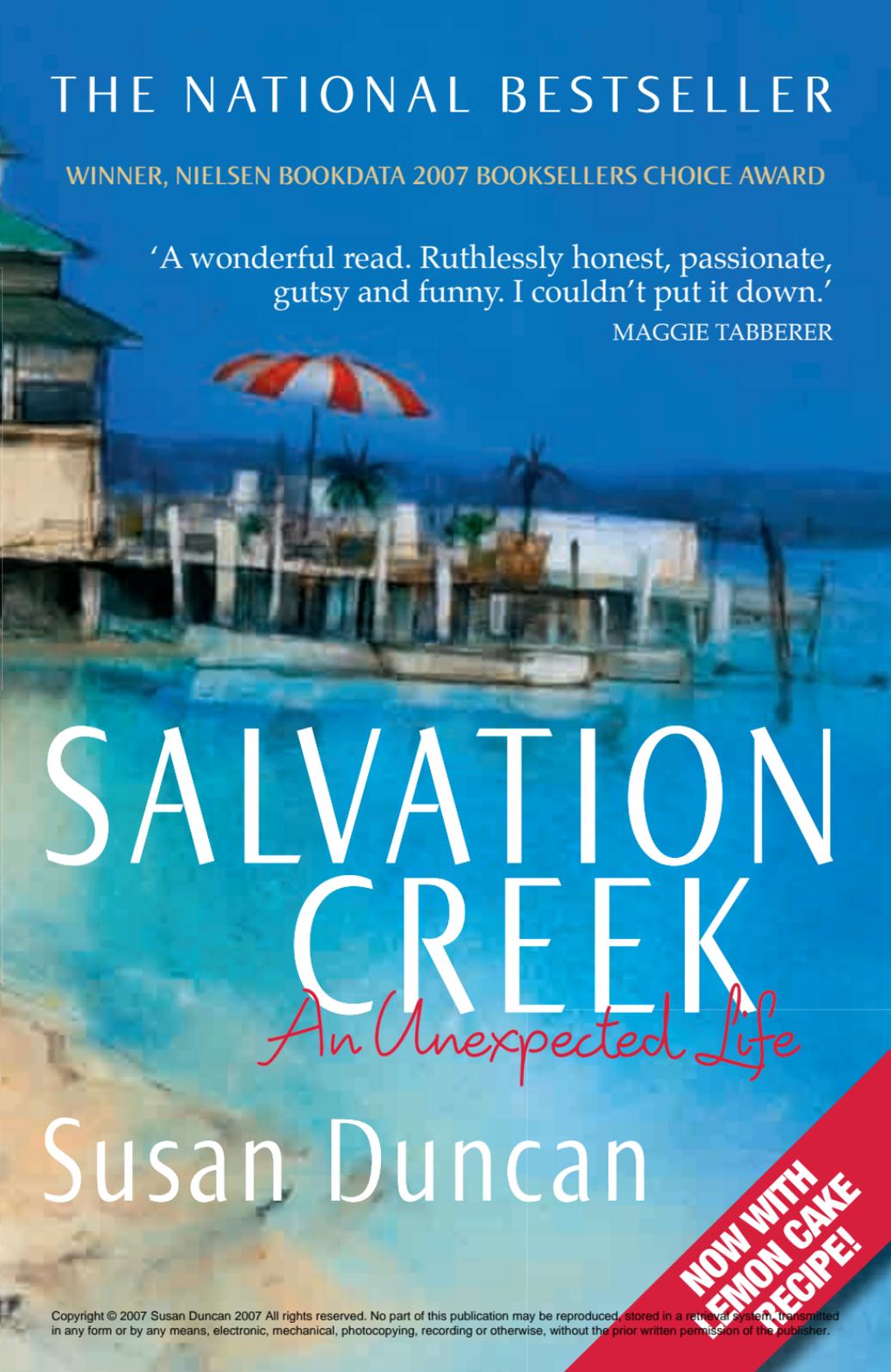


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# SALVATION CREEK

*An Unexpected Life*

Susan Duncan

**NOW WITH  
LEMON CAKE  
RECIPE!**

*Note:* Some of the names of people in this book have been changed to protect their privacy.

SALVATION CREEK  
A BANTAM BOOK

First published in Australia and New Zealand in 2006 by Bantam  
This edition published in Australia and New Zealand in 2007 by Bantam

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Duncan, Susan (Susan Elizabeth).  
Salvation Creek: an unexpected life.

ISBN 978 1 86325 638 4.

1. Duncan, Susan (Susan Elizabeth). I. Title.

920.72

Transworld Publishers,  
a division of Random House Australia Pty Ltd  
Level 3, 100 Pacific Highway  
North Sydney, NSW 2060  
<http://www.randomhouse.com.au>

Random House New Zealand Limited  
18 Poland Road, Glenfield, Auckland

Transworld Publishers,  
a division of The Random House Group Ltd  
61–63 Uxbridge Road, Ealing, London W5 5SA

Random House Inc  
1745 Broadway, New York, New York 10036

Cover painting 'Church Point' by John Lovett  
Chapter openers feature linocuts by Katie Clemson, from the series  
'Pittwater Boatsheds', 2003.  
Cover and text design by Nanette Backhouse/Saso Content and Design  
Typeset by Midland Typesetters, Australia  
Printed and bound by Griffin Press, South Australia

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



# 1

ONE MORNING, FOR NO reason at all, I cannot find the strength to get out of bed. It's mid-winter in Melbourne. Trees are naked under a dirty brown sky. A few dead leaves skitter joylessly in an irritable wind. The alarm clock went off an hour ago. The dog hasn't been walked. I haven't showered, dressed or left for the office. The thought of throwing back the covers and putting my feet on the floor fills me with terror. I lie there, squeezing my eyes shut. Descending slowly into a deep, dark hole that I welcome. I want oblivion so badly I can think of nothing else.

When I look at the clock again, two hours have evaporated. I reach for the phone and call the doctor.

'I can't make the decision to get out of bed.'

'Stay there, then. Stay there for as long as you want. You're ill.'

I put the phone back in its cradle, look around an anonymous mustard bedroom in my rented house. Mirrored closet doors reflect a haggard old woman. I turn away and face the window, counting on my fingers. Eighteen. Eighteen months since my brother, John, and my husband, Paul, died. For a second only, I squint into the future. The vacant spaces are unbearable.

The crying starts in silence. Tears wetting the pillow, dampening the collar of my pyjamas. Through the day it builds, until swollen eyes reduce the world to a narrow slit and my dog, Sweetie, climbs on the bed for the first time in her life to press her warm, black body close. When the maelstrom ends two days later, nothing has changed. My brother is still dead. And so is my husband.

My brother battled cancer for five years. They say a heart attack killed him. But it was exhaustion. I sat, the night before he died, on a white chair on white carpet in his white bedroom. He lay on a white bed under white sheets, so thin, frail and white himself, he barely existed. He breathed in quick little sips, the tumours in his lungs wider than his arms. They squeaked like an old flywire door when you rubbed them. As I'd done in the past to relieve a smidgin of his pain. On this night, he moved a finger. No rub. Thank you. One eye open, the other closed. Already nearly dead.

'Shall I hold your hand?'

The finger again. No.

My brother never showed fear. A lifetime on the racetrack taught him to disguise his emotions. Win? Lose? He never changed. Perhaps a deeper tinge of pink in his cheeks if the win was big, a white band around his mouth if the loss hit hard. The only time I saw a hint of dread was the day we watched the races on television – he in bed, me propped against pillows alongside. I knew he'd had a big bet and nerves got the better of me.

'I'll just go and make a cup of tea,' I said, getting up.

'Not yet,' he said. 'Don't leave the room yet.'

So I sat, truly frightened for the first time. As stupid as I know this is, my brother had been ill for so long I thought he would just stay ill. I refused to accept that he would die. Not the handsome, blonde, blue-eyed big brother who built a billycart so his irritating little sister could be dragged along behind when he went out double-dink riding with his friend. Not the brother who got his girlfriends to make his sister's clothes because he thought her mother had lousy ideas about what suited her. Not the brother she had loved without question all her life. Larrikin, gambler, beautiful dresser, generous spirit, comfort and support. Not her big, invincible brother.

As a child, John was wise and compassionate. Almost five years older than me, he steadied the impact of rocky episodes in my

parents' marriage, dragged me along in his older life. Sometimes, at the height of my parents' disappointment with each other, they would turn to us children standing white-faced and trembling and demand we choose between them.

'Choose no-one,' my brother would whisper in my ear, his arm protectively around my shoulders.

'But I want Mummy.'

'Choose no-one and they will have to stay together.'

My brother recognised early the power of emotion. He quickly learned the power of money. When he was barely ten years old, he set up a soft drink counter at the local tennis club. On days thick with bush flies and corrugated heat, profits soared. When frost crunched underfoot and our hands turned blue waiting for the school bus, he kept profits flowing by scrounging empty bottles from the local tip. Worth threepence each, he filled the billycart he towed behind his horse over and over until the tip was cleared. He amassed enough cash to buy a big, boxy blonde stereo on tiny, tapered legs that seemed to glow and throb in our sombre sitting room where we played *South Pacific* on wet winter nights until the record wore out.

Once, my mother hit him. I can still smell that cold, damp morning when my father's belt came out and she wrapped it around John's legs as he marched barefoot down the path in front of the hydrangeas. He was about eight years old, blue-eyed, hair so white we nicknamed him Snow. Tall for his age but all bones.

'You are *not* going to school without your shoes!' she snapped.

'I told you. I can't find them!'

'Get back inside and have another look!'

'No!'

Whip. A red streak on white legs. My mother sitting abruptly on the concrete pathway. Crying with shock and remorse. She had never raised a hand to either of us before.

John squatted beside her and pulled her head to his chicken

chest. Holding her until she calmed. 'Please, Mum. Don't hit me again. It upsets you too much.' He'd always been unbeatable.

My husband's illness, like my brother's, came out of nowhere. His sneezing woke me at about 2 am.

'Get a tissue, for heaven's sake.'

The sneezing continued. Seriously cranky, I turned on the light. His eyes were open but unseeing. Please, God, please. Not both my boys. Please. I promised a God I thought I didn't believe in obeisance forever in return for Paul's life.

He was still breathing when they lifted him into the ambulance, the seizures settling into a steady pattern. I climbed into the seat beside the driver, a calm young woman with an open face.

'This is going to sound bizarre,' I babbled, talking fast and intimately to try to hold back panic.

'Tell me anyway.'

'Two Sundays ago, Paul dreamed his friend, Terry, who is dead, landed in a plane and tried to convince Paul to join him on a trip. Exactly a week later, Paul dreamed his mother, who died before Terry, was combing his hair and asking him to follow her.'

The driver said nothing as she eased the ambulance through the empty streets in the last hour before dawn.

'So I guess what I want to know . . . want to ask . . . Is my husband dying back there?'

'It doesn't look good,' she said, gently.

She was brave in many ways, that smiley young driver, but especially courageous to tell me the truth. She could have lied. It would have been so much easier on her.

A few hours later, when the drugs kicked in and the seizures finally abated, when life and understanding filled Paul's eyes again, one of the doctors asked him a question: 'Who is the Queen of Australia?'

'I suppose you mean that bloody Elizabeth,' he grumbled.

I laughed with relief. This was the Paul I knew so well.

Irreverent. Pig-headed. Caustic. Unswervingly true to his Irish political heritage despite never having set foot on the velvety green land of his ancestors. Thank you, God. I owe you.

Days later, after tests and then more tests, the tidy, cleanly shaven neurosurgeon with thinning hair pulled the flimsy curtain around Paul's hospital bed. 'There's a tumour at the front of your brain. It's the size of a small apple.'

Paul smiled. As though he'd known all along. He looked almost uncaring, dissociated. But I thought I might faint. For a moment the room lurched. Then settled. I felt the blood drain from my face as though a plug had been pulled.

Paul kept smiling to himself, withdrawn into his own space. So I did all the talking. 'You can operate, can't you?' I asked.

'We'll have to. The tumour is putting pressure on the brain.'

'Well, it could be all right, couldn't it?'

'We won't know until we've done a biopsy.'

'Can you guess?'

'Why don't we wait and see?'

Three days later the worst possible news. Glioblastoma. A quick growing, aggressive son-of-a-bitch that could not be stopped. A death sentence. I didn't owe God at all.

When my brother first became ill, I'd traipsed the dusty roads of Mexico after hearing about a miracle clinic. On the way through poverty stricken villages, along a road more potholed than whole, my cab broke down. The driver, too drunk on tequila to be able to even lift the bonnet, sank to the ground on the shady side of the car and told me to keep walking. I'd get there eventually. An hour later I staggered into a clinic set in a flaking 1950s motel with blood red carpet, vinyl chairs and saggy wooden beds. People queued at a box-office window that used to be the motel reception desk, squandering their last few dollars on hope.

One man, tall, thin and dark with desperation, argued with the

nurse on the other side of the glass partition: 'The money will come through. I've arranged to mortgage the house. Give me the medication. Please.'

He didn't get his pills that day, that young Englishman who would probably die in Mexico. But I took my brother there anyway. Try anything. That's how I saw it. There was nothing to lose. John walked away.

I made other calls to obscure clinics in Europe and America, some in Australia, and felt surges of hope when friendly voices asked for medical details but then, quick as a flash, came back with fantastic fees for treatment. I'm not sure exactly when I understood it was all a sales pitch, selling guilt to the healthy, hope to those without hope. Maybe it was when a clinic in California asked for a list of financial assets to be faxed before it asked what disease needed to be treated. I decided, quickly, that I would not go down that path with Paul.

The tumour gobbled everything. His brilliant intellect. Laconic humour. Razor sharp wit. Once a voracious reader, he would lie in bed, book in hand, giving the impression his mind still kicked over. But he seldom turned the page. I stopped by the hospice every morning on my way to work as the editor of a national women's magazine. On my way home, I called in to see my brother, then drove another two suburbs to visit Paul again. To sit alongside his bed until he drifted into sleep. Which meant getting home late. Wondering when to fit in a load of washing. When to clean the house. Whether it was selfish and irresponsible to steal an hour for a hot bath. Whether I could find enough strength and energy for the day ahead. It was like being on a hurdy-gurdy. Not enough time. Ever. Nothing done properly.

Occasionally, Paul would suddenly become lucid again, in a way that was as cruel as it could be because it made me think – hope – that the experts were wrong and he would beat the odds: 'What's on the cover of the magazine this week?'

Halfway through my answer, he'd drift off again into a strange world where thoughts were tangled and friends, many long dead, flickered in and out of his mind: 'Must look up Don in Hong Kong next time.'

'Yes. Great idea.' But Don had succumbed to alcoholism a decade earlier.

My brother died as the sun came up on a Wednesday morning. His flame-haired, sharp-tongued wife, Jan, whom we call Dolly, steadfastly by his side as she had been throughout their lives together. I set aside Saturday morning to write his eulogy so when the phone rang, I flew into a rage at the interruption.

'What!'

'It's the hospice. Can you come and see Paul?'

I wanted to scream 'No!' Wanted to yell at everyone to leave me alone, to give me a break, just a tiny break, so I could write my brother's life in a way that did him justice.

'What's the matter?'

'Nothing. Nothing. Well, he's had a bit of a fall. Can you get here? Quickly? He's asking for you.'

In his room with its views across monochrome Melbourne suburbs, Paul lay on a mattress on the floor. Another, empty mattress had been placed next to him. So I knew he was dying. The empty mattress was for me. Late one night when I was sitting with him, a nurse had told me that when death approached, a second bed appeared for families to lie close and hold tightly for the last time.

I crawled onto the mattress beside him and cradled his head in my arms. 'I love you more than anyone in the world,' I whispered.

He lifted his hand with its beautiful long fingers – like a surgeon's, his mother used to say proudly – and pointed to where his heart was fading away.

'More,' he said. He smiled wonderfully.

The fall, I discovered, had been caused by a heart attack. And

that's what killed him. Not the tumour at all. So we had two funerals in a week. My brother's in Melbourne. Paul's in Sydney, his hometown.

A few days after Paul's funeral, when it was Monday again, I zipped on my work face, climbed into my high heels and returned to my office to sit behind my desk. I locked loss in a hollow space and, fortified with my good old Melbourne public school upbringing that hammered home the maxim that the best way to get over a problem was to get on with it, I goosestepped onwards.

Until the day I couldn't get out of bed.



## 2

I LAY UNDER THE DOONA in my manky blue-checked cotton pyjamas, staring at those mustard walls, confusing day and night, for five days. I suppose I must have fed the dog and I have a vague memory of the phone ringing. I also recall opening a can of tomato soup and eating it with buttered toast. Which is what my mother gave me when I was a little girl and my tummy felt bad. Tomato soup or rice pudding. But I didn't have any rice pudding.

On the sixth day I finally get up, walk the dog, shower, dress, turn the key in the ignition and swing carefully into peak-hour traffic. I pick up coffee from the corner shop. Hang my coat behind the office door. I sit behind my huge, ugly desk with its desolate views of West Melbourne and wish every celebrity to hell, every whining bad luck story to the same place.

When colleagues look enquiringly at me, I smile. 'Better?' they ask.

'Yup. Virus or something. Fill me in.'

Covers to choose. Stories to chase. Staff to manage. Crying often, but pretending it's over a reader's heartbreaking story. I alone know I don't really give a stuff about the readers any more.

Sometimes, when the cover lines won't gel, I daydream about being dead. Escaping the whole shit bundle of grief in a single bound.

But then I hear my brother's words: 'All those people who kill themselves and I lie here fighting to live another minute.'

Paul's words: 'Live for the quicksilver moments of happiness. Recognise and absorb them. They are rare and precious.'

I have long given up the search for happiness, though. What I want now is peace. No Friday morning envelope with disappointing circulation figures. No shrinking budgets, no being beaten by the opposition. No stress. No responsibility beyond my front door. Work, a career, the media – it is all a silly game, anyway, when death is inevitable and it's simply a question of when.

During those awful first months after the boys die, a routine begins with my stepdaughter, Suzi. We meet on Friday nights for dinner at a casual pub restaurant in St Kilda. Suzi, the actor. Big-eyed and skinny in her fashionably frayed op shop clothes. Suzi, who was there when her father died. Who sat with him each afternoon. Who loved him unconditionally. Which was the only way with Paul. I tell myself I am helping her to talk through the loss of a parent at our regular dinners. But she gives me far more than I am able to give her. She listens and listens and is the only one who lets me drop the façade of coping.

I call her around six thirty every Friday night. 'Let's meet early. I'm buggered.'

'Great. I'll catch the tram now. See ya there.' Her actress-trained voice carries far beyond the phone.

We never alter the routine. I order the same main course every week. So does Suzi. Lamb for me, steak for her. And the same wine. I ask for the same table, and when it's not available, I feel a sudden lurch of fear, as though I am plunging unprepared into the unknown. Death has snatched away any illusion of control and only dogged routine gives me a semblance of stability.

White napkins are swished into our laps, wine ordered, the buttery smell of baking pastry fills the room. Waiters, black clad stick figures balancing plates and human nature with equal skill, take our orders and give us respite from our everyday world. When Suzi and I cry, as we often do, they look the other way, those

waiters. Or bring a glass of water and no words. Or a sinful pastry. The kindness of strangers. It is overwhelming.

One night, when it is nearly midnight and I've drunk too much, and the world has shrunk to the table where we sit, wine blots out my last vestige of emotional reserve.

'You know, you're a gift, Suzi. A gift in my life. If I'd had a child I would have wished for you.'

She shrugs as though it's no big deal. 'You have me,' she says.

And for a moment I feel as though I belong somewhere. But it has been a habit, for most of my life, to need others to tell me where I fit. So I back away from the impulse to make Suzi an anchor. Anchors, anyway, if they do not come from within yourself, can die on you. Or move on. Or turn out to be just plain unreliable.

There are moments, though, when my breath comes in short gasps and a single word or sound, such as my brother's name or an ambulance siren, can trigger waves of panic that make me want to jump up and flee. Or lean over and vomit. Just the sight of an ambulance leaves me shaky and distraught, unable to continue on my way for a small passage of time.

I discover quickly that there is no such thing as an ordinary moment any more. Too many ordinary moments have ended in disaster. Like going to bed one nondescript night and waking up to a husband with a brain tumour. Like listening to my brother's light cough and then getting a phone call to say it's a rare kind of cancer. I begin to assume the worst outcomes from the most trivial events. If Suzi is late for our dinner, it's a crash, not heavy traffic. If the phone rings late at night, it's a death, not a friend touching base. No. Nothing can be trusted to be ordinary any more.

At the office, I sometimes find myself sitting and staring at nothing, playing little mind games. I ask myself one question after another, but they are all the same in the end. What I ask myself in

a dozen different forms is, if I die tomorrow, who will miss me? Will there be any regrets?

Answering the *regrets* part is easy. I've danced at the White House with tall, handsome young soldiers in crisp dress uniform. Driven around Somalia with men carrying machine guns perched on the roof of the car. Talked to Demi Moore about sex over a cup of coffee and watched her push a half-eaten chocolate petit four around her plate, too disciplined to swallow the final, tiny mouthful. I've jumped icefloes in Newfoundland to photograph helpless baby harp seals being clubbed to death while nearby their mothers wailed pitifully as the floating, white wastelands turned red with the blood of their young.

I've been blasted by the foul stench of a polar bear's breath while he was being airlifted from a tiny town called Churchill, in Canada, to an isolated, snowy place where there were no humans to feel threatened, no rubbish bins to ransack. I've wandered through Imelda Marcos's vast, stuffed closets in Malacanang Palace, in the Philippines, counting her shoes and fur coats. Hitchhiked from Cape Town to Windhoek, sleeping by the side of roads so isolated only a car a day passed by. Spent an afternoon with a sober Richard Burton in his movie set trailer, lulled by his seductive voice and charmed by his earthy humour. Heaps of assignments, miles of travel, mostly at someone else's expense. An interesting, privileged, capricious journalist's life.

No. No regrets. I'll die without feeling there is still much to do. But the other question, the one about *who will miss me*, I find difficult to confront. Because no-one will, not for long anyway. Transitory lives like mine touch many surfaces but rarely leave a mark. So when an old skin cancer on my top lip returns, I merely shrug.

'How much of the lip will go?' I ask the doctor.

'Nearly all of it.'

He reaches for my hand but I move it away, pretend I don't see his gesture of compassion.

‘That’s ok. I’m ok with that. It’s not like I’m a young girl with her life ahead of her.’

But what I mean is that if death is the final outcome of life, what does it matter whether you have a top lip or not?

‘When do you want to do this?’ I ask.

He is struggling with my off-handedness and looks puzzled, as though there’s some part of an equation that’s missing.

‘I can book you into a hospital or you can have it done at the clinic,’ he says.

‘What do you suggest?’

‘Well, if we do it at the clinic, I’ll do the lip reconstruction myself. In hospital, you can use a plastic surgeon of your choice. Do you want to think about –?’

‘The clinic will be fine. Thanks.’

That night I call in, as I do at least twice a week, to have dinner with my brother’s wife, Dolly. Of the fire engine red hair. The routine suits us. She cooks, I eat. For her, the routine of two at dinner continues and she doesn’t have to wrestle with what quantities to cook for one. The following morning, she does the dishes while I grind my way to the office.

She’s chopping onions when I mention I need to have a little surgery on my lip.

‘I’ll drive you to the clinic,’ she says.

‘Nah, I’ll take a cab. It’s no big deal.’

She looks at me sharply. Then changes the subject. ‘They call us the Black Widows, you know,’ she says.

‘You’re kidding!’

‘Sounds a bit glamorous, doesn’t it.’

We are both flippant about death in those early days after the boys are buried. Flippant in a way that shocks some friends, relieves others, but ultimately allows us to publicly acknowledge their absence without being shattered by it.

‘Jesus, Dolly. Remember Paul’s funeral? Remember dear old

Keith, coming up to us? We were standing in the middle of the room like a couple of crows in a paddock. “*Don’t stand too close, you said. We’re on a roll!*”

Dolly laughs, throws the onions into a frying pan, and wipes tears from her eyes. Onion tears? We fill our glasses with more wine.

‘The poor bastard took off like a rabbit. Come to think of it, he didn’t look too flash himself, did he?’

‘What about Taronga Zoo?’ she asks, still laughing.

It was the day after Paul’s funeral. I’d drunk a barrel of wine at the wake and, later, even more at dinner. I had a drilling headache. Burning, roiling stomach. A paralysing hangover. All I wanted to do was lie still.

Dolly and my brother’s best friend, James, were taking the ferry from Circular Quay to Taronga Zoo to fill in time before our flight to Melbourne. She insisted I join them.

Somehow, I controlled my churning, poisoned stomach on the ferry trip. From the wharf, we climbed a narrow, dizzying spiral walkway to catch a cable car to the zoo. At the summit, I turned to look at the hordes of cheerful, chatting families in a snaking line behind us, waiting their turn. Just as we were about to climb into the cable car, I felt nausea rise in a sudden, dreadful, uncontrollable wave. There was nowhere to run, nowhere to hide.

I leaned over the fence and, in front of hundreds of people, vomited copiously.

‘Had the cable car all to ourselves. Three empty seats!’ Dolly says, giggling.

Wine flows again. Dolly brings our plates to the table. Huge steaks with a mushroom and onion sauce, a fresh green salad with lots of chopped parsley, the same as her mother makes. Mashed potatoes whipped with more butter than milk.

‘So do you want me to drive you to the clinic on Monday?’ she asks again, sitting down to eat.

‘No thanks. It’s easier to grab a cab.’

‘Right. Well. Do you want me to pick you up?’

‘Nope. I’ll grab a cab.’

Dolly looks at me hard. Torn between respect and concern.

‘I’ll be fine. Prefer to go alone, then I don’t have to worry about keeping anyone waiting.’

‘Should we open another bottle?’ she asks.

We are still drinking from my brother’s cellar which he made sure was stocked for Dolly’s future. Along with the wine, he left a detailed letter telling her when to sell certain wines at auction, when to make sure the whites were drunk. Taking care of her from the grave.

‘Yeah, why not? It’s Saturday.’