?’

Kirsten studied me for a moment and then answered quietly, ‘no, he doesn’t date.’

I made my mind up.

‘I’ll go for a walk when we’ve washed up...’

‘Kirsten and I will handle the washing up, love,’ Molly said quickly. ‘You might as well walk down.’

‘But, what do I say?’

‘Just start talking,’ Kirsten advised. ‘Something will come of it.’

‘I think you need to talk about Jim with Val. Otherwise,’ Molly said wisely, ‘it’ll just eat at you. Mysteries do that.’

I smiled softly at her sure way and nodded.

‘I’ll get my coat.’

2.

The sun had set and the streetlights had pools of welcoming light under them, safe havens in the inky blackness. As I walked, I could hear the crash of the waves from the sea and the whistle of the wind. It was very quiet but not frightening or eerie. In fact, I felt at home.

I had changed, at Kirsten's insistence, into one of her skirts and borrowed a woollen jumper as well.

A few people were out and about, some said hello and I nodded back. The pub was full and it sounded like the crowd was in full swing. I could smell the beer as I walked past. A few blokes standing outside watched me silently as I walked by but said nothing.

Turning onto the wharf road, I looked down at the harbour, half wishing that the Moretti shed would be dark but it was not.

He's in there!

I looked up onto the head and saw the blinking light of the small lighthouse. Taking a deep breath, I looked back at the building.

What on earth am I doing here?

Val's four-wheel drive was parked next to the building and I could see a pool of light spilling through the open doors.

Strangely, my heart began pounding again.

Will he believe me?

How do I tell him?

Just how do you say to someone that you think you were once his best friend?

Taking a deep breath, I dug my hands into my coat and walked down the wharf road.

As I drew closer to the shed, I could hear music. It was strange as I felt a tremor course through me, a shiver really, and I had to stop.

Something or someone was nudging the edge of my mind, flickering in and out in the mental shadows and I wished I could see it clearly, wished I could remember.

Remember what?

The music seemed louder and, strangely, even though I did not think I had heard it before, it sounded very familiar.

Why?

A car drove down the main street, headlights casting a brief whirl of light over the grass near the road and the sound of the engine was distant and vague.

Standing in the dark, staring at the shed doors bathed in a warm yellow light, I listened to the song.

Walking 'round the room singing

Stormy Weather

at 57 Mt. Pleasant St.

Well it's the same room but everything's different

You can fight the sleep but not the dream

Things ain't cooking in my kitchen

Strange affliction wash over me

Julius Caesar and the Roman Empire

Couldn't conquer the blue sky

Well there's a small boat made of china

Is going nowhere on the mantelpiece

Well do I lie like a loungeroom lizard

Or do I sing like a bird released

Everywhere you go you always take the weather with you¹⁷

Once again, the music drew me forward and I cautiously stepped through the double doors. Val sat on the bench, legs swinging, drinking beer from a can and staring at the floor. His eyes were closed and he was singing softly along with the CD.

He looks like he's remembering, lost in the past.

I must have made a noise as Val looked up quickly, at first startled, and then he smiled slowly. It was nice watching the smile creep onto Val's lips, wiggle a little bit before slipping away, trying to hide before anyone noticed. I suddenly knew that Val did not smile much lately.

'I knew Crowded House,' he said quietly, 'would draw you out.'

I stepped in and rubbed my upper arms for something to do, to pretend I was cold when I was far from it. I felt warm and unsure, my mind taut like a stretched rubber band.

'Is that the same band you mentioned before?'

Keep it normal, keep it usual and casual.

Val's eyes watched me intently and I wondered what he was hiding. His eyes appeared guarded, almost afraid.

‘Come on,’ he laughed sharply, ‘even people from England must have heard of Crowded House? They were pretty big.’

‘Sorry,’ I said, folding my arms, ‘I don’t know them.’

Val sipped from the beer can and nodded.

‘But you like the music, right?’

‘Yes,’ I agreed, ‘I do. This song is nice but I prefer the one I heard...’

‘When you first came down here,’ Val said. ‘Why?’

‘It was sad and beautiful...’

‘Yes,’ he said briskly, cutting me off. ‘Want a beer?’

I shook my head.

‘Are you a wine girl?’

For a moment, I wondered if he was teasing me or, worse, provoking me but I ignored the undertone.

‘Do you have any wine down here?’ I countered, looking around the untidy workshop.

Val laughed.

‘No, I don’t. Just a few beers. Why not try one. You might like Aussie beer.’

‘I doubt it. I don’t even like the smell.’

His eyes held mine.

‘Is that right? When was the last time you smelled beer?’

‘I can smell it now!’ I joked but Val’s expression was still serious.

‘Before that.’

‘When I walked past the pub.’

‘Before that, before you came here?’

‘What is this, twenty questions?’ I parried.

‘Just curious. When?’

‘I...I don’t remember.’

‘No,’ he said softly, ‘I don’t suppose you do.’

Val crumpled the tin, tossed it into a garbage bin with a flourish and slid from the bench.

‘We need to talk,’ he said seriously, looking down at me.

An image of his face – younger and freer, more open – jumped behind my eyes and I stumbled slightly with the force of it.

Val laughing, holding my hand, running along sand!

‘You all right?’

I managed to nod shakily.

‘I’ve got a chair in the office. Want to sit in there?’

I nodded again and Val gently led me towards a desk with two chairs that sat against the far wall. That, I guessed, was his “office”.

Val’s fingers seemed to burn through my sleeve, I felt strange, and it was a relief to sit down. He watched me as I adjusted my skirt and I smiled weakly up at him.

‘Thanks.’

‘No problem. Want a glass of water?’

‘That would be lovely. Thank you.’

‘You have a great accent,’ Val said as he looked in a small, battered fridge.

I wanted to point out that everyone else seemed to have an accent but didn't, just smiled.

‘Thanks.’

I watched the way the muscles in his arms moved as he poured the water into a glass. Val offered me the glass and I took it, sipping gratefully.

He sat astride the other chair and I made sure I didn't look down at his open crotch.

‘We do need to talk,’ he said softly.

‘I know,’ I said simply, although I was sure he didn't want to talk about the same thing as I did.

‘So,’ he said quietly, ‘your name is Norah?’

I nodded, sipping water.

‘Why?’

I lifted my head to look directly into his large dark eyes.

‘Why what?’

‘Why is your name Norah?’

‘Why is yours Val?’ I countered and he shrugged.

‘It’s Valentino, my grandfather’s name. He emigrated to Australia from Italy a long time ago. My Dad insisted.’

‘It’s a nice name,’ I said softly.

‘Look,’ he said, ‘let’s not beat about the bush.’

I frowned at him.

‘What does that mean?’

‘Why are you here? What brings you to Harlequin Cove?’

‘I...I don’t know...’

‘You’ve come from England and you don’t know?’

I shook my head, staring at my Docs Martens.

‘What is your last name?’ Val asked quietly after a moment of silence.

‘Sanderson,’ I whispered.

‘Because you are Molly Sanderson’s niece? I’m afraid I don’t believe that!’

‘No, that’s not it,’ I murmured.

‘Then what is it?’

‘You...you won’t believe me,’ I said wryly. ‘I don’t really believe it myself although, some things are inescapable.’

A flicker behind my eyes again and I shut my eyes. This time, the image was a very young Val with an older man. The older man was grey and laughing, holding Val proudly in the air and I just knew he was Val’s father.

The memories are slowly coming back!

‘Are you ok?’ I heard Val ask.

‘Yes... sorry...’

‘You seemed to drift away.’

‘I know. Sorry again.’

‘Stop apologising,’ Val said irritably, ‘you sound just like...’ There was a great deal of emotion in his voice before his words faded.

Surprised, I looked hard at Val but he avoided my eyes and looked away.

‘Val,’ I said softly, carefully placing the empty water glass on the desk, ‘I don’t know why I am here.’

He nodded, staring into the distance.

We sat that way in silence as the CD had stopped and the shed seemed suddenly

large and cavernous. In the distance, I could hear the sound of the sea. He cleared his throat and I jumped slightly from the sudden noise.

He turned his head to look at me, his eyes wide and, I could clearly see hurt and fear deep within those dark pupils.

‘I got a letter,’ he said hoarsely, eyes now imploring me, ‘a letter from Jim!’

Shocked, I half rose from the chair, torn between running from the shed as fast as I could and holding him, telling him that everything would be all right, making the suddenly obvious fear and pain just go away.

Instead, I said nothing! My mouth opened and closed as my reeling mind tried to make sense, tried to understand.

Another letter!

Another letter from Jim!

How many did he send?

Val stood up and began pacing.

‘It was a shock...’

He stopped and stared at me hard.

‘You know what I’m talking about, don’t you? I mean, you know who I’m talking about, you know Jim!’

I nodded but Val didn’t allow me to say anything else.

‘I knew it! I sensed something...anyway...shortly after he died, I received a letter from Jim! It was freaky, I mean really freaky!’

Val stopped and pointed dramatically at me.

‘In this bloody letter, sent after he died, he talks about you! He said you might come, that Norah would come here! That he was going to change into Norah!’

Val wide eyes stared at me as a bitter laugh escaped his lips.

‘I thought it was a cruel joke, the last word from the grave! And then you came! You bloody came here!’

Val sank back into the chair and for a moment,

I thought he was about to dissolve into tears. His face was so very sad and my heart ached to hold him, to comfort him in some way...

Wait! What is going on with me? Why am I feeling...

‘Is it true?’ Val asked softly, staring at the floor.

Of course, I could have procrastinated and asked him what was true but I didn’t bother.

What was the point?

His eyes burned into mind and I felt something stir on the edge of my mind, something big but hidden in the shadows.

‘Are you Jim?’

‘I don’t know,’ I said truthfully, ‘but I’m confused.’

His head whipped up.

‘Confused? Why are you confused?’

‘I don’t remember anything,’ I whispered.

It took a moment to register and then I wondered if I saw relief in his eyes.

‘You don’t remember anything from...from when?’

‘From before I woke from the coma,’ I said quickly.

‘Coma?’

‘I woke up and they...they told me stuff but I don’t remember anything before the coma.’

‘Why...why were you in a coma?’

‘I think you can guess,’ I said softly.

He nodded and looked at the floor.

‘What was in the letter?’ I asked quickly.

He looked away.

‘Stuff.’

‘What sort of stuff?’

‘It’s personal.’

‘But...but you said it mentioned me?’

He nodded but didn’t say anything more.

‘It wasn’t the only letter,’ I murmured and Val whirled on me again.

‘It...it wasn’t?’

‘No. Jim wrote to Hester – a woman he worked with – a doctor actually who helped me a lot when I woke.’

‘Did you see the letter?’

‘Yes,’ I said and decided not to tell him that Molly and Kirsten had also received a letter from Jim. If he wanted to be evasive, so could I!

‘What was in it?’

‘It was personal,’ I said coldly, standing.

He smiled wryly up at me.

‘I think I deserved that.’

‘Yes,’ I said quietly, ‘you did!’

I walked to the door.

‘You know,’ I said from the door, ‘I’m looking for answers, searching for Jim in some way...’

‘But, you...you are Jim, aren’t you?’

There, it was out in the open! Finally, the strange fact was revealed between us and, strangely, I felt calmer, felt glad.

‘I’m...I’m not sure. I’m still searching for him, trying to find his memories in my mind, trying to understand. I’m just looking for help,’ I added, ‘but it doesn’t look like I’ll get help here.’

I walked out the door and into the inky black night.

Wrapping my coat around me, I walked steadily up the wharf road. I half expected Val to follow me, to call me back but he didn’t. I was quite disappointed that he didn’t but did not know why I should feel that way.

So Jim, you were a busy letter writer, weren’t you?

You left nothing for chance, did you?

Such a methodical approach to something so bizarre.

The far off waves were suddenly louder as I topped the hill. Stopping, I looked back down at the wharf and the shed I had just walked from. There was no sign of Val, although his car was still there.

I wonder what was in his letter?

What did Jim say to Val?

3.

Kirsten pounced on me as soon as I walked in the back door.

‘Well?’

‘It was strange,’ I begun but Molly stepped in.

‘Let Norah get her coat off, love,’ Molly said to Kirsten. ‘Have a glass of wine,’ she said to me, ‘and you can begin from the beginning.’

And so, sipping white wine, I told them what had happened in the shed. Molly and Kirsten listened in silence until I revealed that Jim had also sent Val a letter.

‘He also got a letter from Jim?’ Kirsten interjected. ‘Wow!’

‘So,’ Molly said carefully, ‘that’s three letters he sent?’

‘It seems so.’

‘And he wouldn’t tell you what was in it,’ Kirsten murmured. ‘That’s interesting, isn’t it?’

‘I suppose it is,’ I said quietly. ‘He said it was personal.’

‘What a strange thing to say,’ Molly said quietly.

‘I didn’t tell him that you also got a letter,’ I said quietly. ‘I...I didn’t know if you wanted him to know,’ I said.

I suddenly felt hot, very hot as if I was boiling and I tugged at the neck of my jumper. My head strange.

Molly looked at me closely.

‘You all right, Norah? You’ve gone very pale.’

‘I’m...I’m...’

Suddenly woozy, I put my hand to my head as the room began to spin.

Waterfalls and sand! Rain and more rain! Pouring down on me...

‘Norah!’

*Val was looking at me a mixture of shock and horror on his face! His eyes wide!
He hates me...*

‘Norah! Grab her, Kirsten, she’s fainting!’

Blackness take me, let me slip into the night! Take me, take me away...

Take me...

...please...

4.

We were at the beach and the sky so blue! So very blue, a duck egg blue. Is that what they call it? It doesn't matter, it's just so blue!

Val laughed when I asked him if it was duck egg and said the only duck eggs he had seen were white, bordering on a light brown.

It doesn't matter, the sky is blue and I feel free!

So free!

So open and free!

The sand was nice between my toes and I looked back at our footprints. Val's big feet and my smaller footprints in the sand, the two of us walking in the sand.

We'll have to get back soon so Mum can drive me to the airport.

Sad to be going but also happy, so free.

Val smiles at me.

The sky is so blue.

Mum will be waiting...

Christmas was over so quickly and the last weeks have been wonderful. Mum's kept the Christmas tree up because she doesn't want this Christmas to end...

The sand feels so nice...

Walking in the sand...

5.

Christmas. It was nice. The tree with gifts and everyone was happy. Kirsten, Mum and...

‘Norah!’

Groggily, I opened my eyes and saw a concerned face close to mine.

‘Mum?’ I whispered and she darted a strange look at Kirsten who was putting a cushion under my head.

‘Yes,’ Mum whispered, stroking my hair back over my forehead, ‘it’s me.’

‘How do you feel?’ Kirsten asked and I noticed she was holding my hand.

‘I...I...weird,’ I said at last, lifting my head. ‘What happened?’

‘You went white as a ghost,’ Kirsten supplied, helping me to sit up, ‘and then crashed. Luckily, Mum caught you.’

Mum was still looking at me, eyes glistening and she rested her hand on my

shoulder.

‘I remember feeling hot,’ I said, ‘and then I started to see things. I remember Christmas here,’ I said happily, pointing to a corner. ‘The tree was there with gifts underneath. It was really nice. It was just the three of us...’

‘Jim’s last Christmas here,’ Kirsten said darting a look at Mum.

‘You...you know you called me Mum?’

‘Yes,’ I whispered, ‘I know. I saw things; the memories are coming back. I know for sure that I was Jim! I’m not Jim now, but I was!’

Mum hugged me and so did Kirsten.

Jared poked his head around the door.

‘What happened?’

‘Aunty Norah fell over,’ Kirsten supplied. ‘And you should go back to bed, young man!’

Aunty Norah!

Kirsten tried to appear stern but it was a failure. Instead, she hugged her son and took him to bed.

‘Let’s have a cup of tea, love,’ Mum said and I nodded.

6.

Things had changed between us. We were closer and our feelings were a lot deeper. We were, I finally recognised, a family.

That night, before I went off to bed, I hugged them both again and thanked them for everything.

Mum went to water and even though Kirsten's eyes glistened. It was nice.

That night, the dreams came with a vengeance and, when I woke in the morning, I realised that more memories had come back.

I pointed at a vacant lot on the street as Mum and I walked down to the café in the early morning.

‘There used to be a pub there, wasn't there?’

‘That's right,’ Mum said with a note of wonder in her voice. ‘You remember?’

‘Vaguely. When was it knocked down?’

‘When you were seven. I mean, when Jim was seven.’

‘It’s confusing, isn’t it?’ I said with a small laugh.

‘Yes,’ Mum agreed, ‘but nice, very nice.’

We weren’t talking about the old pub and Molly slipped her arm around me.

‘Do you miss him, Mum?’ I blurted out. ‘That’s a silly question...’

‘Of course, I miss his face and his personality but,’ she said seriously, ‘I can see some of that in you. I’m sad for Jim but happy that he got what he wanted and I found another daughter!’

I only slipped up and called Molly Mum once. A few of the customers noticed but just looked at Molly for a moment and then returned to their newspapers. I suddenly had the feeling that Harlequin Cove would not care what I called Molly. The only thing that mattered to them was that one of their own was happy and Molly was definitely happy!

And, I had to admit, so was I!

When Kirsten arrived for work, I went for a walk but kept away from the wharf. I did look down the road and saw Val’s vehicle parked outside the large metal shed that served as his workshop.

I wonder what music he is listening to?

As I walked away, I felt a prickle down the back of my neck and I visualised Val sitting on the bench, legs swinging moodily, can of beer in his hand.

And, I suddenly felt warm!

What on earth is going on?

What was it about Val that caused me to react in a weird way?

Shrugging, I kept walking up the hill towards the bluff with the lighthouse. I stopped on the side of the path and decided it was too far to walk to the lighthouse.

Standing on the hill and looking out to sea, I called Hester and told her that the memories were returning. She became quite emotional and told me she was glad.

‘But how do I know the memories are real?’

‘Are memories real?’

‘You sound like Bronwyn now,’ I warned with a chuckle.

‘I try my best,’ Hester said, ‘although I don’t think I could be classed as being at her level. When are you coming back?’ Hester added lightly.

‘I...m...I’m not sure...’

‘Are you coming back? Bronwyn wanted to find out about your visa. We can get it changed to residential if you like.’

‘Just like that?’

‘Professor Frankston has connections. Do you want it changed?’

I watched the white tops of the rolling waves and then watched seagulls hovering in the stiff wind, wings outstretched.

‘Yes,’ I said carefully, ‘get it changed.’

‘I’m glad,’ Hester said softly. ‘Call me when you can.’

7.

Sherrie snuggled up to me on the sofa in front of the fire as I read her a story. Jared and Kirsten were drawing together on the floor and the television was softly talking in the corner.

Mum was dozing in the armchair, a teacup balanced precariously on the arm as the newsreader droned through the television news.

It was all very nice.

Suddenly, the doorbell rang and Kirsten looked over at Mum who woke up with the bell.

‘Who can it be at this time of night?’ Mum mumbled.

‘It’s only twenty past seven, Mum,’ Kirsten said gently. ‘I’ll take a look.’

Kirsten gave me a look as if she suspected who was at the door but I didn’t say anything, just continued reading.

We heard voices and Mum looked at me and was about to say something when Kirsten appeared in the doorway.

‘It’s Val,’ she said carefully. ‘He wants to talk to you.’

Suddenly, I felt warm and I guiltily looked around, trying to appear casual.

‘Oh?’ I said but my voice sounded strange even to my ears.

Kirsten nodded, watching me.

‘Tell him to come in,’ Mum said but Kirsten shook her head.

‘Already asked him. Said he’d wait on the porch.’

‘I’d better go, then,’ I said sliding gently away from Sherrie who had fallen asleep.

‘Call out if there’s a problem,’ Kirsten said.

‘Why would there be a problem?’ I asked quickly.

Kirsten shrugged.

‘Who knows but just yell if there is.’

The front door was ajar and I carefully opened it. Val, in a large thick short coat, stood on the porch, his hands deep in the coat pockets and his longish hair moving in the breeze.

‘Hi,’ he said, the moment he saw me.

‘Hi,’ I replied. ‘Do you want to come in?’

‘Kirsten already asked me. I want to talk to you.’

‘It’s cold out here.’

‘Get your coat,’ he said, turning away from me.

His brusque manner annoyed me.

‘Why should I?’

He turned and frowned at me.

‘Do you want me to get my coat,’ I continued, ‘so I’ll be warm while you’re bloody rude to me?’

Val flinched and looked down.

We stood in silence for a moment and then, rubbing my upper arms, I said, ‘I’m freezing. Come inside.’

‘No, I...I can’t.’

‘Can’t or won’t? Is it just a stubborn bloke’s thing?’

Val lifted his head and looked at me hard for a moment.

‘No, it’s not – whatever that means!’

‘Don’t get grumpy.’

‘Look, I’d like to talk.’

‘I see,’ I said shivering a little. ‘Will I be safe with you?’

‘Why wouldn’t you be?’ Val said with a frown.

‘I don’t really know you...’

‘Don’t you?’

I remembered the dreams and turned away a little so he couldn’t see my face.

‘No, not really...’ I mumbled lamely.

‘I’d like to apologise,’ he said after a long moment.

‘Why didn’t you say so?’ I said cheekily. ‘I’ll get my coat.’

Mum appeared in the hallway as I struggled into my coat.

‘Everything all right, love?’

‘Yes, I’m going to talk to him for a while.’

Val was sitting on the porch steps when I walked out.

‘You know,’ I said, closing the front door, ‘there’s a perfectly good fire inside.’

Val didn’t say anything so I hovered uncertainly behind him.

He suddenly stood up and still looking over the road, said, ‘It’s a bit of a shock.’

I didn’t say anything but a strange concoction of feelings suddenly rippled through me. Firstly, I wanted to comfort him, hug him or simply hold him. Secondly, I felt warm and a little off balance. It was very confusing.

Val turned and looked at me, his eyes hollow and a little haunted.

‘Are you really Jim?’ Val whispered hoarsely.

It’s a fair question.

‘At first,’ I said slowly, ‘I wasn’t sure but now...I’ve begun to remember things...’

‘You have?’ Val pounced. ‘What sort of things?’

‘Various things,’ I said warily.

He nodded and took a deep breath.

‘Look, I’m sorry for being a bit terse,’ he said in a rush.

‘Terse?’

‘Whatever you want to call it. Anyway, I’m sorry.’

‘I get the feeling you are not one to apologise quickly,’ I said, watching a black cat walk across the front fence. ‘Thanks anyway.’

He nodded and moved to the steps.

‘Can I see the letter?’ I asked quickly and Val stopped. ‘Mum and Kirsten also got a letter,’ I added.

‘Mum?’

I shrugged and smiled wryly. ‘I remember her. It seems natural.’

‘You...I mean Jim was always close to his mother. So, they also got a letter?’ He smiled sadly when I nodded. ‘Typical bloody Jim! He always planned everything!’

‘Everything?’ I asked quietly and Val looked away.

‘Perhaps not everything.’

Val looked at me and I was struck by the depth of emotion evident within his eyes. It occurred to me again that he was definitely hiding something.

I was also struck by just how good looking he was.

Don't get distracted!

‘I'd like to talk about a few things before...before I give you the letter.’

‘Ok,’ I said slowly. ‘Now?’

‘No, I'm exhausted. I've been thinking about this entire thing and walking...just walking...tomorrow?’

‘Of course. When?’

‘At lunchtime? Come to the shed and we’ll go for a drive.’

‘A picnic?’ I asked and he frowned.

‘A picnic? No, that’s not what I said.’

I was vaguely disappointed.

‘Do you want me to bring something to eat?’

‘If you want. Tomorrow?’

I nodded and Val stepped down from the porch.

‘Do you remember what it was like to be a man?’ Val asked suddenly.

I shook my head.

‘No. Couldn’t imagine it. Perhaps Jim never felt like a man either,’ I said quietly.

The effect of my words was startling and I saw a flicker of anguish ripple over Val's face for a millisecond.

'You may be right,' he said in a hoarse, almost broken voice. Hands in pocket, he walked away and I watched him until he drove away.

Fourteen. The Look of Love.

■

The look of love is in your eyes

The look your heart can't disguise

The look of love is saying so much more

Than just words could ever say

And what my heart has heard

Well, it takes my breath away¹⁸

■

1.

Mum and Kirsten helped me prepare a few sandwiches and insisted that I take two bottles of mineral water with me.

‘It’s a pity you didn’t change,’ Kirsten said, critically looking over my uniform as I took my coat down from the rack.

‘Change?’ I asked. ‘What’s wrong with the uniform?’

It was a little after noon and the café was full.

‘Nothing,’ Kirsten said with a quick glance at Mum. ‘You look nice.’

Mum hugged me and then she and Kirsten gently propelled me out the door.

‘Take as long as you need,’ Mum called after me and I walked down the road towards the wharf.

I could see the shed where Val ran his small business and his car parked in its usual place. Seagulls wheeled around me, perhaps sensing the sandwiches in the carry bag and hopeful of a snack.

The fishing boats had left for the fishing fields – I had heard the noise of their departure on the wind in the early hours of the morning. It was dark, I was still in bed and I wondered what it would be like to be so far out to sea on a small boat.

It was a reasonably fine day. Even though it was supposed to be winter, the sky was bright blue and the sun warm.

It's not like England at all!

It definitely was not but it also, in a strange way, felt like home.

Is that Jim inside me, is that Jim's thoughts or my own?

My heart thumped a little more quickly as I approached the shed and I strained my ears to hear any music but only the sound of drilling came through the open doors.

Val was working on a boat engine and I watched the way his face contorted slightly when concentrating.

It's familiar. Am I remembering or just noticing?

He suddenly noticed that I was there and he turned, his eyes studying me. Again, I felt warm, bordering on hot, and I smiled nervously.

‘I bring sustenance,’ I announced in a joking way, holding the carry bag high.

He smiled and looked around the shed, obviously looking for a place for us to eat.

‘No,’ I said suddenly.

Frowning and clearly puzzled, Val asked, ‘no what?’

‘No, we’re not eating here,’ I said brightly. ‘You said a picnic.’

‘No, I...’

‘I want a picnic! It’s such a beautiful day and you need some sun! There’s a bench outside that the seagulls haven’t pooped on as much as the others.’

Val grinned and, once again, I was struck by that strangely soft smile. Warm and lingering, I watched it take over his entire face, even his eyes and then slowly slip away. The sight of it made me warm again and I wished Val would smile all the time.

‘I don’t think I’ve ever heard an adult use the word “poo” before! You know,’ he teased, ‘you can say shit here. We rough colonials are used to vulgar words like

that.'

'Just trying to raise the tone,' I said airily. 'Come on, I'm hungry and the sandwiches are pretty special!'

'Special?'

'I made them with a little help from Mum and Kirsty.'

He blinked again and then smiled but this smile was different. I could tell it was forced as his eyes remained sad and a little haunted.

Did he remember something?

Something vibrated within me and I knew he had recalled something, probably a memory of Jim.

'Let's go for a drive,' he said and then suddenly the smile became alive. 'I know a poo-free zone.'

'Now, you're just teasing,' I said good naturedly.

'The car's out front,' he said, seizing his coat. 'Hope the sandwiches aren't thin

neat girly ones.'

'You'll just have to wait and see.'

2.

Val was a little embarrassed when he opened the door to his four-wheel drive, as the interior of the vehicle was very messy. The floor in the front on the passenger's side was littered with fast food wrappers, empty soft drink bottles and parts of the local newspaper.

'Do you live in your car?' I asked and, flushing he scrambled to clear the rubbish out.

'I just get a little messy,' he said as he scooped up a pile of rubbish. 'It's just me.'

'What if you give a lift to someone?'

'I don't.'

'So no one else drives in the car with you?'

'No,' he grunted, taking the last load to the garbage bin.

I felt vaguely pleased that no one else drove in the car with Val – why, I didn't really know.

Sometimes I'm just plain weird!

I inwardly snorted at that, considering the circumstances!

3.

We drove in silence and I looked at the café as we passed it, wondering if Mum or Kirsten could see me in Val's truck.

'Where are we going?' I asked as we left Harlequin Cove behind.

'It's just a few clicks up the road.'

Suddenly, we turned onto a dirt road and drove through the tress until we suddenly emerged on a grassy area with sand and waves directly before us.

A deep feeling of familiarity, even déjà vu swept over me and I was suddenly conscious that Val was quietly watching me.

His eyes burned into me and I felt hot and very strange.

'You ok?' Val asked at last.

I turned away from him and looked out the window at the waves rolling into the white sand.

I've been here before!

Jim has been here!

‘Norah?’

‘I’ve...I’ve been here before, haven’t I?’ I asked softly.

‘Jim and I came here to swim.’

I turned to him.

‘I can’t swim,’ I said hoarsely.

‘Jim could. How do you know you can’t?’

I shrugged.

‘I suppose I don’t know.’

A strained silence, broken only by the crash of the waves and the screech of

seagulls.

‘I’m starving,’ Val said suddenly. ‘There’s a picnic area under the trees with a table and a bench.’

I followed him out and sat on the bench opposite him, watching Val as he opened the bottles.

‘What’s in the sandwiches?’

‘Ham and salad,’ I said, pushing the bag towards him.

‘Ladies first.’

‘I’m really not that hungry.’

He tore the bag open and picked up one half of a sandwich. I stared at the beach as he bit into it.

A cloud skittered across the Sun and a shadow rippled along the white sand before vanishing.

‘Something happened here, didn’t it?’ I asked quietly after a moment.

Val continued to eat, not saying anything.

‘Val,’ I said softly, resting my hand on his arm, ‘tell me?’

He sighed and put the half eaten sandwich down.

For a few minutes, he stared out to sea and I wondered if Val was remembering or thinking how to tell me something.

At last, Val spoke – slowly, carefully and with a hint of sadness.

‘It was a few days before Jim left for university. It was exciting for him as he hadn’t lived anywhere else. I was a little jealous,’ Val said ruefully, ‘but I didn’t get into Uni and didn’t really want to. I was working with my father and I was getting serious with Carla.’

He looked at me with those dark eyes.

‘Carla Denison,’ he added. ‘We got married a few months later.’

I nodded, waiting.

‘Anyway, Jim and I came here for a swim, just like we used to. We were laughing about, having fun when...’

Brushing hair from my eyes, I watched Val and saw he was nervous and, perhaps even afraid to tell me.

He looked down the beach and I watched the sea breeze ruffle his hair.

‘What happened?’ I asked after a long silence.

I had to know as I sensed something and I was nervous.

‘He...Jim tried to...’

He looked out at the ocean and I waited for him to finish.

‘Jim tried to kiss me.’

It didn’t seem such a big deal to me but I could see that confusion and, perhaps shame, was evident within Val’s eyes.

I didn’t say anything, thinking that silence would encourage Val to talk it out, to express himself.

He may even string a few words together, I thought cattily. He is usually almost monosyllabic!

‘We had been friends forever,’ Val said and I was pleased to hear the words spill from him. ‘I mean, since we were small and I never, ever guessed...’

‘That he was gay?’ I asked quietly and Val nodded.

‘It was a shock...a real shock...’

Suddenly, an image of Val’s shocked face flickered before my eyes! I knew it was a memory as I was growing more confident in the brief images that danced tantalisingly for a few second before my eyes but the image showed a younger Val!

Hair longer, fear in his eyes and cruelty on his lips!

The image faded and I was back with the real Val who looked at me keenly.

‘You all right?’

‘Yes,’ I said softly. ‘Just saw something, a memory.’

I cleared my throat.

‘You were shocked, weren’t you and not very nice.’

‘You...you remember?’

‘I think I just saw it.’

‘Oh.’

Val looked back at the sea.

‘I wasn’t very nice. I’ve regretted my reaction everyday since.’

‘And Jim?’

‘Tried to laugh it off but we knew that we could never go back from that, couldn’t go back to how it was. That we couldn’t pretend it didn’t happen.’

‘What happened?’

We drove back to Harlequin Cove. I dropped Jim at his house and I drove away. We didn't see each other for a few years.'

'A few years?' I interjected incredulously. 'Years? Did you say years?'

'Yes,' he said defensively. 'Jim went away to university; I got married and moved to Brisbane for a few years until the marriage broke up.'

'I'm sorry,' I said softly but I knew I wasn't really sorry that his marriage had died. Why, I wasn't sure. Perhaps if he was married still, we wouldn't be talking and I would not be discovering Jim!

'Don't be,' Val said harshly. 'It wasn't love! It was a rushed thing and...well, I think I got married to prove something.'

'To whom?'

'To myself.'

He looked away and I spoke the moment I understood.

'You were attracted to Jim! You wanted to prove you were straight!'

‘No!’

Val’s head whipped around.

‘I am straight! There wasn’t a physical attraction to Jim!’

‘Then what?’

‘We were close,’ he said softly and I wondered if his voice had a wistful tone, ‘very close. I’ve never met anyone that...it doesn’t matter,’ Val said suddenly.

‘No,’ I said softly, ‘please go on.’

He shook his head.

‘I...I can’t,’ he whispered.

‘Please?’

He shook his head again and we sat in silence for quite a while. We ate the sandwiches and watched the waves rolling in and the seagulls wheeling

overhead.

The sky was cloudless and I wondered if there was anywhere in Britain like this. I doubted it and resolved that if I go back, I should look around, as I could not remember much about it at all.

It suddenly struck me that I had thought “if” I go back!

‘I hurt him very badly,’ Val said suddenly and I looked up.

He was staring out at the sea and his eyes were glassy, seeing something in the past.

I decided to plunge in.

‘What happened that night when Jim went down to your shed?’

His head whipped up and his eyes burned into mine.

‘What night?’ Val asked almost evasively.

‘I think you know,’ I said steadily, even though my heart was pumping wildly, ‘I think it was prior to Jim going to England.’

‘Who told you about that?’ Val asked hoarsely.

‘Kirsten. She said when Jim returned it was obvious he had been crying.’

Val nodded and turned away from me.

After a few moments, Val said bitterly, ‘I’m a real bastard!’

‘I can’t believe that,’ I said, resting my hand on his shoulder. He looked at my hand and I quickly withdrew it.

I waited as I could see that Val’s mind was racing, even though his eyes were vacantly staring at the waves, staring again into the past.

‘I came back here after Carla and I called it quits. Dad was dying and I knew it was time to stop stuffing around and join the business just as he wanted.’

Val smiled wryly.

‘Not that it’s much of a business these days with three quarters of the fishing fleet gone!’

He turned and looked at me.

‘Jim had finished university...’

‘Finished? How long was...’

‘We hadn’t seen each other for almost six years. I knew he was home but I didn’t go up and see him. Instead, he came down and saw me.’

Val’s eyes darted away and then back again.

‘He had changed,’ he said hoarsely, ‘thinner but still the same with that crooked smile.’

His anguished eyes burned into mine.

‘I see that smile every time you smile!’

‘Oh...’

‘Anyway, he came down and we just looked at each other for a moment. I offered him a beer but he declined, said he was into wine now. It was awkward.’

Val lapsed into silence and I waited, realising it was difficult for him and perhaps the first time he had every spoken about that night long ago.

‘He told me he was going to England and then he suddenly said the only thing he was sorry about was that he didn’t actually get to kiss me that day so long ago!’

Val rubbed his chin and I saw the pain in his eyes.

‘I didn’t know what to say!’ Val said hoarsely. ‘I didn’t! Jim smiled and said that he had always loved me, that it was an inescapable fact! He then went on to tell me that he had been to doctors about his condition...’

‘Condition?’

‘I can’t remember the name of this so called disease but it was something about gender! He said he was a woman on the inside but a man on the outside. He started crying and said that life had been hell for him!’

I blinked, suddenly hit with a wave of sadness and fear. The emotions were so strong, I almost swayed with their ferocity!

Memories!

Val's face, shock mingling with fear surfaced in front of me and, in a flash, I was there, standing in front of Val on that terrible night!

Do you think I want to be in love with you? Do you? It's hell for me! Hell!

Jim, you don't know what you're saying...

Don't I? How would you know? Do you feel anything for me, Val, anything at all? I have to know before I go away for good! I have to know!

No, I don't feel anything for you!

I gasped, swayed, and would have fallen off the bench if Val hadn't steadied me.

'Norah?'

I hadn't realised that my eyes were closed and I slowly opened them. Val's concerned face swam into view.

'You ok?'

I managed a shaky smile and looked around, thankful that I was on the beach and not in the shed on that horrible night.

I am Jim!

‘Norah?’

‘Ah...huh?’

‘You look so pale...are you sure you’re ok?’

‘I’m...I’m fine. Thanks.’

For some reason, I could not look Val in the eyes and looked out to sea.

‘You told him you didn’t care for him,’ I said, trying not to make it sound like an accusation. ‘He asked you and you said...’

‘How do you know?’ Val demanded.

‘I...I just saw it.’

Tears formed and I rummaged in my handbag for a tissue, turning away slightly so he couldn’t see me crying.

As I sniffled into the tissue, Val gently turned my head.

‘Why are you crying?’

‘I’m not!’ I mumbled pathetically, turning my head back.

Val did not say anything further and we sat on that bench, each with their own thoughts.

‘You’re right,’ Val said softly after a long time, ‘As I said, Jim told me he loved me and then asked me if I felt anything for him.’

I lifted my face to look at his.

‘I told him I didn’t. I’ll never forget the look on his face. It looked like I punched him!’

Val turned his face to mine and I saw the pain in his eyes.

‘I hurt him badly.’

‘I know,’ I whispered, ‘but it’s in the past now.’

‘But,’ he said loudly, his voice strained, ‘I lied to him! I did care for him! We were friends forever, for fucks sake! Of course I cared for him! But,’ he whispered sadly, ‘I didn’t tell him. I was afraid that he would see it the wrong way...I’m not gay...I wish...I don’t know anymore. I just wish I could go back and tell him the truth.’

‘I know,’ I said softly and I took his hand to squeeze in a light but comforting way.

‘You saw it?’ Val asked after a moment. His hand slipped from mine and then took my hand in his, holding it. It felt warm and comforting for me.

‘Yes. I felt it as well.’

‘That’s why you cried?’

‘Partly. Will you let me read it?’

‘Huh?’

‘The letter Jim wrote to you. Will you let me read it?’

‘I don’t know.’

I didn’t press him and we sat in silence for quite a while. It wasn’t until we moved to get into the four wheel drive to drive back that I realised that Val had been holding my hand all the time.

4.

Kirsten and Molly pounced on me as soon as I walked into the café.

Their questions died when they saw my eyes and sensed immediately that something was wrong.

Wordlessly, not caring about the others in the café, I slipped into Molly's comforting embrace and allowed her to hold me tightly.

'I was Jim,' I whispered. 'I know I was!'

'I know,' Molly whispered into my hair, 'I know and it's all right!'

5.

The children were sprawled in front of the television while Kirsten, Molly and I sat around the small kitchen table, sipping wine.

The wine had been Kirsten's idea. I think she thought it might help me tell them everything that had occurred with Val. They were, I knew, extremely curious but did not press me.

Hesitantly, I began to tell them what happened. When I described how I saw Val's face, the tears began again and Molly quickly embraced me for a moment until I told her I was ok.

They listened as the words rushed from my face.

'I was Jim! Jim was in love with Val! He was! And Val told him he didn't care for him but he lied...'

They listened patiently, sipping wine and nodding as each word spilled free.

'Do you feel like Jim?' Kirsten asked after I had lapsed into silence.

I shook my head.

‘I just feel like me! Is that a bad thing?’

‘No,’ Molly said instantly. ‘Of course it’s not.’

‘I think,’ Kirsten said quietly, ‘Jim would have been very happy for that, to just feel like you, feel like Norah.’

I could feel we were all close to tears and Molly, with a wry smile, placed a box of tissues on the table. We each took a tissue and were wiping eyes when the doorbell rang.

Molly and Kirsten looked at me.

‘Do you want me to go?’ Kirsten asked.

It seemed we all knew that who ever was at the door was for me. I think I knew, somehow, it was Val.

‘No, I’ll go.’

‘Bring him in to the front room,’ Molly called after me. ‘The fire is on.’

It seemed that Molly also thought it was Val at the door.

I opened the door and Val stood on the porch, his face in shadow from his cap.

‘Hi,’ I said softly.

He nodded.

‘Feel like a drive?’

‘It’s cold,’ I said quietly. ‘Come into the living room.’

I turned away without giving him time to protest and walked into the front room. The front door closed behind me and I knew Val was following me. I was standing in front of the fire, rubbing my arms when he walked in.

‘Take your coat off,’ I said.

He looked around the room and I sensed he was nervous.

‘Molly and Kirsten are in the kitchen,’ I said. ‘You’re safe,’ I teased.

He darted me a look and then slowly unzipped his heavy coat, dropping it with his cap on a chair.

‘Here,’ Val said, holding a crumpled envelope out to me.

‘What is it?’ I asked, even though I was sure I knew what it was.

‘It’s the letter Jim wrote to me.’

‘Are you sure you want me to read it?’

‘Don’t you want to now? Have you changed your mind?’

‘No, but you were so uncertain...’

‘Just read it, Norah!’

He slumped in a chair by the fire.

‘I suppose,’ he said quietly, hands under his chin, fingers interlocked, ‘it’s all right. You were once Jim, weren’t you?’ He smiled uncertainly. ‘Sounds really weird when you say it, eh?’

‘Yes,’ I said softly, staring at the envelope, ‘I suppose it does.’

Slowly, I sat down on the other chair and pulled the neatly folded sheets of paper from the envelope.

Val watched me as I read.

Fifteen. Message to My Girl – 3

■

*I don't want to say I love you
That would give away too much
That would give away too much
Hip to be detached and precious
The only thing you feel is vicious*

*I don't wanna say I want you
Even though I want you so much
It's wrapped up in conversation
Whispered in a hush
Though I'm frightened by the word
Think it's time that it was heard¹⁹*

■

Hello Val!

Suppose this letter will be a shock but there was no other way! It has been six months since I flicked the switch and this letter has been held until the right

time!

By now, you have probably been told that I died!

They could have told you the truth – don't worry, I'll get to what really happened – but I very much doubt if you have been told the real story!

If everything goes the way I think it will, I'll be in a coma right now!

If it didn't, I am really dead and that's that!

For sometime now I have been working on a breakthrough that will reverse DNA and change people.

*I won't go into details as I know it will bore the pants off you. *smile* Now, that's an interesting concept!*

Suffice to say that this is my opportunity to be who I really am, that is, a woman!

Remember that night years ago when I told you that I loved you; that I wanted to be a woman? I can never forget your stunned face and then you became super protective of your feelings (an irritating trait, I have to say!)

I hope you were lying when you said you didn't care for me at all. We've been friends for so long, that I feel it must be a lie!

Anyway, by the time you're reading this, I would have attempted the process. Yes, I am the guinea pig!

I feel very confident that all will be well even though there are risks. I could die or I could be transformed and lose all my memories. Either way, I don't really care!

Val, I do love you and wish you well for the rest of your life. I am just sorry we never were as we should have been – you boy, me girl! It's a cruel world!

I'm going to seal this letter, send it to the company that will send it on the date on the envelope and then I'm going to start the process.

If it is successful, I'm going to go back home, tap you on the shoulder and just smile up at you. Perhaps I'll even say something corny like "hello there, big boy!"

(I've always wanted to say that!)

I hope I will get to see those gorgeous dark eyes of yours again, Val, but if not, be happy!

And if a young woman called Norah pops her head into your shed, be kind to her!

With all my love,

Norah (Jim).

Sixteen. Cowgirl in the Sand

■

Hello woman of my dreams

This is not the way it seems

Purple words on a grey background

To be a woman and to be turned down

Old enough now to change your name

When so many love you is it the same

It's the woman in you that makes you want to play this game.²⁰

■

1.

I read the letter again, carefully folded it and pushed it back into the envelope. Val studied me as I handed it back to him.

He took it and then offered a large light blue handkerchief.

‘Here. Don’t worry, it’s clean.’

I wasn’t even aware that I had been quietly crying while I read the letter and was surprised by his gesture.

I took the handkerchief and, turning towards the fire, wiped my eyes and nose.

‘Probably mascara on it now,’ I said huskily, holding the handkerchief out to him.

‘You keep it.’

‘You think I’m going to need it?’ I said, trying a little joke.

Val shrugged and I watched as he gently pushed the envelope into his pocket.

‘How many times have you read it?’ I asked softly.

Val frowned and said defensively, ‘who says I have read it more than once?’

I raised an eyebrow and smiled wryly.

Val gave a rueful grin and shrugged.

‘Probably a million times,’ he admitted. ‘There are times I hope that, somehow, it has changed but, of course, it never has. It’s always the same.’

I stared at the flames.

‘I’m not Jim, Val,’ I said quietly. ‘I was Jim but now...’

‘I know.’

‘Do you?’

‘Yes. It’s a little obvious,’ he said with a slow wink and I found myself smiling.

‘I suppose it is.’

‘But you were once him,’ Val said quietly. ‘I believe it and I’m sure Molly and Kirsten does. Anyone that knew Jim would believe it.’

‘What makes you so sure?’

‘I...I don’t know. I just am. I wasn’t in the beginning but now...well, I am!’

‘It’s all a little fantastic, isn’t it?’

‘It appears,’ Val said solemnly, ‘that Jim, although he couldn’t surf properly or throw a ball, was a bloody scientific genius!’

I laughed again.

‘Thanks.’

‘For what?’

‘For showing me the letter.’ I looked back at the fire. ‘And for being nice.’

He just nodded, stood and picked up his coat.

‘I’d better go.’

I took my glasses off, rubbed the bridge of my nose and then slid the glasses back on.

‘Jim used to do that,’ Val said quietly.

I smiled and shrugged.

What was there to say to that?

‘Would you like a cup of tea or a glass of wine or something?’

He hesitated.

‘I don’t know whether Molly would like me...’

‘She wouldn’t mind,’ I said firmly.

As if on cue, the door opened and Molly popped her head in.

‘Hello Val,’ she said brightly. ‘Cup of tea or a glass of wine?’

Val looked at me as if he suspected Molly and I had prearranged the invitation and then smiled slightly.

‘No thanks, Molly, I’ve got some work to do. I promised that I’d have a tractor engine finished by tomorrow. Work’s hard to find so I have to take it when it comes.’

He slipped his coat on.

‘I’ll walk you out,’ I said quickly and Molly smiled at me as she stepped aside to let me pass.

‘Thanks again,’ I said at the front door.

‘It’s ok,’ he said and opened the front door. ‘Are you working in the café tomorrow?’

‘Yes.’

‘I...I might stop in for lunch,’ he said, looking suddenly nervous.

‘That would be nice.’

2.

Molly and Kirsten looked up at me when I walked into the family area. They were still at the table and I guessed the children were reading in their beds.

‘Glass of wine?’ Kirsten asked and I shook my head.

‘I might have a cup of tea.’

‘I’ll get it,’ Molly said, rising.

Putting my hand on her arm to stop her, I said, ‘I can make it. Anyone else?’

They both shook their heads.

When I returned with a mug of tea, they looked at me expectantly.

‘He showed me the letter that Jim sent to him,’ I said. ‘Jim was in love with Val.’

Kirsten exhaled as if she had been holding it in and I watched as she squeezed her mother’s hand.

‘I see,’ Molly said quietly.

‘Is that why they had a falling out?’ Kirsten asked quietly and I nodded. ‘I guessed as much. Jim told me a little, told me that he confessed to Val but that was all.’

‘You didn’t tell me!’ Molly said with a frown.

‘I’m sorry, Mum. Jim told me in confidence.’

Molly didn’t say anything but I could tell she was hurt.

‘I don’t know what to do,’ I said softly.

Sipping the tea and sat down at the table.

‘I have memories that come every now and again but they don’t seem like my memories! They flicker like one of those old films! I don’t feel like Jim!’ I said a little defiantly. ‘I feel like me!’

Molly and Kirsten didn’t say anything, just waited.

‘I feel like everyone wants me to be Jim! I can’t! I don’t know anything about him really!’

‘No one wants you to be Jim, Norah,’ Kirsten said, squeezing my hand. ‘I quite like you as you are.’

I felt tears prickling.

‘Thanks, Kirsten.’

‘And so do I,’ Molly said quietly. ‘I’m just pleased to know that in some way, my son isn’t dead.’

‘But, I don’t remember everything!’

‘It doesn’t matter,’ Molly said firmly, ‘it really doesn’t matter.’

3.

‘Here he comes,’ Kirsten said softly, nudging me.

I looked up and saw Val walking across the street from his four-wheel drive, his hands deep in his pockets and leaning against the wind. The weather forecast (it was all the locals talked about) was for heavy squalls and there had even been a storm warning issued for fishing and recreational boats.

Jack, a retired fisherman who lived near the hotel and ate breakfast at the café everyday, had warned us to batten down the hatches.

‘I can smell a big one coming,’ he proclaimed from the door.

No one laughed and a few of the locals nodded wisely.

‘If Jack says it’s a big one,’ I heard a woman murmur, ‘it will be!’

Val pushed the door open and Kirsten winked before vanishing out the back.

‘Hi,’ Val said, sliding onto a stool. ‘Weather’s turning,’ he offered as he removed his coat and cap.’

‘Jack says it will be a big one,’ I said, filling a glass with water.

Val smiled.

‘Then it will be. Get plenty of candles because the power is sure to go.’

‘Molly has probably got that under control. What would you like?’

He gave me a crooked smile and I felt myself go slightly warm. It was a strange feeling and I felt suddenly self-conscious.

‘I’d like a coffee and maybe a hamburger? The one with the lot. I skipped breakfast.’

‘You shouldn’t skip breakfast,’ I said as I scribbled the order down for Ivan, ‘it’s the most important meal of the day.’

Val was smiling at me when I looked up and I felt even more self-conscious.

‘Just saying,’ I said crossly, sliding the order slip along the windowsill between the café and the kitchen. Ivan picked it up and read it before spiking it with the other orders.

‘I know,’ Val said, ‘and I appreciate it’

‘Now you’re teasing!’

‘No, I’m not. It’s nice to have someone concerned about me.’

‘I didn’t say I was concerned! It was just an observation! What sort of coffee would you like?’

‘Flat white.’

‘Coming up.’

‘So you weren’t concerned?’ Val called as I fiddled with the coffee machine.

From the corner of my eye, I saw that Molly and a few of the locals were listening to the conversation.

I ignored him and made the coffee.

‘Sugar is there,’ I said, placing the coffee in front of him.

‘Don’t have it, I’m sweet enough.’

‘Even I know that is an old joke,’ I sniffed, wiping the counter before placing a knife and fork in front of him.

‘Is everyone watching us?’ Val asked in a very low voice while he stirred his coffee.

‘It appears so,’ I said stiffly.

‘Nothing much happens around here so our conversation will be hot gossip tonight.’

‘Really?’ I asked, surprised.

‘New beautiful girl arrives in town...’

‘Hardy beautiful,’ I muttered before I could stop myself.

‘You shouldn’t correct a compliment when someone gives you one,’ Val joked.

‘Even when it’s bullshit?’

‘Hey,’ he said with a sly grin, ‘you sound like an Aussie!’

‘They have bullshit in Britain too, you know,’ I said and I looked up sharply when I thought I heard Kirsten giggle. She looked away and immediately began wiping a table that I knew she had wiped before.

A sudden gust of wind shook the building and large raindrops splattered forcibly against the café window.

‘Here it comes,’ someone called.

The sky had become so dark, the only streetlight had come on and I suddenly shivered.

‘It’ll be fine,’ Val said quietly.

‘I know,’ I said briskly just as Ivan rang the bell. ‘That’ll be your burger.’

I placed it in front of Val and watched as he splashed a brown sauce over it before beginning to eat.

Molly and Kirsten were standing at the window watching the rain. I joined them and looked out on the street, watching the sheets of rain turn the footpaths and

the street into small rivers. The rain was so heavy, it was like a special time of day – neither day or night, but not at all like dusk or dawn.

Frankly, it was scary and a little surreal.

Forked lightning crackled over the hills and I felt Molly's arm fold around my shoulder just as the thunder cannoned off the roof, shaking the walls.

Lights flickered and we watched the only streetlight die a lonely death in the rain.

The lights in the café flickered for several minutes but managed to hold on, although just a little dimmer.

'Better get some candles, Molly,' Jack called and Molly and Kirsten moved away, leaving me alone at the window.

As I watched the rain, I felt someone standing beside me and I didn't have to look to know, somehow, that it was Val.

'This is just the first part,' Val said softly. 'It will be quiet as the centre of the storm moves over us and then the worst part will hit.'

'Worse?'

I shivered and folded my arms, hunching over a little.

‘This is scary,’ I said honestly.

I half expected Val to laugh and tell me I was being stupid or girly.

Instead, he surprised me.

‘Yes, it is frightening,’ he said softly. ‘We see all sides of nature here! Floods, bushfires, storms – you would think we’d be used to it but it’s still frightening. Nature’s way of telling us we aren’t as bloody smart or as powerful as we think we are.’

Surprised by his sudden articulate burst, I looked up at him and immediately saw those dark eyes Jim had mentioned in that letter.

Hello there, big boy...

Another lighting flash and then more thunder. This time, the lights in the café died and only the candles that Molly and Kirsten had lit shone.

Kirsten’s mobile phone rang and she spoke for a few minutes.

‘They’re closing the school,’ she announced. ‘I have to get Sherrie and Jared.’

‘In this?’ I exclaimed.

‘The school’s beside the creek,’ Kirsten said as if that explained everything.

‘I’ll come with you,’ I said quickly, looking for my coat.

‘There’s no need...’

‘I’m going with you, Kirsty! Let’s hurry.’

‘We can go in my truck,’ Val said suddenly. ‘You’ll need a four wheel drive. I’ll run over and bring it to the door.’

Val was out the door and running through rain to his vehicle before Kirsten and I could say anything.

‘You know,’ Kirsten said quietly as she shrugged her coat on, ‘Jim used to call me Kirsty.’

‘Oh. I...I...’

‘I like it,’ she said simply. ‘In fact, I’ve missed it.’

Standing by the café door, watching the rain through the window as it bucketed into the street, Kirsten and I held hands as we waited for Val.

4.

Kirsten and I crammed into the front seat next to Val and we were deathly quiet as Val steered the four-wheel drive through the rushing water. I had never seen anything like this and yet, although fearful and nervous, I was also accepting as if I had seen this before.

‘Jim and I used to play in the rain,’ Val said suddenly as he steered the vehicle towards the street that led to the school.

‘I remember,’ Kirsten said softly.

Nothing more was said as if they were waiting for me to say that I also remembered but, as I didn’t, I sat silently in the middle, watching the windscreen wipers try to beat the rain.

‘They’ll be in the school hall,’ Kirsten said and Val nodded.

‘I’ll stop outside.’

Suddenly, the raindrops diminished and after a few moments, stopped.

‘Good timing,’ Val said as he opened the door. ‘Careful, it’s nothing but mud here.’

Kirsten leapt from the vehicle and I followed her into the hall where the children were listening to a story read by a calm teacher.

She smiled at us as we entered and Sherrie and Jared bolted from the group to their mother.

‘Time to go home,’ Kirsten said happily and I smiled up at Val.

‘Thanks,’ I said softly. I really didn’t know what I was thanking him for.

‘No problem,’ he said but there was, I felt, a lot more he wanted to say but didn’t know how.

5.

Mum closed the café early and we hurried home to prepare for the rest of the storm. Already, the clouds were dark and ominous and there was no horizon out to sea.

‘We’ll be fine,’ Kirsten said to Sherrie and Jared. ‘we’ve been through this before.’

As I had not, I shared the concern of the children but I put on a brave front.

Val had gone down to his shed to secure it after he had dropped the four of us at the café. While I helped Mum and Kirsten close windows and put candles in the rooms, I found myself hoping Val was safe.

The eye of the storm passed over us quickly and the velocity of the wind dramatically increased. We could hear distant thunder and I had a feeling it was going to get a lot worse before it got better.

The crackling fire made cheery noises and candles scattered throughout the house cast a warm glow over everything.

Rain pelted the tin roof as if someone was throwing pebbles at us.

‘We won’t be able to hear ourselves think,’ Mum said with a smile, ‘when the real storm hits!’

We were sitting down to dinner when we heard the doorbell.

Something made me jump to my feet.

‘I’ll go.’

Val stood in the doorway, illuminated by lightning flashes and he smiled as the wind snuffed the candle I was carrying.

‘Not much good out here,’ he said with that wry smile. ‘Just thought I’d check to make sure you’re all ok.’

‘We’re fine,’ I said with a shy smile and then found myself asking, ‘do you want to stay for dinner? Mum’s cooked loads!’

‘Ah...I...’

‘You’d rather eat hamburgers in your car?’ I asked and he chuckled.

‘Come on,’ I said, taking his arm, ‘I won’t take no for an answer.’

Val didn't argue and followed me in, closing the front door behind him. I took his wet coat and put it over the back of a chair in front of the crackling fire in the front room.

'Come through. We're in the kitchen.'

Mum and Kirsten looked up when we came in and Mum simply said, 'I'll set another place.'

'Molly,' Val began, 'there's no...'

'Oh, Val, sit down! You used to eat here a lot when you were a boy! Surely you can do it again?'

Val shrugged and Kirsten said, 'I'll get another chair.'

The atmosphere was a little strained as we ate at first until Sherrie and Jared were sent to read in bed. Kirsten returned after reading a story and Val cleared his throat.

'I...I brought the letter Jim sent to me,' he said to Mum, 'in case you wanted to read it. You too,' he said to Kirsten and then turned to me. 'I assumed you told them?'

I shrugged.

‘You didn’t tell me not to and it’s important to them as it is to me...’

‘I know. No need to be defensive...’

‘I wasn’t.’

‘I’ll get the letter he sent to us,’ Mum quietly interrupted, ‘so you can read that as well.’

The rain suddenly was louder on the roof and the thunder crashed as the others read the letters.

‘Here is the one he sent to Hester,’ I said, putting the copy on the table. ‘Hester won’t mind.’

‘Well,’ Val said when they had all finished, ‘he certainly planned everything. Do you think there’s anyone else he could have sent a letter to?’

‘Not that I can think of,’ Mum said slowly.

There was a sudden explosion of thunder and we all jumped. Sherrie and Jared

came running into the room and clung to Kirsten.

‘You can stay in here with us,’ Kirsten said, comforting the children.

‘Let’s have some hot chocolate,’ Mum suggested. ‘We can make it on the fire.’

6.

We sat around the crackling fire, sipping hot chocolate and talking when the sound of the thunder and pelting rain on the roof allowed us to hear each other. It was nice and comforting.

‘Does it rain like this where you live, Aunty Norah?’ Sherrie asked. She was half-asleep and I absently brushed a lock of hair from her eyes.

Aunty Norah! It’s nice!

‘No, I don’t think it does. I don’t really know that much about it,’ I added suddenly.

‘Were you scared when the storm started?’

‘Yes,’ I said truthfully, ‘I was.’

‘So was I,’ she said sleepily and closed her eyes.

7.

I walked Val to the door and he looked up at the night sky.

‘The stars are out. The storm is gone. We’ll see what mess it’s left behind in the morning.’

‘Thanks for helping with Sherrie and Kirsten...’

‘Thanks for dinner...’

‘Mum cooked...’

‘It was nice...’

Suddenly, we were a little awkward with each other.

‘You working at the café tomorrow?’

‘Not really working, just helping Mum and Kirsty...’

‘Jim used to call Kirsten that.’

‘Kirsten told me.’

‘I might come in for lunch or...something...’

‘Ok.’ I shivered and pulled my coat more tightly around my shoulders. ‘Val?’

‘Yep?’

‘I...I don’t remember all of Jim’s memories...’

‘They may come back...’

‘But...I won’t be Jim. You know that, don’t you?’

‘Yes,’ he said with a short nod, ‘I know. Goodnight, Norah.’

‘Goodnight Val.’

I watched him back his vehicle out and waved. Val returned the wave and drove

off, the headlights picking up all the storm debris on the road.

Looking up at the millions of stars, I hugged myself and whispered, 'I just want to be me!'

Seventeen. Solsbury Hill

■

Climbing up on Solsbury Hill

I could see the city light

Wind was blowing, time stood still

Eagle flew out of the night

He was something to observe

Came in close, I heard a voice

Standing, stretching every nerve

I had to listen, had no choice

I did not believe the information

Just had to trust imagination

My heart was going boom, boom, boom

Son, he said, grab your things, I've come to take you home.²¹

■

1.

The café had opened on time, despite the lack of power. It had taken the electricity providers some time to restore electricity. Thankfully, Mum and Kirsty had a small back-up petrol generator installed in the café after the last big storm so the freezers and refrigerators had operated all night.

The generator wasn't big enough to fuel the lights so we had begun the day with candles.

When we opened the café, the street was full of litter from the storm - branches, a twisted sheet of corrugated iron from some roof and other storm rubbish.

The locals filed in and commented that the candles were a nice touch.

'Bit hard to read the newspaper,' Jack complained.

'What newspaper? Nothing has been delivered this morning,' Ivan called through the window to the small kitchen. 'There's no fresh milk...'

'We have enough milk, Ivan,' Mum interrupted. 'Here, Jack,' Mum said putting a newspaper in front of Jack, 'read yesterday's. The news doesn't change that much.'

Bob and Teddy laughed and returned to their breakfast.

They had all said hello to me when they had entered which was nice. It seemed that they had accepted me a little.

Kirsty came in once she had dropped the children at the school and we were very busy as it seemed everyone decided to have breakfast at the café,

Perhaps it was a chance for the battered community to get together but there was laughter and jokes flying around the crowded café. There was even a small but ironic cheer when the lights came back on.

Kirsty, Mum and I had a small respite before lunch and we sipped tea and managed to eat a bacon and egg sandwich each.

‘It was nice last night,’ Mum said. ‘It’s been a long time since Val stayed to eat.’

‘It was nice,’ Kirsty said slowly. She turned her head slightly to look at me. ‘Any more memories returned?’

I shook my head and Mum was about to say, I suspect, something comforting when Kirsty suddenly said, ‘Can I ask you something?’

‘Of course. You don’t have to ask...’

‘Do...do you have feelings for him?’

Slowly, I put my half-eaten sandwich down. Mum watched me as I marshalled my thought.

It was obvious Kirsty was asking about Val and given what was in the letter he had shown us, it was a fair question.

‘I...I like him,’ I said softly. ‘I have from the first moment I saw him and I think...you know that dream I had walking along the wharf?’

Kirsty nodded. ‘It wasn’t Jim in the dream,’ she said quietly, ‘it was Val, wasn’t it?’

‘Yes,’ I whispered, ‘it was. He makes me feel...strange...I can’t explain...’

‘I think you have, Norah,’ Kirsty said with a warm smile and she squeezed my hand.

‘Finish up, girls,’ Mum said. ‘The lunch rush will be on us soon.’

2.

‘Looks like he’s coming in for lunch again,’ Mum said with a wink as we watched Val walk across the main street.

They left me behind the counter to wait on the tables and I busied myself as best I could.

‘Hi,’ Val said, sitting at the counter.

‘Hello. Lunch or just coffee or tea?’

‘Lunch. I’ll try one of Ivan’s steak sandwiches.’

‘Coming up?’ I said, scribbling the order down. ‘Anything else?’

‘I’ll take a bottle of spring water. Norah?’

‘Yes?’

I looked up and saw Val’s face was flushed.

‘I...I was wondering...’

‘Suddenly, the café became rather quiet and Val nervously looked around.

‘Yes?’ I prompted, heart pounding and feeling a little warm.

Mum and Kirsty were pretending to wipe tabletops but I knew they were listening.

Perhaps the rest of the café was listening as well, including Ivan who was taking an awful long time reading the order I had given him.

‘It’s just a steak sandwich, Ivan,’ I snapped.

‘Just checking,’ he said, aggrieved. ‘You want onions with that?’ Ivan asked, poking his head through the window.

Val nodded.

‘The order,’ Ivan said triumphantly, ‘doesn’t mention onions!’

Knowing that onions were standard, I was about to argue when I realised Val and I were the focus of everyone's surreptitious focus.

I moved close to Val and offered him a glass for his water.

'Thanks,' he said and I watched his big hand unscrew the bottle top.

'You were saying?' I asked softly.

Val glanced around.

'Nothing,' he said looking moodily at his glass.

'Oh,' I said, disappointed. 'You sure?'

He nodded.

Mum suddenly appeared behind the counter.

'Hello, Val.'

‘Hi, Mrs. Sanderson.’

‘Norah,’ Mum said, eyes twinkling, ‘you can take your lunch now, if you like.’

‘Now?’

‘Yes,’ Mum said firmly, ‘now! I made a salad sandwich for you,’ she said, thrusting it into my hand. ‘Why don’t you go for a walk? We’ll have a rush in half an hour.’

‘Well...’

‘You need a break,’ Mum said, eyes darting to Val and back.

I suddenly received the message loud and clear.

‘Well, if you’re sure...’

‘Just half an hour.’

‘Ok. I’ll sit down at the wharf for a while.’

I removed my apron, grabbed my coat and, salad sandwich in one hand walked towards the door.

The regulars watched me as I moved through the tables and Kirsty gave me a conspiratorial wink.

‘I’ve changed my mind, Ivan, I’ll have my steak sandwich to go,’ I heard Val say and I smiled as I shut the café door behind me.

3.

Surprisingly, there wasn't a cloud overhead and I again marvelled at just how blue the sky was. There was a small chill in the air but it wasn't overpowering.

I sat on the bench overlooking the wharf and unwrapped the sandwich Mum had made for me.

Val's vehicle was parked by the shed and there were more boats moored at the wharf than usual.

There was a movement behind me and I turned to see Val standing behind me, the wind in his hair and the bottle of water in one hand. What must have been his steak sandwich was in a brown paper bag in the other hand.

'Can I sit with you?'

'Of course,' I said with a welcoming smile.

'Got tired of the café,' Val grunted as he sat next to me and I suppressed a giggle.

Suddenly I felt light headed.

I also felt warm as if the sun had suddenly turned up the volume and baked me in a deep, knee bending heat.

‘Do you think you’ll stay in Harlequin Cove?’ Val asked suddenly.

‘I...I don’t know...’

‘It’s home, isn’t it?’

It was Jim’s home! But, I felt at home here as well, especially with Mum and Kirsty. It was unexplainable and if I attempted to describe it to someone who hadn’t known Jim or read his letters, I was sure I would be locked away as hopelessly insane.

‘I...I suppose it is, but I don’t know anywhere else...have you travelled?’

‘Not out of Australia. Dad was always on at me to go to Italy but...’

‘Where did your family come from?’

‘I think it was from around Naples – Napoli – but not sure.’

‘Do you speak Italian?’

‘Some. Can’t read it but can speak it as my grandfather and even my father spoke Italian all the time.

It was many words in one sentence for Val and I listened silently, hoping to encourage him to talk a little more but he didn’t.

‘What about you,’ I asked at last after a long silence, ‘will you stay here?’

‘I’m not sure. Now that Dad’s dead...there’s no family here...’

I wanted to ask about his mother but decided to leave that subject for another day.

‘Norah?’

‘Hmmm?’ I replied, munching my sandwich and watching seagulls.

‘Do you...do you think we could do something together?’

I turned and looked at him.

What did Jim say in that letter? Those gorgeous dark eyes! Well, Jim, you certainly got that right!

‘Something?’ I asked huskily. ‘Like what?’

‘I...I don’t know...dinner? Maybe a drive or a...I could show you around...’

‘That would be nice,’ I said softly and those moody dark eyes of his lit up. ‘Perhaps a picnic?’

‘Well...’ Val said, frowning slightly.

‘I’ll bring the food.’

‘Well, ok then,’ he said happily.

‘And Val?’

‘Yeah?’

‘Clean your car out.’

Val laughed loudly, scratched the back of his head and said, ‘sure. I guess I can do that! How about tomorrow?’

4.

Val had not only cleaned the car out, he had also washed and polished it! He was also wearing a spotlessly clean shirt and jeans. For a moment, I was hopeful he may have even cleaned his boots but he hadn't.

Still, he did look gorgeous!

Can you say that about a bloke?

Who cares!

And those eyes...

Kirsty had insisted on lending me a casual pale blue skirt with pockets, a white top and cardigan in case it became too cold.

Val even opened the car door open for me and I slid the picnic basket onto the seat before climbing in.

'What's in the basket?' Val asked as he slid behind the wheel.

‘Cold chicken, salad, fresh bread and stuff.’

‘Sounds like a feast. I know a nice spot...’

‘Val?’

‘Yeah?’

‘Can we go somewhere new?’

‘New?’

‘Somewhere you and Jim never went.’

‘I think I can do that,’ he said and started the engine.

I glanced back at the house and wondered if Kirsty and Mum were peeping through the curtains.

5.

Val was not a great conversationalist but it did not seem to matter at all. Somehow, we communicated.

‘I’m not good at talking,’ Val suddenly admitted gruffly. ‘Jim used to say I was hopeless at it.’

‘I’m not Jim,’ I said lightly.

‘I didn’t say you were. Why do you keep saying that?’

‘Perhaps, I’m trying to find my own identity, find my own place.’

I tugged at a tuft of grass and looked down the hill at the waves beneath the small cliff we were sitting on. The breeze was fresh but not cold and the seagulls managed to find us so they could liberate some bread.

‘I don’t know much,’ I burst out. ‘I know nothing about Britain or the rest of the world! I know a hospital in Manchester...’

‘You know Harlequin Cove,’ Val pointed out.

‘Yes and I’m glad I came. Mum and Kirsty have made it feel like my home. And you, of course.’

‘Me?’

‘Yes, you’ve been nice.’

To my surprise, Val blushed.

‘I...I wouldn’t say that...’

‘You introduced me to Crowded House,’ I teased and he grinned.

‘Well, you have a point.’

‘So,’ I said after a moment, turning to look at the waves, ‘you didn’t bring Jim here?’

‘We didn’t come here, if that’s what you mean.’

‘What about...your wife?’

‘Ex-wife. No, I didn’t come here with her either.’

‘What’s the difference between bringing and...’ I asked.

‘Bringing? Well, uh...it sounds like a date!’

Val threw a bread crust to a seagull that caught it and flew off with other gulls chasing it.

‘I see,’ I smiled. ‘So, we’ve come here for a picnic...’

‘No,’ Val said quietly, face turned away, ‘I brought you.’

For a moment, I didn’t know what to say as the full implication hit me.

He thinks this is a date!

Is that a bad thing?

No, I thought, it definitely isn’t!

‘Val,’ I said softly and he turned. From the stony look in those dark eyes, I guessed he assumed I was going to say that we weren’t on a date.

‘Yeah?’

‘Thanks for bringing me.’

6.

I felt strange when I stepped from the car. For a strange and awkward moment, I had wondered if Val was going to kiss me. We were rather frozen for a minute, unsure what to do until I had smiled brightly and opened the door.

Val watched me to the front door of the house, waved and drove away.

Did I want him to kiss me?

Mum watched me dreamily walk into the kitchen.

‘It went well?’

‘It was super!’

She smiled and then grew serious.

‘You left your mobile here!’

‘Did I? Oh well, not...’

‘There was a call for you. I answered it. Hope that’s ok...’

‘Of course,’ I said and spontaneously kissed her cheek. ‘It’s fine. Who was it?’

‘Hester Scott. She said it was urgent!’

‘U...urgent? Did she say...’

‘No, that’s all she said but she did say to call her at anytime.’

I picked up the mobile, scrolled through to Hester’s name and pressed the button.

It took a little while to connect but Hester answered almost instantly.

‘Norah?’

‘Yes. What’s...’

‘How was the date with Val?’

‘H...how did you know...’

‘Molly and I had a small chat, that’s all. Is there a problem?’

‘No,’ I said glaring at Mum shrugged at me as if to say it was just conversation.
‘Anyway, what’s so urgent?’

‘Another letter has arrived at the centre.’

‘A...another letter? F...from Jim?’

‘Yes.’

‘To you? What did this one...’

‘No,’ Hester said carefully, ‘it wasn’t to me. It was to you!’

‘Me?’ I squeaked.

‘It was addressed to Norah, care of me. I haven’t opened it!’

I sat down heavily and Mum stood by me, a concerned expression on her face and a hand on my shoulder.

‘To me?’ I repeated softly.

‘Yes. I can bring it to you. I’ve booked a flight...’

‘You’re going to bring it?’

‘I want to see you, to see how you are and this letter could be important. We could open it here but, somehow, I feel Jim would not have wanted that!’

No, he wouldn’t!

Another letter from Jim but this one was to me!

‘When do you arrive?’ I asked dully.

Hester ran through the details of her flight but I wasn’t really listening.

‘Are you there?’ Hester said gently.

‘Huh? Ah, yes. Sorry. You were saying?’

‘We’ve used our contacts and I’m flying from Sydney into the naval base near you so I’ll be there quickly. Are you all right, Norah?’

‘Yes, I think so. See you soon, Hester. Safe trip.’

I slowly put the mobile down and said to Mum, ‘Jim wrote another letter.’

‘To you? I heard,’ she explained softly.

‘Hester is bringing it...’

‘She can stay with us,’ Mum said firmly. ‘You can bunk in with your sister.’

How quickly she has absorbed this, I thought. Once, her son was dead and now she believes she has a new daughter!

I smiled weakly at her and Mum enveloped me in a hug.

And she feels like my mother!

Why? Who can explain it but she does!

‘There is no point worrying about the letter,’ Mum said firmly in her calm, sure way. ‘Let’s make dinner.’

7.

Hester telephoned me when she landed at Sydney. It was a call I had been fretting about for the twenty four hours since she called.

Why would I be worried about a letter?

‘I’m here,’ Hester said succinctly. ‘I’m heading to a small plane and I’ll be at the naval base in an hour.’

‘Do you want us to meet you?’

‘Us?’

‘Val offered to drive...’

‘Ok. That will be brilliant. Wait at the gate to the base.’

It suddenly struck me that Hester must have travelled this way for the funeral!

Jim’s funeral!

‘He has a four wheel drive. It’s silver and blue...’

‘I’ll find you. Have to run to catch the plane! See you soon.’

8.

I idly watched the cars move in and out of the gates to the navy base.

‘I wonder if we could open Jim’s grave,’ I said as the thought popped into my mind.

‘Why?’ Val asked quietly.

He was leaning against the car door, one hand on the steering wheel and the elbow of the other on the windowsill.

‘I don’t know...perhaps to see what’s in there?’

‘I thought you said Doctor Scott said they filled it with weights?’

‘Yes, that’s what she said.’

‘Don’t you believe her?’

‘Yes, I do but...’

‘You would just like to see, to make sure?’

‘Yes,’ I said, grateful that he understood, ‘that’s it.’

‘Let’s ask Doctor Scott if we can do it. Is that her coming through the gates?’

9.

‘Do you have enough room?’ Hester asked. ‘I could sit in the back?’

I was wedged next to Val, his leg against mine while Hester sat on the passenger side.

‘No need,’ I murmured, ‘I’m fine. How was your trip?’

‘Long. Very long.’ She glanced at Val and then back at me. ‘Do you want the letter now?’

‘Later,’ I said, suddenly nervous. ‘When we get home?’

‘Home?’ Hester quickly asked. ‘This is home now?’

‘It’s all I’ve got,’ I said softly, staring through the windscreen at the winding road ahead.

10.

We sat around the kitchen table. Mum, Kirsty, Val, Hester and myself. Mum had insisted on making a pot of tea and we all dutifully sipped on it.

Hester became business-like and I expected she would offer the letter again.

Before she could, I jumped in with, 'Hester, how easy would it be to open Jim's grave?'

Kirsty and Mum gasped while Val watched me quietly.

'I would think,' Hester said steadily, as if she had anticipated this question, 'if Australia is like the U.K. you would need a court order. There is nothing there, Norah,' she said quietly. 'We filled the coffin with weights.'

Hester quickly looked at Mum.

'Sorry, Mrs Sanderson,' she said quickly and Mum smiled weakly.

'Don't be. It's good news in a way.'

‘Norah needs to make sure,’ Val said firmly and I offered him a weak smile of gratitude.

‘I understand perfectly,’ Hester said, rummaging in her bag. ‘That’s why I took this photograph.’

She opened a folder and slid a large photograph across the kitchen table.

It was Hester, Joni and Professor Frankston standing next to an open coffin and staring solemnly at the camera.

Next to the empty coffin was a pile of metal of various shapes and sizes.

‘It was Herbie’s idea,’ Hester said, ‘even though we were breaking the law, we took the pictures with a timer. Just in case, you came out of the coma and wanted to know everything!’

‘That’s the coffin,’ Kirsty said softly. ‘I remember it.’

Mum and Val nodded.

‘There are other photographs of us loading the weights, soundproofing it and sealing the coffin. We could go to prison for this and there is no reason why we would go to this trouble unless we’ve been telling you the truth.’

Hester sighed and slid a disc over the table.

‘This is top secret but you have a right to know. It’s a visual record...’

‘A film?’

‘Yes, of the transition. It’s sped up but you can see the changes as Jim becomes you.’

I picked the disc up and fingered it while everyone looked at me.

‘Do you want to watch it?’ Hester asked softly.

I looked up at Mum and she gave me a soft, warm smile. Kirsten was sniffing softly and I squeezed her hand.

‘No,’ I said huskily, ‘I don’t think we want to see it.’

Kirsten shook her head emphatically and Hester took the disc back, holding it in her hand for a moment before dropping it back into her bag.

‘Do you want to see the letter?’ Hester asked softly.

Heart pounding and butterflies swarming inside me, I could only nod.

‘Take it into the front room, love,’ Mum said and I shakily stood up.

Without a word, Hester gave me the envelope and I walked from the kitchen into the front room, closing the door behind me.

Eighteen. Message to My Girl – 4

■

*Now I wake up happy
Warm in a lover's embrace
No one else can touch us
While we're in this place
So I sing it to the world
Simple message to my girl*

*No more empty self-possession
Vision swept under the mat
It's no New Year's resolution
It's more than that²²*

■

Hello Norah,

I expect this is really weird for you; it is strange writing a letter to myself, even though I know you probably won't remember me.

You see, I guessed that memories would be initially discarded and if they do resurface, they will always be as if you are seeing someone else, not you!

Remember, you are not me! Some may tell you that you are me but you know that's not true.

You came from me but you are your own person. Don't forget that!

Please say hi to Hester. I'm sure she looked after you and, perhaps, even took you under her wing. Knowing her, she probably even looked after Mum and Kirsty! I will always be proud that such a brilliant, kind woman was my friend. I loved her in my own way.

Norah, I hope you enjoy your new life and that things work out but there are two things you can do for me.

Firstly, you can discover the world as Norah and build a brilliant life for yourself!

If you get the opportunity, travel to our home town, Harlequin Cove and say hello for me to Mum, Kirsten and her children. It is one of my great regrets I never got to see my niece and nephew! Still, I'm sure Kirsty understands!

I'm going to miss Mum – she's always been there for me! I hope both she and Kirsty know how much I loved them.

And if he's still there, say hi to Val. He was my friend and my soul mate but love between us was never meant to be. I loved him but he did not love me. I hope he's happy.

Any way, enjoy life and make it brilliant! You are what I was meant to be so live life for both of us!

The other thing?

Please don't forget me.

With love and great hope,

Norah

Nineteen. Oh Jim 2.

■

Oh Jim, how could you treat me this way

Hey hey

How could you treat me this way?

You know you broke my heart

Ever since you went away

Now you said that you love us

But you only make love to one of us

Oh Jim, how could you treat me this way

You know you broke my heart

Ever since you went away²³

■

1.

‘I will never forget you,’ I whispered, tears streaming down my face. ‘Never!’

For several minutes, I sobbed quietly in front of the crackling fireplace. The rest of the house was very silent and it occurred to me that, perhaps, Mum and the others in the kitchen could hear me weeping.

Conscious that the others were waiting for me, I slowly stood up, shakily wiped my face and opened the door.

Kirsty was white faced, as was Mum. Even Val was a little pale and Hester was obviously concerned. All of them stared at me when I appeared in the kitchen doorway. The ticking of the old clock on the mantelpiece above the fireplace was extraordinarily loud as was the crackling of the fire itself.

Mum looked at me closely and I knew she saw my red eyes but I didn’t care; it was plain I had been weeping. Deep concern grew within her warm eyes and I suddenly thought how lucky I was to have her, to have a family!

No matter what the truth of this entire episode was, I still had that! Had a mother and a sister, had a niece and a nephew and no one would ever take that away from me!

I tried to smile and Mum was about to stand to hug me when I gestured for her to sit, that I was fine and there was something more important than I was.

‘I read it,’ I whispered.

It was a blindingly obvious statement but, due to the emotion of the moment, nobody said a thing.

The tears began again as I offered the letter to Mum.

Mum raised her hands as if she was about to decline. Perhaps she was afraid, just as I was, afraid to know.

Afraid of the truth!

But, I knew, no one should be afraid of the truth. Knowing, no matter how painful, how agonising, makes us see, makes us strong and I knew that Mum would see it that way.

‘Read it, Mum, you need to know,’ I whispered and pushed the letter towards her. ‘Please read it.’

Her eyes held mine for a long moment and then she nodded, reaching for the letter. I saw that her fingers also shook slightly as they picked up the letter from Jim.

Her son.

Her fingers continued to shake and tears streamed down Mum's cheeks as she read it.

She stared at it for a long moment, blinking furiously, and then, silently, handed it to Kirsty.

Kirsty glanced at me, her face white and then began to read, the tears softly coming as she read it.

Finally, Kirsten offered the crumpled piece of paper to Val.

'No,' he said softly, 'I don't deserve it.'

We all looked at him, trying to decipher his meaning. It was, I realised, a moment of true confession for Val and I was the only one who could give him absolution.

'Yes, you do deserve it, you big lug,' I whispered. 'read it!'

His face went white and, for a long moment, I thought he was going to cry.

‘How...how...why did you call me that?’

‘It...it kind of came out...’ I mumbled, watching his eyes, falling into them.

Big lug!

Is that what Jim called him?

He stared at me for a moment and then whispered, ‘I really don’t want to read it. I’m not brave enough.’

How difficult it was for Val to admit that I can’t ever know but I can, with intuitive empathy, guess. My heart went out to him and I fought the urge to hug him, to hold him tight against my breast while kissing his tousled hair.

Instead, I put my arm around his broad shoulder, feeling his warmth and the firmness of his back.

‘Please read it,’ I whispered hoarsely, head close to his. ‘You need to. We all need to.’

His eyes locked with mine and I whispered, ‘yes.’

Silently, he took the letter, read it and then handed it back to me without a word but I think we all saw the pain in his eyes.

The agony of self recrimination.

A silent and powerful pain.

Hester had been watching both of us silently but she was surprised when I offered the letter to her.

‘Me? Oh no, I think it’s meant for...’

‘He mentions you in it,’ I whispered and Kirsty nodded, encouraging Hester.

‘Read it,’ Kirsty urged and Hester finally took the letter.

When she finished it, Hester silently handed it back to me. Tears were rolling down her cheek but she appeared not to notice them.

Kirsty offered Hester some tissues and said, ‘have we ever thanked you, Hester, for everything you have done?’

‘There’s no need,’ Hester sniffled into the tissue. ‘Look,’ she said as brightly as

she could, 'I'm done in from the 'plane trip and everything. I'll go over to the pub to see if I can get a bed...'

'Nonsense,' Mum said firmly. 'We have a bed here for you. Norah, show Hester where she can sleep,' Mum said firmly. 'The poor thing looks exhausted.'

2.

‘This looks very comfortable,’ Hester said, looking around the small room. ‘This was Jim’s wasn’t it?’

‘Yes. I’ve been sleeping here. The bed is comfortable,’ I said, trying to smile but the effort was tremendous. I felt weak and wrung out, lost and lifeless.

‘I’m not putting you out, am I? Where will you sleep?’

‘I’m bunking in with my sister for the night so it’s no problem...’

‘Sister? It’s gone that far?’

I nodded and Hester smiled tearfully.

‘I’m glad, Norah,’ she whispered, ‘so very glad!’

We hugged tightly and she whispered, ‘you aren’t Jim, just like he said.’

‘I know but...’

‘No “buts”! None! He knew, the sly bugger, he knew what would happen...’

‘You loved him,’ I whispered, holding her and I heard a rough sob in my shoulder. ‘It’s all right,’ I soothed, holding her close. ‘He loved you...’

‘In his own way,’ Hester said a little bitterly.

‘That’s all anyone can do,’ I said softly. ‘Hester, Jim loved you!’

Hester broke from me, pasted a tentative smile on her face and tried to look in control, tried to look like “Hester”!

‘Thanks...Do you have any...’

‘Connection to Jim?’

‘Sorry, now isn’t the time...’

‘Now’s the perfect time. Do I have a connection? Yes and no. I feel the intense connection between Mum, Kirsty and myself. There is no doubt about that. Sometimes it’s like Jim is there, just in the back of my mind, standing in the shadows and watching me.’

‘I’m sorry for asking, Norah, I truly am...’

‘It’s fine, Hester,’ I said enveloping her in a full hug, squeezing her tightly. ‘He loved you.’

‘Yes, I see that. Many people go through life without feeling love...’

‘Exactly! You helped him!’

‘Helped you?’ Hester said hopefully and I shook my head.

‘You’ve helped me when I came out of the coma, Hester, and we’re friends because of that. But not for Jim. I am not Jim.’

‘I know. It’s tempting...’

‘I understand but I am not Jim.’

‘I get it, Norah,’ Hester whispered, hugging me again. ‘Jim is dead.’

‘Sleep, Hester, you need it. And thank you for everything.’

3.

Val wasn't in the kitchen when I returned after helping Hester to bed.

'He's on the porch,' Mum supplied, pouring tea, eyes down, fire crackling loudly..

Her eyes followed me to the door and I paused, hand on the doorknob.

'How...how is he?'

'Go to him, Norah,' Mum said evenly. 'He's not as strong as Kirsty and I.'

I smiled weakly and Mum's eyes grew warm and comforting.

'No,' I agreed, 'you two have been wonderful...'

'So have you. My tough Norah,' she said with a catch in her voice. 'I am blessed.'

That almost undid me but I managed to keep the tears at bay, knowing I had to comfort Val.

Val turned when I stepped out of the door, rubbing my arms against the chill.

‘I’d better go,’ he said.

I nodded, unable to say anything.

‘It’s ...it’s been a bit much, hasn’t it?’ Val murmured.

‘The letter?’

‘Everything.’

‘You should see it from my side,’ I said wryly.

He nodded and moved to the steps.

‘Val?’

‘Yeah?’

‘Are you all right?’

‘Yep! Of course.’

‘Liar,’ I said softly and he grinned ruefully and ran his shaky fingers through his hair.

‘Can I hide anything from you?’

‘Probably not,’ I whispered. ‘We’re connected...’

‘Hotwired,’ he supplied.

‘Whatever that means.’

‘You know,’ he said calmly and I looked away.

The streetlights had been repaired and I could see white clouds overhead against the dark sky. It was surreal and comforting at the same time.

‘Do you want me to drive you and Doctor Scott to the naval base?’ Val asked.

‘I’m not sure when she’s going back...’

‘Just let me know. Goodnight...’

‘Val?’

‘Yes?’

‘We should talk,’ I said softly.

He looked away.

‘What about?’

‘Everything.’

Val nodded and walked to his vehicle. He didn’t look back as he drove away.

4.

Kirsty woke up early with the children so I also got out of bed. It was early and I hadn't slept that well at all. So much spinning around in my mind, so many unresolved things.

Rugged up against the early morning chill, I walked down to the wharf and watched the seagulls for a while before walking towards Val's shed.

Moretti & Son - Mechanics

His vehicle wasn't there and the shed was locked.

There were times when I just could not get Val out of my mind! We were, I knew, attracted to each other. It was obvious, even though we hadn't said a thing.

But, was he attracted to me because he thought I was still Jim, that he could make amends?

Wistfully, I looked at the battered sign and wished I had never been Jim. If I hadn't, Val and I could just be two people who wanted to share their lives.

But then, it was Jim who brought me here! If it had not been for him, I wouldn't

be in Harlequin Cove.

In fact, I would not exist!

Although I didn't tell Hester or anyone else, small memories were returning. At least, I think they were returning! It didn't really matter but I could now remember little things.

I remembered Mum in a red polka dot dress, looking young and pretty! I also remembered Kirsten going out on a date with her then boyfriend who became her husband and then her ex-husband.

All were, I knew, Jim's memories but I was seeing them as my own! It was Norah remembering them!

Me!

It was making my attachment to Mum, Kirsten and Harlequin Cove a little deeper.

I was staring moodily out to sea when I sensed someone behind me.

Turning, I saw Val, wrapped in a dark blue sailor's jacket, looking at me with sad eyes.

‘I couldn’t sleep either,’ he said.

‘No,’ I agreed, ‘it’s difficult.’

‘Feel like breakfast?’

The truth was, I wasn’t that hungry, in fact my stomach was churning and the thought of breakfast was unattractive.

I was about to decline his invitation and suggest we just walk and talk when Val added, ‘I could show you my house.’

Slowly, I turned so I was directly opposite him, my hands deep in my coat pockets.

‘You have a house?’

It suddenly occurred to me that I had not even considered where Val lived.

So much has happened in such a short time.

‘It was Dad’s. He left it to me when he died. It’s where I grew up. It’s a bit run down,’ he warned.

I suddenly knew that Val had not invited anyone to his house in a long time.

‘I’d love to see it,’ I said warmly. ‘And,’ I added teasingly, ‘you can cook me breakfast!’

‘Whatever the lady desires!’

5.

Val surprised me by driving away from the ocean and turning into the hills.

‘I had visions of you living by the water,’ I said, fiddling with the car radio.

‘My Dad wanted to grow fruit trees. Can’t do that by the beach.’

The radio suddenly burst into life and I started tapping my thigh in time with the beat.

‘Who’s singing that?’ I asked.

‘Amy Winehouse.’

Well Sometimes I Go Out, By Myself,

And I Look Across The Water.

And I Think Of All The Things,

Of What You’re Doing,

And in my head I Paint A Picture.

‘Cause since I’ve Come Home,

*Well My Body's Been A Mess,
And I Miss Your ginger Hair,
And The Way You Like To Dress.
Oh Won't You Come On Over,
Stop Making A Fool Out Of Me,
Why Don't You Come On Over, Valerie.²⁴*

‘It’s good,’ I said, moving slightly in my seat. Something made me say, ‘I could sing it and change it to Valentino!’

Suddenly feeling a little light-headed and happy, I sang along but changed the words a little.

‘Stop making a fool of me, why don’t you come on over Vaaaaaaaaal!’

I laughed while Val watched me, his eyes suddenly serious.

‘Do you think I’m making a fool of you?’

I stopped swaying.

‘Ah, well, no, of course not! It was just a joke, Val.’

‘Was it?’ Val said quietly and I couldn’t reply and the words of the song kept punching home as the car steadily climbed the hill.

And in my head I Paint A Picture.

‘Cause since I’ve Come Home,

Well My Body’s Been A Mess,

Oh Won’t You Come On Over,

Stop Making A Fool Out Of Me,

Why Don’t You Come On Over, Vaaaaaaaaaall...

6.

Val turned into a long driveway and I hopped out of the vehicle to open the gate. As Val drove in, I looked around at the surrounding countryside. It was hilly and the rambling white house on the top of the hill was the only sign of settlement in the rolling green hills.

‘This is nice,’ I said when I jumped back in.

‘It’s forty acres...’

‘My god, forty acres? Isn’t that huge?’

‘No,’ Val laughed, ‘it’s small but carries the fruit trees, the vegetable gardens and other things. It was great as a kid. Just ran wild.’

It was the most Val had said without prompting for sometime and I said nothing, hoping he would continue.

‘Just me and my dogs,’ he added and then lapsed into silence as we drove up the gravel, tree lined driveway.

As we drew closer, I saw the house had a wide covered porch on all sides and there were several sets of French doors leading onto the porch from the house.

A faint memory flickered at the back of my mind before escaping.

‘Did Jim come here?’ I found myself asking and Val nodded. ‘This is really lovely,’ I breathed when Val parked the car next to what I knew was the back door.

‘It needs work but I haven’t decided to sell or keep it...’

‘You can’t sell this!’ I exclaimed, clambering out, ‘it’s wonderful!’

I inhaled the fresh air and saw strands of mist looping around the trees down the valley. I could also see chimney smoke in the trees and guessed there were other small farms close by.

It was new but also tantalisingly familiar.

Suddenly conscious that Val was watching me, I smiled awkwardly.

‘Come on,’ he said, leading the way and opened the back screen door.

The house was like what I imagined a rambling farmhouse to be. It had old but sturdy furniture and a very large stone fireplace in the long living room with a fire still smouldering in the grate. The kitchen was big enough to have a large

wooden table and eight chairs.

I opened the pantry doors and saw preserving bottles stacked on shelves, containing a variety of fruit.

‘Dad did that,’ Val explained when he saw me examining the bottles.

‘This is brilliant, Val,’ I said excitedly. ‘It is so beautiful!’

‘Yeah,’ he said distantly, ‘it’s all right, I suppose.’

‘All right? Val, this really is brilliant!’

‘Yeah. Breakfast?’

‘Sounds super. I’m afraid I don’t know how to cook...’ I said, suddenly embarrassed. ‘I don’t remember much but Mum’s been teaching me... Did Jim cook?’ I asked suddenly.

‘I don’t think so.’

There I go again, I thought, comparing myself to Jim!

‘So,’ Val said slowly, ‘eggs on toast?’

‘Great! I can make a pot of tea.’

7.

Even though it was still a little fresh, I insisted we eat on the wide porch so I could enjoy the view.

‘Did you like growing up here?’ I asked.

‘Yeah, it was good.’

I waited for more but Val sipped tea and said nothing.

‘Do you have and brothers or sisters?’

A shake of his head.

We lapsed into silence and I turned to look down the valley while sipping tea.

‘So beautiful,’ I said softly.

‘Yeah,’ Val said and I turned to see he was watching me.

I felt a little warm and tried a weak smile.

‘Come on,’ Val said after a moment, ‘I’ll show you the rest of the house.’

He took my hand – warm, strong but soft – and led me inside.

‘Living room,’ he said, gesturing at the long room.

‘I got that,’ I laughed. ‘And I love the fireplace.’

‘Yes, I remember when Dad built it...’

‘Your father built it? Brilliant!’

‘He built the house.’

I looked around and said quietly, ‘how can you even think of selling it?’

‘I just don’t know what to do. The business isn’t going well...’

‘Are you going to leave Harlequin Cove?’

It was suddenly important for me to know but I did not know why.

Val laughed harshly.

‘I left once and didn’t really like it. Guess I’m just a small town guy!’

‘Nothing wrong with that,’ I said softly.

‘Carla hated that in me,’ he suddenly admitted and then looked away.

‘Are you still in love with your ex-wife?’ I asked, heart was pounding.

‘No,’ he said, scratching his head. ‘I realise now I was never in love with her. It was a mistake. Takes a while for a small town guy to wake up to the bloody obvious!’

Val smiled softly and took my hand again.

‘Come on, the grand tour continues!’

He led me into a large bedroom.

‘This is where I sleep now. It was Mum and Dad’s...’

‘I pounced immediately.

‘You don’t talk about your Mum...’

‘She died when I was young,’ Val said simply. ‘Dad never remarried or even went with another woman. This way; my old bedroom is down here.’

I stepped into the small bedroom and looked around. There were a few posters on the wall showing different types of dinosaurs. I picked up one of the books from the simple bookcase and flipped the pages.

‘You had a thing for dinosaurs?’

‘And model aeroplanes,’ he said wryly, pointing at the small ‘planes hanging from the ceiling with fishing line.

‘You must have been a cute little boy,’ I found myself saying.

‘Cute?’

He blushed slightly and I smiled, flicking through another book.

‘Yep,’ I teased, ‘although you had a seriously weird dinosaur fixation!’

He laughed and moved closer. Suddenly, it was very warm in the room.

Val took another step and I looked nervously up into those dark eyes.

I didn’t stop him when he took me into his arms, perhaps I should have, but it felt so good, so natural!

His face began moving down towards mine and thought of pulling away, of pushing free but, instead, something made me relax against his arms and shut my eyes.

We kissed.

Sounds simple when you say it like that but there was nothing simple in that kiss!

Regretfully, I felt him pull away and I rested my head against his chest.

‘I can feel your heart racing,’ I murmured.

‘I’m surprised I’m still standing up,’ he mumbled, ‘after that!’

Giggling at his romantic remark, I wiggled a little in his arms.

I tilted my head back and looked up at him, silently asking him to kiss me again.

Val got the message!

‘Hmmm,’ I murmured, after the second, longer kiss, head against his chest again, ‘that was yummy!’

‘It was,’ he croaked and he suddenly released me. It felt strange to be out of his arms.

‘When Jim tried to kiss me,’ Val began.

‘I’m not Jim, Val,’ I said quietly. ‘Were you thinking you were kissing Jim?’

For the first time, I felt angry with Jim, perhaps even resentful.

‘No! I...’ Val exclaimed.

‘I think you were! Talk about ruining the moment!’

I shook my head, stepped from the room and walked to the living room for my coat.

‘Can you take me home?’ I said as I struggled into the coat. ‘Hester may be awake and I want to talk to her.’

‘Can we talk?’

‘What about?’ I said coolly. ‘Look, Val,’ I said, softening a little, ‘I understand that you feel guilty, that you think you hurt Jim. You may have, but there’s nothing I can do about that! I may have come from Jim but I am not him!’

I felt the tears rising and I turned away. The last thing I wanted was to collapse into tears in front of him!

He stared at me for a long moment, his face pallid and his eyes wide.

I expected a passionate argument or even agreement but all Val said was, ‘I’ll take you home.’

8.

‘Thanks for breakfast,’ I said when we parked outside Mum’s house. ‘And for showing me your place.’

‘That’s ok. Look, Norah,’ he said softly, staring ahead, ‘I feel an awful lot for you...’

‘For Jim, you mean,’ I said, opening the door. ‘Thanks for everything, Val.’

‘Do I mean anything to you, Norah?’ Val asked quietly.

‘Val, we’re just getting to know each other! I’m just getting to know myself, for god’s sakes!’

As I opened the front door, I heard Val drive away and I wondered what exactly did I feel for him?

9.

‘What do you feel for him?’

I had poured my heart out to Hester as we walked down to the wharf.

‘I...I’m not sure...’ I mumbled.

‘No?’ Hester raised an eyebrow.

‘No, I’m not sure!’ I snapped, frowning.

‘Don’t bite my head off. Just asking.’

‘I’m confused,’ I wailed. ‘This is really complicated.’

‘Life is...’

‘Oh, please! No bloody philosophy!’

Hester slipped her arm through mine and we walked on.

‘The point is,’ I said after a moment and Hester simply waited for me to continue. ‘I don’t know whether he cares for me or Jim!’

‘And that’s important to you?’

‘You have been taking lessons from Bronwyn, haven’t you?’

Hester laughed.

‘Maybe one or two,’ she admitted and this time, we both laughed.

‘He feels bad about Jim,’ I said.

‘We all do,’ Hester said quietly.

‘But you don’t see me as Jim, do you?’ I asked.

‘No, I don’t,’ Hester said firmly. ‘But I saw Jim change into you, step by step over a long period so I see you as you! Val didn’t see that process!’

‘But Mum and Kirsten see me as, well, me!’

‘Yes, they do but the family connection is still there. You feel like Molly is your mother, don’t you?’

‘She is,’ I said firmly. ‘And Kirsty is my sister...’

‘But,’ Hester said gently, ‘what has Val got? It must be so confusing for him and add to that the fact that he is smitten by this young woman...’

‘Smitten?’ I asked hopefully.

‘It’s a little obvious to anyone on the outside,’ Hester said with a smile. ‘You should ask your Mum and sister what they think.’

‘Maybe,’ I mumbled. ‘What should I do, Hester?’

‘I think you should take a break from Harlequin Cove and get some perspective. Take a look at the world. You’ve only seen the research centre and Harlequin Cove!’

10.

I hugged Hester and waved to her until she vanished through the gates to the naval base.

‘Thanks for driving us,’ I said as I clambered back into Val’s vehicle. ‘I should learn to drive one day.’

He said nothing until we were back on the highway.

‘What are you going to do, Norah?’

‘I’m going to see the world! Take a look around and think about what I’m going to do with my life.’

‘When?’ Val asked and I was surprised with the suddenly obvious pain in his voice.

‘Not for a few weeks.’

‘Can I see you in that time?’

‘See me? Hey, I’m right here...’

‘Norah,’ Val said softly, staring ahead, ‘I want to date you, to be with you as much as I can.’

‘Why?’

‘I want to see if I can get you out of my system.’

‘That’s a bit cruel,’ I teased. ‘I’m a virus or something?’

‘It’s not cruel, just fact. Will you see me?’

I smiled at him and slid across the car seat so I was next to him.

‘I’ll see you every day, if you want.’

‘I do.’

I felt so warm and comfortable, even safe.

I lightly patted his thigh.

‘So do I.’

11.

The weeks flew. Gone in a blink of an eye and the plane ticket to London suddenly seemed ominous as it lay on the dressing table in my room.

‘You will be back?’ Mum asked as she poured tea.

‘Mum,’ I sighed, ‘I think you’ve asked me that a trillion times!’

‘Just making sure.’

‘Yes,’ I said, hugging her, ‘I will be back!’

Val and I spent as much time as we could together and I loved every minute of it.

The fact was, I felt that I loved him but could not bring myself to say it.

I was confident that my feelings for Val had nothing to do with Jim. Jim was gone and only Norah remained. There was no doubt that parts of Jim remained within me in some strange way, a way I no longer attempted to fathom but I was confident that Norah loved Val. I pushed to the back of my mind that Jim also had loved Val!

Sometimes, just thinking about all of this does my head in!

12.

Mum, Kirsten, Sherrie, Jared and I visited Jim's grave.

It was Kirsty's idea.

'Now that we know what happened,' Kirsty had said calmly, 'we should really say goodbye to Jim and,' she said, smiling warmly at me, 'hello to Norah.'

Mum also smiled at me and nodded.

'We should have our own little ceremony.'

'What's a ceremony, Grandma?' Sherrie asked, stumbling over the word.

'It says to us that one door has closed,' Mum said, eyes glistening, 'and another has opened.'

As I placed flowers on the grave, I felt a little strange but also calm and happy. Even though I knew the grave was empty, I felt we were all saying goodbye to Jim at last!

13.

As the day for my departure grew closer, I was a little miffed that Val had not attempted to seduce me!

‘Mustn’t find me sexually attractive,’ I mumbled to myself.

Unfortunately, Kirsty was in the same room, fixing Sherrie’s hair and pounced.

‘What did you say?’

‘Me? Ah, nothing...’

‘You’ve been sitting there for ages, staring at the fire and mumbling to yourself! Are you going nuts or something?’

‘Maybe I am,’ I said gloomily. ‘Maybe I’m going bonkers!’

‘What’s bonkers?’ Jared asked and I laughed softly.

‘Aunty Norah is going crazy,’ I explained.

‘Are you?’ Jared asked hopefully and I laughed softly.

‘Going crazy,’ Kirsty said shrewdly, ‘or crazy for a certain some one?’

‘Shut up!’

‘Just stating the obvious...’

‘Kirsty, leave it out!’

14.

Val decided he had to teach me to cook and we had been spending more and more time at his house, laughing and joking in the kitchen as we cooked.

Usually, after some heavy kissing, Val would drive me home and, after a torrid kiss at the door, he would drive away, leaving me wondering what was wrong with me!

We had a small flour fight and Val still had a smudge of white on his nose. I gently rubbed it off with a cloth while his dark eyes inflamed me even more.

Before I could stop myself, I asked timidly, ‘do you find me attractive?’

Val smiled, took the cloth and softly removed flour spots from my cheeks.

‘I think you are the most beautiful woman in the world...’

‘Now you’re just teasing! Seriously, do you find me attractive?’

‘Of course I do. Norah, what’s wrong?’

Val's hands rested on my shoulders and I turned my head to the side to avoid those dangerous eyes.

‘Nothing,’ I said in a small voice.

‘There is! Even a thick bloke like me can see it! Tell me?’ Val added gently.

‘Well, this is our last night...’

‘I know and, by the way, you’re not catching the bus. I’m driving you...’

‘To Sydney? You don’t have to...’

‘I know but I want to. I want to spend every minute with you!’

‘But,’ I burst out, ‘you don’t want to make love to me!’

Wide eyed, Val stared at me.

‘Norah...’ he began and reached for me.

I allowed him to take me into his arms and he held me tight.

‘Of course I want to,’ he murmured in my ear, fingers stroking my hair, ‘more than anything but...’

‘But?’ I asked in a timid voice.

‘I...I wasn’t sure if you were ready...’

‘I’m more than ready!’

Val suddenly chuckled and I felt the deep tremors in his chest and stomach as he laughed.

‘I...I wasn’t sure if you wanted to,’ he said after a moment. ‘I mean,’ he said seriously, holding me at arms length so he could look earnestly into my eyes, ‘you have just changed from...’

‘Oh for goodness sakes,’ I snapped, ‘will you forget Jim and think about me!’

‘I can hardly think of anything else...’

‘Val,’ I said softly, ‘I’d like to stay the night with you. Our last night! Do you

want...’

‘More than anything,’ he said, pulling me close, ‘more than anything!’

15.

Val woke me with a long kiss and with the sun peeking through the curtains, we made love again. This time was lingering and slow as if we both weren't ready to say goodbye.

Afterwards, we lay in each other's arms, listening to our hearts and watching the beams of sunlight lengthen across the bedroom ceiling.

'Have you got me out of your system?' I teased and he chuckled.

'No, I think I'm completely infected!'

Val kissed me and rolled from the bed.

'We'd better get going,' he said without looking at me, 'you have a plane to catch tonight and we have to get you to Sydney!'

I watched him walk to the bathroom.

Lying in that old fashioned comfortable bed that Val's father had made for his wife, Val's mother, I stared at the ceiling and wondered if I would feel the same about Harlequin Cove when I returned.

And, would I feel the same about Val?

16.

‘Goodbye, Mum,’ I said, hugging her and choking back tears.

The embrace was warm and solid, binding me to her no matter how far I would travel.

‘You come back, Norah Sanderson,’ she said firmly in my ear. ‘This is home!’

‘I know,’ I said tearfully. ‘I love you!’

We hugged again and Mum whispered fiercely, ‘I love you!’

Kirsty hugged me but didn’t say anything until we broke apart. Grinning foolishly at each other through tears, Kirsty said, ‘write or send an email. I’ll print it off for Mum.’

‘I will. I’ll telephone as well.’

‘Make sure you do, sis,’ she said lightly and we hugged again.

I hugged Sherrie and Jared.

Then, slowly, I walked to the car where Val was waiting.

‘Drive safely, Val,’ Mum called and Val nodded.

He took my bags and put them in the car.

Numb and crying, I managed to get into the passenger seat.

‘Seat belt,’ Val reminded me and I fumbled with the belt for a few seconds until I finally locked it home.

I waved until we turned a corner and I turned to the front.

‘Are you all right?’ Val asked.

I turned, tears streaming down my face and managed to say wryly, ‘that’s a really silly question, Val!’

He nodded and we drove in silence.

17.

‘Don’t come in,’ I said, picking up my bags before Val could.

‘I should see you to the gate...’

‘No. Please don’t, Val. I’ll just be crying when I get on the plane. Let’s say goodbye here.’

‘Norah...’

‘Shhh,’ I whispered, placing my fingers over his lips. ‘There’s no need to say anything. Kiss me.’

And when the kiss was over, I picked up my bags again and walked towards the airport entrance, head back, staring determinedly straight ahead with my heart breaking.

18.

The flight was long – I had forgotten just how long it was – but it gave me time to think and try to come to terms with being Norah and my feelings for Val.

Stop Making A Fool Out Of Me,

Why Don't You Come On Over, Vaaaaaaaal...

The first few days with Hester and Joni were fun. I even spent a little time with Bronwyn – social time! Although, she still asked questions and answered questions with one!

I guess some things never change.

Hester suggested again that I understand the process that was involved with the change.

She and Bronwyn persuaded me to watch the video of Jim's transition.

Well, not all of it, just the start! I wanted to actually see Jim, to try to understand.

It was shock to see the striking physical similarities but it was also very sad.

‘He’s dead, isn’t he?’

‘In a way, Norah,’ Hester said softly, taking my hand, ‘but parts of him live on just as he would have wanted.’

I nodded, blew my nose and tried to stop crying.

After a few more days, Joni and I travelled to London to do some shopping.

‘I really should do all the tourist things,’ I said as I walked through the crowds. ‘I haven’t even seen Buck House!’

‘That’s a good idea. Look, shoes!’

Laden down with parcels, we were giggling and laughing when we returned to Hester’s house where I was staying.

Hester was waiting for us and she had a serious expression on her face.

‘What’s wrong?’ I asked immediately.

‘There’s a letter,’ Hester said softly and my heart thumped loudly.

I sat down, parcels spilling away from me.

‘A...a letter?’ I stammered. ‘To me?’

Hester nodded but was that a twinkle in her eyes?

‘A letter,’ I mumbled, ‘from...from Jim?’

‘No, not from Jim,’ she said holding up a long express delivery envelope.

‘It’s from Val!’

Twenty. Message to My Girl – 5

■

*I don't want to say I love you
That would give away too much
Hip to be detached and precious
The only thing you feel is vicious*

*I don't wanna say I want you
Even though I want you so much
It's wrapped up in conversation
Whispered in a hush
Though I'm frightened by the word
Think it's time that it was heard*

*No more empty self-possession
Vision swept under the mat
It's no new years resolution
It's more than that*

*Now I wake up happy
Warm in a lovers embrace
No one else can touch us
While we're in this place
So I sing it to the world
Simple message to my girl²⁵*

■

Norah, I hope you are well. I hope this letter finds you, care of Doctor Scott.

*I'm not much good at words and I know I'm terrible when I try to speak to you
and I come across as a bumbling tongue tied fool.*

Maybe I am.

*You've only been gone four days and already Harlequin Cove seems small and
dim, like the light has gone somehow. (Told you I'm not good with words!)*

*I know you're not Jim! I understood that from the start but this weird shit really
spun us all out for a while.*

*By the way, I've written the first part of this letter ten times and this is the best
that I can do.*

Anyway, I know you're not Jim and, by the way, I'm glad!

I don't want Jim! I want Norah!

Remember when I said I knew I didn't love Carla? In the beginning, I thought I knew what love was – just a weird little emotion that passes.

That was until I met you! Then, my childish notions of love were swept away with real love! That's when I realised I had never loved Carla!

And, I didn't love Jim!

I love Norah!

You! I want you, need you, feel empty and cut in half without you!

And I can't help it, can't turn it off and I know I'm stuck with this feeling until I die, no matter what happens between us. That's what love is

You said you want to build some memories for yourself, to see parts of Europe and the world as Norah, to build your own life. You also said that Harlequin Cove was home and you would be back but I don't think I can wait. I bloody know I can't!

Norah, those memories you're going to build, is it possible you might want to share them with someone? I've never travelled. It will be all new to me as well and I was hoping you'd like to share it with a bloke that struggles to put words together but loves you?

I still speak a little Italian so that might be useful? (Now, I'm trying to bribe you!)

Anyway, I'm coming over to the U.K.

I just have to find out if you'll see me!

I'm ready to move on, to explore the world with Norah! I'll write my flight details on the bottom of this letter. Maybe you might decide you want to be with me and meet me?

You know, I always liked Crowded House and so did Jim. However, I never shared my love of Dylan with

Jim. Dylan says it better than me. To me, he's talking about you!

You!

My Norah!

*My love she speaks like silence,
Without ideals or violence,
She doesn't have to say she's faithful,
Yet she's true, like ice, like fire.
People carry roses,
Make promises by the hours,
My love she laughs like the flowers,
Valentines can't buy her.*

I hope you'll meet me at the airport. If you don't, I'll understand and I won't come looking for you.

I hope that after all the crap we've been through that you realise that you and I are soul mates – Norah and Val - not Jim and Val - no matter what Jim said in that letter! And that you are my only love.

Forever.

I hope you'll meet me, love.

I know you'll build a wonderful life; I just hope and pray you'll let me share it with you.

Val

Epilogue. Love Minus Zero/No Limit.

■

*The bridge at midnight trembles,
The country doctor rambles,
Bankers' nieces seek perfection,
Expecting all the gifts that wise men bring.
The wind howls like a hammer,
The night blows cold and rainy,
My love she's like some raven
At my window with a broken wing.²⁶*

■

Vignette 1.

Nervously, I walked through the airport. I was late as I had missed my first bus and, apparently, the plane landed early.

When do planes arrive bloody early!

It's not right!

It's against the laws of nature!

My only hope was that Val had been delayed through customs and was still waiting for me.

Rushing through the airport, the crowd suddenly parted and I saw him! My heart was pounding when I saw Val leaning against a wall, bag at his feet and staring at the ground.

I was immediately struck by how sad and forlorn he appeared.

He thinks I'm not coming!

I stopped and took a deep breath and studied him from a distance.

My heart surged at the sight of him and I was trembling slightly as I furiously wondered what on earth I could say?

Then, I smiled, as it was so obvious!

I hope you're watching, Jim!

Taking another deep breath, I walked over to him, reach up and tapped him on the shoulder.

Startled, he looked down at me with such hope and love in those dark eyes, I almost melted there and then.

Smiling nervously, I said the only thing I could say, and I said it for Jim, as much as I said it for me.

‘Hello there, big boy!’

Vignette 2.

Feeling so peaceful, I lay back in the chair and watched the Sun sink over the vineyards. Somewhere, I could hear children playing and calling out. Even with my rudimentary French, I understood they were playing football in the summer evening, kicking the ball through the rows of grapes.

We were staying in a small farmhouse and this was our last night in France.

Val walked from the small farmhouse to where I was sitting under the trees. He was barefooted, wearing a white t-shirt that enhanced his muscles and strong arms, and faded tight blue jeans.

He smiled softly at me, brushed some hair from my eyes and then gently kissed me.

‘Have you finished the wine?’ Val teased, sitting next to me, his long legs stretching out before him.

‘I’ve had half a glass. It’s nice but I don’t need wine to see how lovely this is.’

‘It is beautiful. Want to stay longer? Maybe I can arrange it.’

I shook my head.

‘No. Let’s not overstay our welcome.’

‘Ok,’ Val said, understanding instantly.

Sometimes, we didn’t even have to speak to communicate. It was spooky but very wonderful.

‘Where to next?’ Val asked, watching the Sun sink and the strange glow it cast on the grapevine leaves.

‘London.’

‘London? Ok.’

I turned and smiled at him, reaching for his hand.

‘I want to say goodbye to Hester, Joni and Herbie.’

His eyes were suddenly intense as he studied me but all Val said was, ‘ok. Then?’

‘I think it’s time to go home, Val,’ I said quietly. ‘We can always travel but I miss home, miss Mum, Kirsty, Sherrie, Jared, Harlequin Cove.’

‘Ok,’ was all Val said but he squeezed my hand, leaned close and kissed me.

‘Hmmm,’ I murmured when our lips finally parted, ‘it’s too early for bed, isn’t it?’

‘I’m not tired,’ he said with a wink and I giggled, head on his shoulder.

We watched the sun for a moment until Val said suddenly, ‘we can stay at my house. It needs fixing up...’

‘That will be fun,’ I said quietly, ‘make it our home.’

‘Yes,’ he said, holding me tightly. ‘I think my Dad would be pleased.’

When the sun had finished its journey and dusk was settling over the French vineyards, Val took my hand and led me back to the farmhouse, bottle of wine carelessly swinging from his other hand.

‘Do I tell you enough that I love you?’ Val asked softly as we stepped inside.

‘Not often enough,’ I whispered, folding myself against him, ‘you big lug!’

Vignette 3.

‘Do you think this will really work, Norah?’ Teddy asked, nervously looking at the small bus as it parked at the wharf.

‘It has to, Teddy,’ Bob said. ‘Isn’t that right, Norah?’

‘Val called me on the mobile,’ I said as I watched Val help the tourists from the bus. ‘They are all excited about it.’

‘Do they speak English?’

‘They’re American, Canadian and Brits. There are some Germans but they speak English. We have enough for two boats which is a good start, Teddy.’

He nodded and I suddenly twigged that both Teddy and Bob were extremely nervous.

‘Now, you two,’ I said with a smile, ‘you have to be gruff fishing boat captains. You don’t have to be nice and smile all the time.’

They both smiled at that, obviously relieved.

‘But,’ I added, wagging a finger at them, ‘try to cut down on the swearing, eh?’

‘We can do that,’ Teddy said, glancing at Bob. ‘Shit, here they come!’

Shaking my head, I stepped forward and, clutching my clipboard, smiled at the tourists.

‘Welcome to Harlequin Cove,’ I said. ‘As Val probably told you, Harlequin Cove was originally just a small fishing village, named after a tall ship that sank off the bluff in 1848’

They were all looking around.

‘These gentlemen are the captains of the two trawlers we’ll be using today. These blokes are a bit taciturn but,’ I said with a smile at the two big bearded men, ‘they both have a heart of gold.’

The tourists grinned and some took photos of Teddy and Bob who looked a little uncomfortable.

‘First, we will have a breakfast at my Mum’s café and then we’ll take you out on a real fishing trawler where you’ll have an experience of a lifetime. This way, folks, we have a big day ahead of us!’

Vignette 4.

‘You look beautiful,’ Mum said, eyes brimming as she looked me up and down.

I looked at my reflection in the long mirror. Mrs Hopkins had made a beautiful wedding dress and it made me look quite reasonable.

What will Val say when he sees me in it?

Kirsten burst into the room and stopped in her tracks, mouth open.

‘Wow!’

‘Now,’ I said wagging a finger at her, ‘you’re exaggerating!’

‘Just trying to make it a perfect day for you,’ Kirsten said mildly. ‘But you do look beautiful. Val will go nuts!’

‘What, and run away?’

‘I doubt you’re ever going to get rid of Val, darling,’ Mum said and Kirsten nodded.

‘Where are Sherrie and Jared?’ I asked Kirsten while Mum added the finishing touches to my hair.

‘With Daniel.’

Daniel was the new owner of the town pub. He was renovating it for what he said would be the coming tourist boom. Maybe he was right as our tourism venture with the fishing trawlers was doing very well.

He was a nice bloke and Kirsten seemed happy with him. More importantly, Sherrie and Jared liked him a lot.

Their father had tried to object but Daniel had spoken quietly to him, explaining he was not attempting to replace him and that was that.

I think it helped that Daniel was a big bloke.

‘Time to go,’ Mum said quietly and I nodded. As I stood up, wedding dress rustling, Kirsty moved close to embrace me carefully.

‘You really are beautiful,’ she whispered.

Vignette 5.

I sat on the seat by the wharf and sipped my take away cup of tea. The last load of tourists and day trippers were on the trawlers and I had a chance to relax.

Val was filling the bus up with petrol in readiness to take the tourists back to the pub, the new motel just outside of town or that new resort and spa in the hills.

Mum’s café was operated by Kirsten and Daniel now and was more of a stylish restaurant and bistro. Daniel had sold the pub to a large corporation who spent a lot of money making it very spiffy indeed. Antique, gift and speciality shops had opened up down the main street and harlequin Cove was now very busy during the weekends and holidays.

But it was still Harlequin Cove.

My memories had expanded and both Mum and Kirsten knew I remembered a

lot more now. In his own way, Jim was very much alive and not dead as I once had claimed.

Perhaps I had been worried that his memories would take over my mind but that had not been the case.

I just remembered more. Norah remembered more!

‘What are you thinking about, love?’ Val asked, plonking himself next to me. He had a take away cup of coffee and slipped his arm around me.

We both watched the seagulls for a moment until I smiled at him.

‘Just thinking how happy I am.’

‘I’m glad,’ he said, eyes locked on mine.

‘Have I told you,’ I said softly, ‘that I fell in love with your eyes first?’

‘Yes,’ he grinned, ‘often! I hope you love the rest of me as well!’

‘Oh most definitely!’ I laughed, wiggling my eyebrows. ‘Some parts I love a lot!’

Val grinned and gently kissed the top of my head.

‘I love you, Norah.’

‘I know,’ I said quietly. ‘I love you.’

We sat on the seat for a moment until Val stirred.

‘I’d better check the bus.’

‘No,’ I said quietly, resting my hand on his thigh, ‘just wait, sweetie. I have something to tell you.’

Val immediately frowned and looked at me with worry plainly visible in those dark eyes.

I smiled as Val hated not knowing what was happening.

‘We’re having a baby,’ I said softly.

My heart leapt when I saw nothing but joy, happiness and wonder explode in his

eyes.

There were no words, just a tremendous, squeeze hug. A warm embrace that I never wanted to be without.

I was home.

And so was Jim.

*My love she speaks like silence,
Without ideals or violence,
She doesn't have to say she's faithful,
Yet she's true, like ice, like fire.*

*People carry roses,
Make promises by the hours,
My love she laughs like the flowers,
Valentines can't buy her.*

*In the dime stores and bus stations,
People talk of situations,
Read books, repeat quotations,
Draw conclusions on the wall.
Some speak of the future,
My love she speaks softly,
She knows there's no success like failure
And that failure's no success at all.*

*The cloak and dagger dangles,
Madams light the candles.*

*In ceremonies of the horsemen,
Even the pawn must hold a grudge.
Statues made of match sticks,
Crumble into one another,
My love winks, she does not bother,
She knows too much to argue or to judge.*

*The bridge at midnight trembles,
The country doctor rambles,
Bankers' nieces seek perfection,
Expecting all the gifts that wise men bring.
The wind howls like a hammer,
The night blows cold and rainy,
My love she's like some raven
At my window with a broken wing.²⁷*

1 Wild World (Yusuf Islam AKA Cat Stevens)

2 Oh Jim (Lou Reed) from “Berlin”

3 Message to My Girl (Neil Finn) Split Enz

4 Quote from Ghostbusters

5 The Other Side of this Life (Written & performed by the great Fred Neil but was also covered by Jefferson Airplane)

6 Mister Tambourine Man (Bob Dylan)

7 I Remember Yesterday (Janis Ian)

8 Message to My Girl (Neil Finn) Split Enz

9 Mad World (Roland Orzabal – Tears For fears)

10 Sleep to Dream Fiona Apple)

11 Australian slang for a person from England. It is somewhat derogatory.

12 My Ever Changing Moods (Paul Weller) The Style Council

13 Don't Dream It's Over (Neil Finn) Crowded House

14 Telephone Line (Jeff Lynne) ELO

15 Remember (Walking in the Sand) (George "Shadow" Morton) The Shangri-las

16 Brass in Pocket (James Honeyman-Scott/Chrissie Hynde) The Pretenders

17 Weather With You (Tim & Neil Finn) Crowded House

18 The Look of Love (David/Bacharach) Dusty Springfield

19 Message to My Girl (Neil Finn) Split Enz

20 Cowgirl in the Sand (Neil Young)

21 Solsbury Hill (Peter Gabriel)

22 Message to My Girl (Neil Finn)Split Enz

23 Oh Jim (Lou Reed) from “Berlin”

24 Originally by the Zutons
(Payne/McCabe/Harding/Chowdhury/Pritchard)

25 Message to My Girl (Neil Finn)Split Enz

26 Love Minus Zero/No Limit (Bob Dylan)

27 Love Minus Zero/No Limit (Bob Dylan)