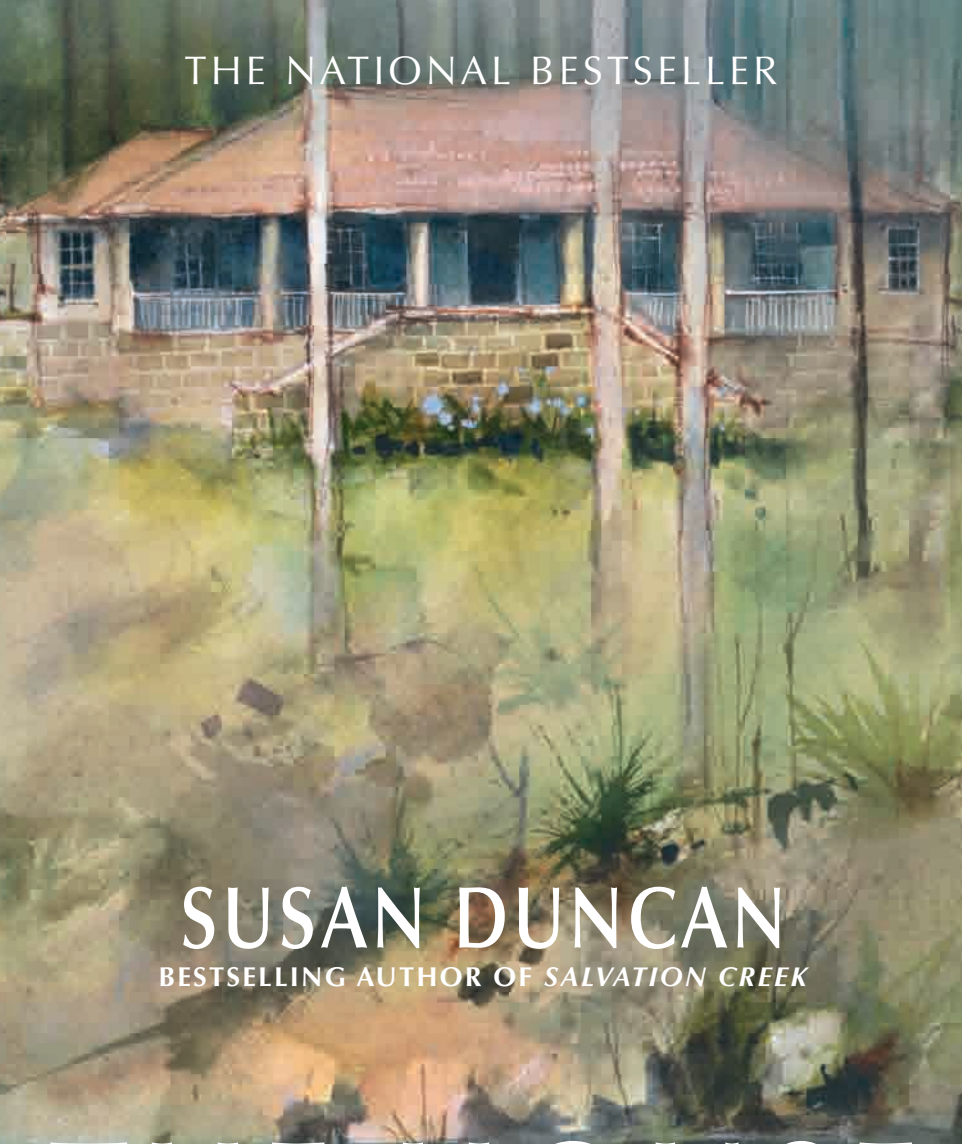
THE NATIONAL BESTSELLER



SUSAN DUNCAN

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *SALVATION CREEK*

THE HOUSE at Salvation Creek

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

A Bantam book
Published by Random House Australia Pty Ltd
Level 3, 100 Pacific Highway, North Sydney NSW 2060
www.randomhouse.com.au

First published by Bantam in 2008
This edition published in 2009

Addresses for companies within the Random House Group can be found at
www.randomhouse.com.au/offices

National Library of Australia
Cataloguing-in-Publication Entry

Duncan, Susan (Susan Elizabeth)
The house at Salvation Creek.

ISBN 978 1 86325 669 8 (pbk).

Duncan, Susan (Susan Elizabeth)
Women journalists – Australia – Biography.
Dwellings – New South Wales – Pittwater.
Pittwater (N.S.W.)

920.72

Cover painting 'Tarrangaua' by John Lovett
Cover and text design by saso content and design pty ltd
Chapter openers feature a pencil study for a linocut 'View from our kitchen window at Tarrangaua' by David Preston
Typeset by Midland Typesetters, Australia
Printed and bound by Griffin Press, South Australia

Excerpts from the diaries of Dorothea Mackellar, the two poems 'My Country' and 'Peaceful Voices' and Mackellar's recipe for Spiced Cottage Cheese Custard are reproduced by arrangement with the licensor, the Estate of Dorothea Mackellar, c/- Curtis Brown (Aust) Pty Ltd.

Random House Australia uses papers that are natural, renewable and recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

1

FOR NEARLY TWO YEARS after we marry, Bob's pale yellow house on the 'high rough hill', which is the Aboriginal meaning of *Tarrangaua*, stays empty. I know he prefers the grand isolation of his home high above the waters of Lovett Bay to my shacky shed hovering over the shoreline, and yet I cannot bring myself to give up my house, where the earth, sky and sea surge through walls of glass. Where the moon prances on the bedroom floor and the sun spears rainbows of light on the timber deck.

Tarrangaua, too, has its own particular beauty. It was built in 1925 for the rich and reclusive poet Dorothea Mackellar, and is a solid, quietly authoritative house – stately, even – made of bricks and terracotta tiles and surrounded on three sides by a gracious verandah. Through the day, light and shadow play on textured walls. It can look sombre, though, when the sun is masked by clouds and the spotted gums and ironbarks, rigid sentinels that enclose the building, turn black in the rain.

Mackellar, who built the house as a summer retreat, was born in 1885. As she grew older, she led a lonely life, thwarted by death and lost love – and, later, alcohol – but she had the courage, and

the heart, to write a poem that evoked the raw passion of a young nation tired of being seen as Britain's grubby apron. In a single line, *I love a sunburnt country*, she embraced a land of *droughts and flooding rains* and made fools of an establishment that continued to yearn for *green and shaded lanes*. As though England's ordered gentility was the promised land and *home*, and Australia nothing but a far-flung, feral *colony.*

The poem, 'My Country', first published in 1908, made her famous and she was invited to recite it over and over throughout her life. It gave her a sense of achievement, a sense she would leave a worthwhile legacy.

My Country

The love of field and coppice,
Of green and shaded lanes.
Of ordered woods and gardens
Is running in your veins,
Strong love of grey-blue distance
Brown streams and soft dim skies
I know but cannot share it,
My love is otherwise.

I love a sunburnt country,
A land of sweeping plains,
Of ragged mountain ranges,
Of droughts and flooding rains.
I love her far horizons,
I love her jewel-sea,
Her beauty and her terror –
The wide brown land for me!

A stark white ring-barked forest
All tragic to the moon,

The sapphire-misted mountains,
The hot gold hush of noon.
Green tangle of the brushes,
Where lithe lianas coil,
And orchids deck the tree-tops
And ferns the warm dark soil.

Core of my heart, my country!
Her pitiless blue sky,
When sick at heart, around us,
We see the cattle die –
But then the grey clouds gather,
And we can bless again
The drumming of an army,
The steady, soaking rain.

Core of my heart, my country!
Land of the Rainbow Gold,
For flood and fire and famine,
She pays us back threefold –
Over the thirsty paddocks,
Watch, after many days,
The filmy veil of greenness
That thickens as we gaze.

An opal-hearted country,
A wilful, lavish land –
All you who have not loved her,
You will not understand –
Though earth holds many splendours,
Wherever I may die,
I know to what brown country
My homing thoughts will fly.

Mackellar built *Tarrangaua* when she was forty years old and employed a married couple, who lived in a cottage on the property, to care for it. Although we are told it became her favourite home, it remained empty for months at a time.

Houses, though, are oddly living things. When they are deserted, they begin to die. *Old* houses are especially vulnerable, like old people. Unless there is someone to notice a crack, a leak, mould clinging to long undusted furniture, a slow rot sets in. They get a smell, too, of neglect, like the dank smell that floats from the pages of a book left unopened for too many years. Bob and I are aware we cannot leave *Tarrangaua* echoing emptily forever, yet the idea of tenants is abhorrent. To sell it is unthinkable.

One day Fleury, a great friend and neighbour who has a travel business, asks if we'd ever think of opening *Tarrangaua* for tour groups.

'What kind of tours?'

'Small groups, mostly from the US. I take them to see the Aboriginal rock carvings on the Ku-ring-gai plateaus and give them a short Indigenous Australian history lesson. They get back on the bus to go somewhere to eat. Maybe you could provide lunch or morning tea? Sitting on the lawn at *Tarrangaua* would be quite special.'

'I'll talk to Bob about it,' I reply, my mind already spinning with possibilities.

It is more than a year since I sat in a crackling, slippery chair with a needle in my hand, being swamped, drop by agonising drop, with a poison that was supposed to save my life. My soul shifted during those grey days where we patients marked time with empty eyes, too frightened to look beyond the moment. I used to crane to see the sky through a window, always careful not to rip the needle from its slot. And later, when I stepped from the chemo ward outside into the physical world, everywhere I looked I saw the small miracles of daily life.

I doubt I will ever again have the kind of strength it takes to drive through peak hour traffic to a suffocating cubicle in a high-rise building to toil all day sealed off from birds, flowers, trees, the sea, sky, wind and earth. So Fleury's idea is appealing. It gives me the opportunity to work – a powerful ethic instilled from childhood – but on my own terms and in an environment that I believe sustains me.

Bob is hesitant and for a while I wonder if he is unwilling to tamper with what has inevitably become a shrine to another life.

'It is a way of breathing energy into the house. Without disturbing it,' I suggest.

He is still noncommittal. I mull for weeks, writing lists with plus and minus columns.

'Be a chance to do some cooking,' I say one day. 'Could be fun.'

'It's a lot of work. Do you know what you're doing?' Bob asks, sighing loudly.

'Haven't got a clue. It's a challenge, though, don't you think? And there's no real downside. If it doesn't work, we pull the plug.'

'A challenge? Yeah, well, challenges keep you young.'

'And they're harder to find as you get older.'

'You could go back to journalism?'

'No. Well, maybe an assignment here and there if it appeals. But that's all. I cannot bear the thought of working unsatisfyingly anymore. I sometimes look back and wonder what the old rat race was really all about.'

'You must have enjoyed it once. And it paid the bills.'

'Yeah, well, now I'd rather live more lightly with less.'

'It can be a mistake,' Bob adds seriously, 'to turn your hobby into a business. It can kill the passion.'

Instead of listening carefully, as I usually do, I plunge into a new career.

2

MUCH HAS CHANGED SINCE 1999, when I moved to this sleepy little enclave where there are only five houses.

My friend Veit, with the ceramic blue eyes and gentle humour who helped me through chemo, has quit his job at the boatshed next door, lured by fishing for lobster somewhere near New Guinea. He dreams of untold wealth, so the rumour goes. We don't know for sure. When boaties move on, they begin again without the past weighing them down, which is part of the seduction of the sea, I suspect. You can reinvent yourself in every port.

Jack and Brigitte, who live behind the *Tin Shed*, have a third son. He is tall and strong though barely two years old. Stef and Bella, who bought the house at the mouth of Salvation Creek, are no longer weekenders. The city, for them, has lost its gloss and they come home to the peace of Lovett Bay each night. Bella leaves us from time to time to work for the International Red Cross in Bosnia, Jerusalem, Timor, China. Lovett Bay, when she returns, brings her back to sanity.

Raoul and Larnce work at the boatshed now, so different from each other they could be from separate planets. Raoul

is dark. Dark skin, dark hair – occasionally, dark mood. Larnce is golden: hair, skin, even his eyes, when they catch the yellow of the sun in the late afternoon. He threshes through the bays in a wild, mauve fibreglass boat he calls the *Ghost Who Whomps*. Nose pointing to the sky, his bony backside finely balanced on a sliver of the stern, engine roaring. Constantly on the edge of flipping, as though he is as immortal as the Phantom himself.

'You go too fast, Larnce, too fast,' we all tell him when we pass by.

He shrugs, a cigarette hanging from his fingers. He looks at the burning tip then back at us. 'Always something's gonna get you,' he says. But you can tell he thinks he's invincible.

At weekends, Raoul brings his little boy, still a toddler, to play in the bay. By early afternoon, you have to watch where you step. He falls asleep suddenly and haphazardly, on bare floors, dirt, grass, concrete steps. Even, once, on the roof of a boat cabin Raoul was painting, his scruffy blanket clutched tightly under his chin, his smooth face angelic.

The boatshed belongs to a new couple, Michael and Mary Beth. They have a young son and Michael has three grown sons and two daughters from a former marriage. Michael is whippet thin with a long face and flowing hair. He works like a demon, as though a moment of rest is a moment wasted. He comes from a family of ten children, two of them fostered. His father, he told us not long after he arrived, worked two jobs to provide for his brood – all day as an accountant, then as a cleaner in the hours before dawn.

Like his father, Michael also has two jobs. He spends mornings at the boatshed, where tired yachts and boats are scraped, painted and restored – even, in some cases, made glorious, like the wooden cruiser with rot so deep and sustained it seemed she would never float again. The boys worked every day, hard and fastidiously, repairing what they could and rebuilding what was beyond saving.

A year later, *Blaxland* slid into the water like a dowager queen, gleaming, her lines sharp and refined. Truly resurrected. In the afternoon, Michael jumps in his car and drives to Manly, where he works as a psychiatric nurse. Which is another form of restoration.

Mary Beth, who is also a mental health nurse, is from the US and has a Yankee accent thick as mud. She is good-hearted and tender. Blunt, too, if she thinks it is the only way you'll get the message. Then her blue eyes focus, her hips thrust forward, her arms fold across her chest like an iron gate. That's how she stood the day a local politician told her he was amazed at what he called the new civility of people who live offshore.

'You've got rid of all the ferals,' he told her, his tone ripe with approval.

'Oh, they're still here,' she replied, her blue eyes glacial. 'It's just that we take care of them.'

Bob and Michael are similar men. On hot summer evenings they stand, slightly slumped, on cool concrete, beer in hand, the setting sun framing them like electricity. They stare, not at each other, but at white-limbed mangroves dancing on the far shore, at an incoming tide filling the empty bowl of Salvation Creek. Proud, in a silent way, of their day's darg. Neither man ever gives in, only paddles harder. It is the bond between them, this quiet understanding of how to go about daily life in a way that is satisfying.

'In the States,' Mary Beth says, 'we'd call Bob a good neighbour.'

'Here, we call Michael a great bloke,' I reply.

Not long after they take over the boatshed Andrew, Michael's son from his first marriage, who is lean like his father and has the same hawkish face, brings home a pup from the dog shelter. Jessie, she is called. She is brindled with brown, grey, black and white. Long-snouted with light-tan eyes and fur soft as mink. At first she is shy and skittish, slow to trust. Perhaps because beginning life in a dog shelter is rarely a good start.

'Got some cattle dog in her,' we say. 'Bit of kelpie, maybe?'

Then we notice she moves with the silence and stealth of a dingo. She has the same aloofness as a wild dog, too. We didn't hear even a light thump the day we found her on the table on the verandah, licking the cream bowl as though she had every right. Soon, she rides the bow of Andrew's tinny with the grace of a dancer. Before long, she and our tarty little terrier, Chip Chop, get into trouble.

The complaints begin. Chip Chop is locked up, Jessie learns what a leash is. They still escape from time to time, but always by accident. When they do, Brigitte is immediately on the phone or banging at the back door. She's a furious guardian of our wildlife, although her passion faltered the day a brush turkey shat on her keyboard. A friend, dressed in a cloche hat and white overalls (for tick protection) and clutching a frail butterfly net, tried to help her catch the beady-eyed bird with its scrawny yellow neck and bulbous head. Chasing. Pouncing. Chasing. Pouncing. It escaped in a hysterical flap up to a power line, where it pitched backwards and forwards, clinging to the narrow wire like a red-faced drunken sailor, until she gave up and went home. The keyboard never recovered.

Mary Beth's father, old Bob, lives at home with his daughter and son-in-law but he is peripheral in our bay life, confined to bed, his heart worn thin by the years, his body reneging on even the most basic instructions. He is cared for by a string of family and hired help. We all know he is there, waiting for death, urging it to *come get me*! But death is taking its time.

'Wanted me to get his suit ready the other day,' Mary Beth says.

'What for?' she asked him.

'For the funeral!' old Bob shouted at her, as though she were an imbecile.

'Why would I burn a perfectly good suit?' Mary Beth shouted back. And together they laughed and laughed. Death, by then, was her father's friend.

He died one cold winter morning. Not in bed, as we all thought he would, but in the car after a visit to the doctor.

'I parked at Church Point,' Mary Beth told the story later. '"Come on, Dad, let's go," I said. But when I looked at him, his head was slumped, his face smooth as wax, like he was cold as the morning. I felt his pulse. Nothing. Put my hand under his nose. Not a breath. I'm a nurse, I know what death is. So I got out of the car and called the ambulance. "My dad," I said, "has just died in the car. Can you come?" Then I called Michael. Sobbing.'

Michael jumped in the boat he calls *Bethie*, after his wife, and flew across the water. At The Point, locals gathered around to comfort Mary Beth. She bought a coffee from the café in the General Store at Ferry Wharf, lit a cigarette as she waited for help, tears streaming down her face.

'Then I went back to the car, to sit with Dad.'

'Can I have a puff of that?' old Bob asked.

'Dad! You're supposed to be dead! The ambulance is coming because you're dead!'

'Dead or not, I'd still like a puff.'

His pacemaker, it turned out, had kicked in, saving his life. His time wasn't finally up until a year later. By then he was cursing the pacemaker from dawn to dusk.

There have been so many changes in so few years in this little cluster of houses in Lovett Bay, and yet I suspect that I have changed more than all else. I do not racket heavily like I did once, trashing through days and nights in a blur of booze and desire. I have a knowledge, now, that comes from an intimacy with death and grief and fear. Hard won but priceless. Live so there are no regrets.

Sometimes I pick up a book that turns out to be about searching for the key to happiness. Once I would have devoured it. Now I set it aside for a civilised thriller or to revisit a classic. For this short period of my life, I need no gurus. And I have learned that only I hold the key.

I am not smug, though, because I am aware the unexpected can drop like a hailstorm from the sky and steal joy in a flash. And if you are not careful, it might take years to rediscover it.

Fleury's first tour group is due in November, on Melbourne Cup Day. Lunch on the lawn for one hundred corporate wives on a junket with their husbands who have a golf day scheduled. Not quite the *small* group we anticipated.

'No problem,' I tell Fleury airily, wondering where I'm going to find one hundred plates, knives, forks and spoons.

'What about tables and chairs?' Bob asks.

'Chairs are easy. Saw some blue plastic ones on sale the other day. Tables are harder. Thought I'd round up all the tables in the bay.'

'I could use the timber from the old deck and build three trestles,' Bob offers. 'Make 'em big enough for ten people each.'

I am amazed, as always, at being married to a practical man. My father was so technically inept we wouldn't even let him turn the radio on. 'Thank you. That'll get us sorted completely.'

I come up with a ridiculous, overly complex menu from flicking through glossy food magazines. The recipes all seem to have at least fifteen ingredients, each one of them expensive. Naturally, I've never cooked any of the dishes before and it doesn't occur to me to do a practice run.

Lisa, from Elvina Bay, agrees to help on the day. She is bouncy and blonde and holds nothing in. Laughter, she always says, cures most ailments. She is a master cook, catering local weddings and parties, and she never shirks when there's a fundraiser, or the fire brigade is doing a back-burn before the heat of summer turns the bush tinder dry. She coddles the fireys, making them exotic sandwiches and homey cakes. It's food so luscious, there's never any trouble finding volunteers.

Marie, from Scotland Island, is quietly efficient. Not so much a cook as a subtle, dark-haired and aloof major-domo, she sees the details, aims for perfection, and is scrupulously careful to waste nothing. 'Scrape the pan,' she tells me as I rush around. 'The dog will eat it.'

And there's my friend and neighbour Caro, who studied to become a divorce lawyer and then turned her back on the petty squabbles of people who married before they grew up. She searched instead for finer pursuits, spurred on by the clear-sightedness of nearly anyone who has had cancer. She offers to lend a hand, as long as she doesn't have to stir anything. Which is weird because she's a great cook. Just doesn't have the confidence to do it as a job. *Neither do I!* But I bludgeon my fear. Confidence is everything, and planning and preparation – right?

Every night for a week before the big day I wake up in a cold panic. The nightmares are all the same. Not enough food. Prepare it for the wrong date. Can't find the plates. A couple of days before the guests are due, I dream about returning home from the supermarket to find crowds of people hanging around, bored, hungry and cranky. All I have is four small, raw chickens. I turn on the oven but it won't heat up. I'm screaming *no, no, no* when Bob wakes me. I'm wet with sweat. Breathless.

'This lunch isn't worrying you, is it?' he asks, frowning with concern.

'Nah! Hot flush, that's all.'

I buy more and more food. Bob shakes his head without saying a word. He offers to help but my mind swizzles in increasingly confused circles. I forget *why* I thought I needed so much parsley. And what's the chutney for again? The pantry is stacked with old jam jars full of it. Quadrupled the recipe.

The day before the lunch I halve fifty spatchcocks to marinate in lime zest, harissa, crushed garlic and salt flakes. It takes four hours to make one hundred fat veal meatballs stuffed with camembert,

rolled in breadcrumbs and oven-roasted. Sprigs of fresh rosemary and crushed garlic are layered between delicate lamb cutlets to be barbecued on the day. I slow-roast beetroot and carrots in honey to serve cold. Spend the entire afternoon char-grilling vegetables on the barbecue – sweet potatoes, red capsicums, zucchini sprinkled with chopped garlic, mushrooms with a whiff of chili – until Lovett Bay smells like a restaurant and everyone wants to know what's going on.

'A party?' the boys in the boatshed ask hopefully.

'Nope. A lunch. A tour group. We're having it up the hill.'

Their faces sag with disappointment.

'There'll be leftovers,' I add, to cheer them up.

The fridge bursts with neatly packed and labelled containers, but the stainless steel bowls I bought hoping they would magically turn me into a professional chef are still stacked, unused, on the kitchen table. I can't decide if that is a good or bad sign.

Dessert will be easy, I tell myself before turning out the bedroom light. Lemon cakes, the kind you make in a food processor in a few minutes. They never fail. As I pull over the bedcovers, the smell of garlic and onions fills the air. From my hands. It takes about three days to scrub it away.

At four am before it's light, I creep out of bed. Count forty-five eggs, soften five and a half pounds of butter in the microwave and zest twenty lemons to make five cakes, doubling the quantities with each one. Twenty slices to every cake. It takes twice as much time as I allotted, time that pounces forward in half-hour increments instead of minutes. My stomach is roiling with anxiety.

By the time Lisa arrives with one hundred golden-crusted bite-size meat pies, the cakes are lined up. Only one has sunk a little alarmingly in the middle, pulled out of the oven before it was

cooked. Impatience. A lifelong affliction, like plunging in without thinking about the details – or possible consequences.

'We can save that cake for last,' I tell Lisa when she looks at it uncertainly. 'Only use it if we have to.'

'Tell me again why you wanted the pies,' she asks, looking at the kitchen sink, which is head-high with dishes.

'Melbourne Cup Day tradition,' I explain. As I say it, I remember we always had chicken sandwiches on Cup Day. I've got it mixed up. Meat pies go with the football. Bugger. I break out in a wave of hot flushes, spin a few times.

'You alright? Think you might do well with a cuppa,' Lisa suggests, putting on the kettle.

'Feel a bit stressed,' I confess. 'Everything changes when people are paying for something. What if it all goes wrong?'

'Well, we fix it. I mean, what's the panic? Is anyone going to die?'

I hear my own words coming back at me: *If it's not life threatening, don't sweat it*. That's how I try to live. But I forget. 'No, of course not,' I smile.

Bob comes in for a cuppa. The knees of his faded jeans are caked with dirt. He's been kneeling somewhere, fixing something. He offers to chop the parsley lying in a deep green mound on the kitchen bench. I hand it to him with a grateful sigh. What's it for again? Then I remember he hasn't had breakfast. I'm about to ask him what he'd like, but he's already putting two slices of bread in the toaster.

At nine o'clock, Bob and Lisa carry the food containers past the boatshed to Bob's rusty old ute parked at the bottom of the hill. The boys put in their orders for leftovers: spatchcocks and lemon cake. There's no mention of vegetables.

At *Tarrangaua*, Caro, Fleury and Marie set the tables on the verandah, arrange flowers and fold crisp white napkins. We crank up the music. Tony Joe White belts out 'Polk Salad Annie', a song

about a poor girl who lives on weeds from the riverbanks. I squirm. The largesse of lunch seems suddenly indecent.

A breeze floats along the verandah like a cool spirit. Splendid yachts, a derelict working boat with a sexy, svelte hull, motor cruisers, old ferries and boats wreathed in grunge and bird shit rock on green waters. The window of a homemade houseboat we call the *Fruit Box*, which never moves off its mooring, winks in the light. Tree tops foam like gold tipped waves. Who cares about the food? To be here is privilege enough.

Fleury organises water jugs, plates and servers, moves tables to strategic positions to serve food and drinks. Lisa sets up the kitchen like an army canteen while Marie and Caro polish cutlery borrowed from every nearby household, iron out creases in the tablecloths, sweep gum leaves that have flown in on the wind like butterflies.

Friends Geoff and Jacqui arrive with a basket of glorious roses from their mountain garden. Marie arranges them in vases on tables, cupboards, the old pianola, the mantelpiece. It feels like the house has woken from a long, deep sleep and has dressed for the occasion in its best party clothes.

'Ferry's coming,' shouts Lisa from the verandah.

'Here, Caro, you cook the asparagus. You do it better than anyone else.' I shove a large box at her. 'It's got me stumped. There's too much.'

Caro's brought her mother's old asparagus cooker, which is big enough for a couple of bunches. She laughs. 'This won't do it!' she says. 'What we need is a huge saucepan.'

She climbs a ladder and passes down a gigantic stockpot from the top shelf of the pantry. '*Almost* big enough,' she says. Then she lifts the box onto the bench and reaches in to begin snapping the ends off each spear. 'We'll tie them in lots of small bundles and stand them up,' she announces.

'Go, girl!'

Bob grabs the tongs and lays the naked little spatchcocks on the grill in orderly lines, tucking in their wings and legs tidily. Fleury's husband, Stewart, who's dropped by out of curiosity, gets ready to barbecue the lamb cutlets, so small and tender they're barely more than a bite each. Lisa arranges the dreaded meatballs on a large platter, cutting them in half.

'No-one's gonna eat a whole one, Susan,' she says. 'They're bigger than footballs!'

Marie and Lisa pour cool water, soft drinks or wine, as guests arrive, offer a bite-size pie. 'Melbourne Cup tradition,' Lisa explains, smiling. I decided not to confuse her with the truth.

Mid-afternoon, Fleury organises a sweep, which has the Americans, Brits, French, German and Italian dames flummoxed. They understand winning, though, and when the race begins, the budgie yabber of a boozy lunch hushes.

I stand back and raise a glass to my brother, a larrikin gambler who graced racetracks with Beau Brummel elegance, in a silent toast. As I will at this time every year. *Wish you were here. Wish we were dressed to the max to hit the Spring Racing Carnival, our race books marked up and every horse a lay-down misère winner.* Then I turn away from the television before the race ends. Too many tears. Too many memories. Better keep busy. Dirty plates are stacked from one end of the kitchen to the other. If my mother were around, she'd say *leave them!* I've always wondered how she thinks they'll get done. By magic? I turn on the tap and fill the sink. If my mother has a secret trick, I wish she'd pass it on.

An hour later, guests tackle the uneven sandstone pathway down to the ferry. Too late, I remember the wobbly stone on the bottom step at the fork. Meant to ask Bob to fix it.

'Lisa! Anyone really pissed?' I call out. She's clearing tables on the verandah.

'Just a couple,' she replies.

'Shit! We'd better help them on the steps.'

'Wouldn't worry,' she says. 'If they're pissed they won't hurt themselves. I'd be more concerned about the sober ones.'

And we laugh and laugh.

'Doesn't matter how many precautions you take,' Lisa adds, coming in with a tray load of coffee cups, 'if there's going to be a bolt out of the blue, nothing you can do will stop it.'

We line up on the verandah waving goodbye as the ferry slides past. Pittwater looks sublime. I feel possessive and protective.

'Well,' says Lisa, hands on her hips, her curly blonde hair looking only slightly frizzy, 'that wasn't too awful. But were you expecting a few more people?' She looks at the leftovers.

'Thought I'd make extra so everyone could take some home,' I lie. Bob's about to tell the truth but my black look stops him.

'So what was all the parsley for?' he asks.

'Decoration.' It's another lie. I remembered far too late that it was supposed to go in the meatballs.

When we've shared the leftovers amongst the helpers, the neighbours and the boys in the boatshed, finished the dishes, mopped the floors and re-settled the house into its customary solitary state, Bob and I wander home a little unsteadily along Lover's Lane to the *Tin Shed* by the light of a torch. An owl hoots, over and over. *Boo-boo. Boo-boo.* It's a lonely, mournful sound. Once it would have made me cry.

I tell Bob the truth about the parsley when we're in bed. Lying can get to be a habit – and there's no point. Trust is a very thin thread.

'House looked good, though, don't you think? Like she'd fluffed for the day?' I say in the darkness.

Bob grunts. Rolls over to wrap his arms around me. I squeeze tightly against him. Until a dreaded hot flush pounds in. He wipes the sweat from under my eyes with the ball of his thumb. Slides across the bed so I can throw off the blankets. Within a minute, his breathing falls into the steady rhythm of sleep. As I lie there

reliving the day in my mind, I begin to think about the pale house on the *high rough hill* slightly differently.

It feels like only a minute or two has gone by between the Melbourne Cup lunch and Christmas Day. When I was a kid, a withered old bloke with missing teeth and a turtle head used to tell me, 'Time speeds up as you get older.' He ran the dusty corner store in the country town outside Melbourne where my parents owned a pub. Every visiting Sunday, when I was allowed out of boarding school – after church and back before dinner – I'd swing open the creaky door with its busted flywire and step into the gloom to buy two shillings worth of black cats.

He was a frugal old codger who'd survived the Depression and only turned on the electric lights after sunset.

'Youth is wasted on the young,' he'd despair, as he separated four black cats for each penny with knotted, arthritic fingers. He had jelly beans, jubes, freckles and mints in glass jars on the pitted counter. Black and white striped humbugs and red, green and gold traffic lights wrapped in clear paper. But the chewy black cats with a powerful taste of aniseed were my favourites.

I didn't believe him about speeding time. I was not even a teenager and the days seemed to drizzle between one school holiday and the next. Now I am in my fifties, I understand what he meant. About youth being wasted on the young, as well.

This first Christmas Day since Bob and I married, the weather is nervy. Winds swirl indecisively, cool from the south for a moment, then blasting hot from the west. Boats swivel on their moorings, confused. White caps foam and froth. We are edgy, too. It is the bushfire season and fires are wreaking havoc north and south of us, destroying homes, livestock, land and lives. It is calamitous. All night a westerly wind flicked ash and soot our way,

fogging the sky, thickening the air. The smell of roasted eucalyptus seeped into our hair, our skin. Now it hangs off us like a spare set of clothing. Our little bay has escaped so far, but for how long?

We are planning to have lunch on the verandah at *Tarrangaua* instead of at home in the *Tin Shed*. A salute to the past. Another easing of feeling that I have somehow stolen another woman's life and I have no right to be standing in her kitchen. The *usual suspects*, as my mother always refers to them, are coming for roast turkey and pudding. Bomber and Bea, tanned almost black from slogging around the waterways on their boot-shaped emerald green barge, *The Trump*, fixing moorings. Marty, my brother-in-law from my first marriage, and his beautiful partner, Witch. The blind Buddhist nun, Adrienne Howley, whom we all met when she kindly visited *Tarrangaua* to talk to Barbara who hadn't much longer to live. Barbara had wanted to know more about the poet. The nun had nursed Mackellar for nearly eleven years and could answer most of her questions.

And, of course, my mother, Esther, is with us, as she is every year. Already Bob and I know she is not keen on the nun – feels her turf is threatened and she might have to battle for the single-minded attention she is used to. Adrienne, also in her eighties, is wise enough to stay out of her way, which isn't hard because we have given her a room at *Tarrangaua*. She sits, each morning, as still as a statue in a cane chair on the verandah, her hands folded in her lap. Wearing the deep maroon robes of a Tibetan nun. At peace.

In the *Tin Shed*, down the hill, my mother rises, as she's done for as long as I can remember, before dawn. I hear her footsteps going to and from the bathroom. The loo flushing. The kettle boiling. The smell of toast cooking and the acrid scent of instant coffee.

'I don't disturb you, do I?' she asks.

'No, not at all,' I fib every time. Because I know it is impossible for her to change her habits.

It is a small group gathering for Christmas lunch this year. Suzi and Lulu, the daughters of my first husband, Paul, are celebrating with their father's side of the family. Bob's son, Scott, can't get time off from his job in Pittsburgh, in the US, where he's a chemical engineer. Bob's three daughters, Kelly, Meg and Nicole, are based in Victoria. Kelly, a nurse, is on duty over Christmas and New Year. Meg, an engineer like her father, plans to drive from Melbourne on Boxing Day. Nicole, with two young children, finds it less stressful to spend Christmas at home.

Pia, a great friend and long-time Christmas stalwart, refused to budge from her new northern New South Wales paradise and who could blame her? 'I'm having a sandwich on the beach with anyone who wants to join me,' she explained.

Stewart and Fleury and their two daughters will come for pudding, bringing their guests – a tradition since I moved to Pittwater. And any neighbour who feels like floating in for a drink, or just to escape their own mayhem, is welcome.

Five minutes after we all sit at the table to begin lunch a hot gust explodes down Salvation Creek, blasting the nun's fresh prawns down the length of the verandah. We watch, open-mouthed. The prawns look alive, like a dream sequence in a B-grade movie. Then the phone rings. Somehow we know it isn't going to be a distant friend calling to exchange greetings.

'Akuna Bay is on fire,' says a neighbour. 'You'd better prepare.'

Akuna Bay, on Coal and Candle Creek, is in the heart of the Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park. When the wind blows from the west Lovett Bay always takes a direct hit. That's the course it blew in 1994, when all the houses in our little enclave burned to the ground. Except *Tarrangaua*.

'It is a strange house, that one,' an old-time resident told me a while after I moved here. 'It's only ever caught fire once. In the 1960s, in a small section of the north east corner, and it was easily put out with barely any damage done. No other bush fire has come

near it. And there have been plenty! Seems to have a spirit protecting it. Or something.' I think of his words as smoke hazes the sky behind the hills and escarpments, hoping they will be true again.

'Better get the pumps ready,' Bob says, pushing back his chair.

'Better get the leaves off your roof,' Bomber replies, standing up.

'Better rake the lawn and sweep the leaf litter away from around the house,' Bea adds, smoothing her dress over a stomach iron hard with muscle.

'What can I do?' asks the nun.

'Better say a prayer,' I suggest.

'What about me?' Marty asks.

'You'd better direct operations, Marty. Save those tired old knees of yours in case we have to make a dash for it.' I look at Witch, dark-eyed, tanned and dressed in pure white linen. Her soft, city hands wave in query.

'Better start making sandwiches, Witch. Think the grand repast has turned into a picnic. Oh, and make a few – if the fire gets here, we'll have hungry fireys everywhere.'

My mother looks up from her plate. Sighs. The oysters will have to wait. 'I'd better have a whisky,' she says, to veil the inadequacy of old age.

Bomber changes into a pair of Bob's paint-stained shorts and a tatty shirt, jams his feet into a too-small pair of battered Dunlop tennis shoes. He grabs a ladder and broom and climbs to the roof, sweeping from a 30-degree angle, treading carefully and trying not to crack the terracotta tiles. Leaves drop from gutters and valleys in the roof line, falling in avalanches that lie three inches deep. Bea and I fill large plastic garbage bags with leaf litter. The wind rockets. Trees bend. Our throats grow hoarse with smoke.

Bob unrolls hundreds of metres of hose from house to shore. It lies on the track like a fat blue snake with a glittering nozzle head. He sets up a pump on the pontoon to pull water from the bay. The pump is so powerful it would empty the rainwater tanks in minutes.

Witch makes strong, earthy-smelling pots of tea, over and over. Offers glasses of iced water. The sandwiches, thick with ham and turkey, are wrapped and waiting.

When Bomber comes down from the roof, the two men test the pump. Bob starts the engine while Bomber holds the hose. We watch it swell until it suddenly kicks in his hands. Water sprays the bush for a hundred feet, drenching it. We are ready. And we wait.

Late in the afternoon, the nun's prayers are heard and a sea breeze kicks in. Our good fortune, someone else's tragedy. Like my Uncle Frank always says: 'If you're doing it good, someone else is doing it bad. If you're doing it bad, someone else is doing it good. Life's a cycle.'

'Worst Christmas ever,' Bea said after they sold *The Trump* and retired to twenty-five acres on the Central Coast a few years later. 'But really, really good, too.' And we laughed. As you do when you come close to disaster and somehow escape.

By February, the nation is still reeling from the worst bushfire season in history. The dry weather we thought would soon move on has become a permanent resident. It is officially a drought.

Already, the towering spotted gum in the normally damp gully in the elbow of the back track where a fungi forest once reigned weeps a resinous brown fluid. The eucalyptus trees that tower above the house are parched and haggard, as though engulfed by a terrible sadness. It's been more than two years since the waterfall in the south west corner of Lovett Bay flooded in foaming white torrents. Soon, we hope, the drought will break. It always does.

Since I retired from full-time work, my mother calls me nearly every morning. She doesn't often have anything new to say, but the connection, I think, makes her feel secure. Reminds her she is not alone.

'I don't want you to worry,' she begins one late summer day.

'Ok. I won't,' I reply calmly, squishing down anger at being manipulated. Because it is an old game – of course she wants me to worry.

'I've had another fall. Broken the other wrist. But I'm alright. Nothing to worry about. Just wanted to tell you.'

My irritation, so quick to flare with my mother for no reason I will ever really understand, subsides in a wave of shame. 'Do you want to come and stay for a while?'

'No. No. I'm managing beautifully.'

'Might be time you moved out of that house.'

'You're not putting me in some home somewhere,' she shoots back. 'I may be old but I'm still capable.'

So I do not ask how she will manage alone in a large house with steps, a house that is two hours away at the foot of the Blue Mountains. I do not offer to stay with her for a while. I do nothing except call her for a few days to make sure she is coping. I am not, I am aware, an ideal daughter, the kind she dreamed would nurse her through her old age. She may have hammered in her idea of family – 'It is the one place where no matter what you've done, no matter how long you've been away, it must always open its door to you' – but in the selfish way of children, I took that to mean *I* could always come home. Not that, one day, it might be the other way around.

'Could find her a place around here,' Bob says, after I indulge in another bout of guilt and still do nothing about it.

'You don't think that might be a bit close?'

'Nah. There's a moat.' He looks up. 'Not an Olympic swimmer or anything, is she?' he adds.

'Got a nice style in the water. Think the distance might be a handicap though.'

'That's alright then.'

I begin quietly looking around for a place in a retirement home for her. But I say nothing. With my mother, timing is of the utmost importance.

A year after we begin our tourist lunches at *Tarrangaua*, they are beginning to lose their novelty. I have learned there is a deep chasm between trained chefs and amateur cooks like myself. Budgets and too many clients wanting too much for too little are wearing out my enthusiasm. I am not helped, either, by my idiotic compulsion to over-cater.

One day, when the wind is blowing cold and hard from the south and hitting the verandah full on, we set up the tables inside. Half an hour before the guests are due, Fleury calls to say the leader of the group insists they all dine outside. She is from Belgium, apparently, where she eats inside all the time.

'There's a gale!' I tell Fleury.

'I know, but she doesn't care.'

I put the phone down. We have moved sofas, tables and chairs to accommodate extra tables. Now we're supposed to move them all again.

'No way,' I mutter darkly to Lisa, who sighs with relief. 'There's only one set of rules here and they're mine.'

Halfway up the steps with her group, Fleury phones again, her voice shaking with anger.

'Now she wants to eat inside!'

'Don't worry. I didn't move any tables. It would have been madness.'

'Thank God,' Fleury sighs.

'What's this dame like?'

'A nightmare,' she whispers.

When the Belgian woman arrives, she rushes straight into the kitchen and tells us she wants lunch on the table in five minutes.

'Madame,' I say, barely able to remain polite, 'you are here because Fleury is a friend. This is not a regular business. Lunch will be ready when it is ready.'

She turns away from me and blasts off a fusilade of complaints in French to her friend.

'Je parle français, madame,' I say, although truthfully I've understood the gist of her conversation and not the specifics.

She spins towards me in horror then bolts out of the kitchen. Half an hour later she insists on leaving in a water taxi.

'Now I've got to find her a goddamn private car as well,' Fleury groans, reaching for her mobile phone. 'Jesus. I'd hate to be her husband.'

The moment the Belgian woman leaves the room, the atmosphere switches from quiet gloom to relaxed chat. Guests stick their heads inside the kitchen to apologise for their colleague's behaviour, to thank us for lunch. I smile, nod. But it is too late. I have reached the denouement.

Bob and I look at each other after the last tipsy guest has piled into a water taxi in ridiculously high heels, and although he says nothing, I know what he's thinking. *Why on earth am I doing this?* It's taken a week to clean and do the food preparation and it will take two days to swizzle both houses back to normal. Cooking is my passion, the lunches my whim, but Bob cannot see me work without offering to help.

'You were right, you know,' I tell him. 'The fun evaporates when you turn a hobby into a job. I don't want to be around people like that mad Belgian woman. They steal your energy and shatter your peace.'

He nods but stays silent.

'The house needs people, though,' I continue. 'It will die if it's left empty for years at a time.'

A month later, around the same time as my mother calls to say the plaster has been removed from her wrist and the doctor reckons she's healed as beautifully as a woman with young bones, Bob casually mentions finding tenants for *Tarrangaua* could be difficult.

'They need to be fit enough to cop the steps,' he says.

'Never know unless we have a go,' I reply.

We ask the local real estate agent to put the house on her books. 'It's a difficult property,' she tells us. 'There's a good market for low maintenance beach shacks. Houses like *Tarrangaua* . . . well . . . it might take a while for the right people to come along.'

'Been empty for a couple of years now. A few more months won't matter,' Bob says.

'By the way, I've looked at a couple of retirement villages that might be suitable for Esther,' I tell him.

'Have you told her anything about all this?'

'Nope. She has a morbid fear of what she calls "old people's homes". I think it's better if I talk to her face to face.'

Over the next few months, though, she sounds so well and happy on the phone, the idea of moving her to a place where she will manage more easily loses its urgency. Like my mother always says, 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it'.

Towards the end of winter, the real estate agent says she has found tenants for *Tarrangaua*. Bob and I temporarily move up the hill to prepare the house. Cleaning furniture, emptying cupboards, repairing fly-screens, touching up paintwork and writing a list of anything that might flummox the uninitiated in the vagaries of Pittwater living. Such as the wise use of tank water and caring for a septic system so it stays happily in balance and neither pongs nor overflows.

We camp like holiday-makers, turning out the lights and sitting on the floor with firelight dancing on the walls, playing music

until late. I am not entirely at ease, but nor do I feel like a trespasser.

Chip Chop, my trollopy little Jack Russell, is already familiar with the house. When I travelled, as I still do occasionally, on assignments for *The Australian Women's Weekly*, Bob and Barbara took care of her, making sure she didn't rampage through the bush as though it was her own private game park. On our first night up the hill, she leaps straight onto the sofa and falls asleep in a cushioned corner with a loud, ecstatic sigh.

A few weeks after the new tenants, John and Therese, lug the last of their clothes and all of their computer equipment up the steps, they call to ask if we would like to join them for dinner. We have seen them on the water in their tinny, but aside from a quick nod or a wave at a smiley bald-headed bloke and a skinny little woman with laughing blue eyes, there's been little contact.

On the night we get together, John barbecues a whole duck to serve with pieces of lime and chili. When he unwraps it from the foil at the table, none of us says a word. It is cinder black, and shrivelled to the size of a large potato.

'Wonderful,' we all trill after a minute or two, trying to find small bits that are still edible. Because we do not know each other well enough yet to understand if the truth might offend or hurt.

'Hottest blooming barbecue I've ever known,' John says eventually.

'What did you expect? Bob's a combustion engineer!' I explain.

'Ah!'

John is a shiny-headed . . . what? Renaissance man best describes him. Lawyer, writer, businessman, sailor and who knows what else? He came to Pittwater on holidays as a child and never forgot it. One day, he is not sure why, he decided he would like to return.

Therese is deeply Irish even though she's lived in Australia for more than thirty years. She is a social worker, unafraid of the seamier moments in people's lives. Once, she brought down

the wrath of her board of directors when she let a homeless man sleep on a bench in the garden of the community centre where she was boss. 'It's bridge day,' they screamed at her, implying that the sight of a shambling alcoholic in need of a bath and clean trousers would be too confronting for the well-dressed women who played cards there every Wednesday.

'This is a *community* centre,' she replied, unmoved. She fetched him fresh clothes, made fifty phone calls until she found a place for him to sleep, then cleaned up the mess he had left behind. Her compassion should have shamed her colleagues, but all they felt was sullied.

'Pound for weight, she's stronger than any woman I've ever seen,' says Bob with approval. He has watched her carry a case of wine up the hill, slim as a teenager, barely more than five feet tall. His tone is rich with respect.

I am at ease that first time we return to *Tarrangaua* on the occasion that becomes known as 'the night of the black duck'. I am a guest, which I am familiar with. But Bob feels strangely disoriented. 'I keep wanting to check the oven and fill the wine glasses,' he whispers. 'And John's sitting where I always sit!'

And it is the moment I finally understand that the *Tin Shed* will never be home to him.

≈

A year later, Bob makes one of his endless trips along Lover's Lane to get a tool from his shed at *Tarrangaua* and something inside me gives way.

'Should we give your house a go for a while?' I ask him. The rental lease is due to expire. We expect John and Therese to move on. Even though he has the chance to leap in with a loud *yes,* he holds back.

'It wouldn't bother you?'

'No. Not anymore.' And I hope it is true.

We tell John and Therese our plans over a dinner of slow-roasted pork with crackling rubbed with preserved lemon, fennel seeds, garlic and sea salt.

'Don't worry,' they say gaily, when we apologise if it's going to cause any inconvenience. 'We'll just move into the *Tin Shed*.' And we swap houses. It's as easy as that.

A week before moving day, I pile cookware, crockery, cutlery, serving dishes, glassware and bowls into the wheelbarrow and push each load along the rough bush path we call Lover's Lane. It runs behind the *Tin Shed* to *Tarrangaua*. According to local legend a doctor who ran a home for mentally disabled men fell in love with Dorothea Mackellar and cut the path from his house to hers. It was an unrequited love, from all accounts. Only a single, isolated sandstone chimney remains of his dwelling, and the tangled residue of a once ordered cottage garden: wisteria, two magnolias, hydrangeas. Plants that survived the firestorm of 1994. Tougher, in the end, than the house.

Bob cleared the pathway in the days not long after Barbara died and I began cooking for the two of us. Most evenings, he walked slowly along the track, bottle of wine in hand, shoulders hunched, his weathered face creased more deeply, it seemed to me, than just a year earlier.

At first, our dinners were awkward. We were wary. Not of each other, but of saying something thoughtless. It took the passing of time to dull the raw edges and, oddly, the familiarity of routine – oddly because I used to loathe predictability and lived for excitement. I am old enough now, though, to look back regretfully at so much effort wasted on worthless pursuits. I cannot help wishing I'd directed my energy more profoundly and less recklessly when I had it in abundance.

The wheelbarrow hits a gnarled and hard root of a spotted gum. I take a deep breath. Grunt. And bounce over it. Every day,

stronger and stronger. Chemo is more like a bad dream from another lifetime.

Bob's shed is dusty, thick with spider webs and tools flung on benches. Bare floorboards, some of them sinking. Grimy windows and gaps between the timber. It is chaos.

'Where's all this stuff going to fit?' he moans as I unload another wheelbarrow load of kitchen equipment.

'What about the cupboards in the hallway? They're huge.'

'That's where I keep my old business files.'

'Oh.'

It makes me suddenly unsure, forces me to question whether what we are doing will be for the best. We are not *beginning* in a new house, we are picking up the past. In a different way, of course, but it's unshakable. There is the indelible print of another woman's life and it will always be there.

Barbara and Bob had the bed made for them in Australian cedar. They found the bedside tables on a jaunt through country Victoria. Bob and his son carried up the huge cedar chest of drawers from the boat on a stinking summer day. Eighty-eight steps. Will Bob drift back in time when he pulls a pair of socks from the drawers, when he lays a book down on the bedside table before turning out the light? Will I feel I have moved in with a ghost?

My head spins. I have made so many moves in too few years. The *Tin Shed* is perfect. Why change the order of things? Because Bob needs his shed, I reply to myself silently. Because going up and down the hill five times a day will get more and more exhausting. Because home is where Bob is and the rest is just building material. Because to resent Bob's past is childish and irrational. We all have pasts. My own is not particularly noble. And Barbara was a friend. To be reminded of her is a good thing. She was a fine woman with impeccable instincts. And because *Tarrangaua* is old and, like old people, it needs tenderness to keep sparkling.

'I'll only take *half* the hallway cupboards, then,' I tell Bob firmly.

Bob nods. A good relationship, he tells me from time to time, is built on many things. Trust is the baseline, with the ability to compromise not far behind. To win every round in a relationship can sometimes mean losing the marriage.

We swap houses on a fine day in late spring 2003 with the help of Bob's mates, six sunny-faced blokes from an engineering factory in Mona Vale.

'Not the kind of move you need a barge for,' Bob explains. 'Next door, really.'

Next door and up a mountain, I think to myself. But I say nothing. And there's Bob's old white ute, freckled with rust. No matter how heavy the load, it just gets gruntier. The blokes still have to carry sofas, beds, sideboards, tables and chairs down the steps from the *Tin Shed*, across the rutted slipway of the Lovett Bay boatshed and along a dirt waterside pathway to the bottom of the sandstone track. Nothing is light. My father always told me to buy stuff to *last*. 'You buy it once,' he advised, 'and you have it forever.'

But I was young then, and the idea of keeping something forever was unthinkable. What did *forever* mean, anyway? So I bought my share of new and trendy. Through the years, I've kept the timeless pieces and flicked the fashion fads. Should've listened to him when I had the chance. Although he was a realist about the usefulness of parental wisdom: 'You've got to make your own mistakes. Only way anyone ever learns.' His face, as he said it, was always full of sad resignation, as though he'd made a million of his own mistakes and wished he could save me from the ones he understood were ahead, but knew he couldn't.

At the waterfront, the blokes tightly strap the first load into the back of the ute. It's a 35-degree incline and the track is rough as hell.

'Would've been a cinch if we'd left all the furniture where it was,' Bob says.

'Yeah, but it's your house. If I don't have my own stuff around me, I will feel like a guest.'

'Fair enough.'

The ute goes uphill frontways over red kangaroo grass that grows down the middle of the track like a mohawk haircut. There's no turning circle at the house and Bob treasures his lawn, so he reverses down. It's like driving backwards into the stratosphere. All you can see in the rear-vision mirror is an empty lapis lazuli sky. Bob stares into the side mirrors to get his bearings but it's still tricky. Too far to the left and he plunges into a deep drainage channel. Too far to the right and he careens into knotty bush. Lose concentration and he'll end up in the bay.

By late afternoon, Bob looks haggard. He's done about thirty trips. There's an ominous thunk under the bonnet of the old ute, but it never falters. Nor does Bob. He's going home and he's happy.

'Those blokes are buggered,' I tell Bob when it is all, finally, done. The smiles are gone. The boys sit, shoulders hunched forward, arms wrapped around bony knees, heads hanging in exhaustion. Except for one. The fitness fanatic.

'Going for a run,' he says. 'To have a look around the bush.'

We groan, tell him to settle. He ignores us and takes off, tall, skinny and indefatigable.

'Bloody glad you didn't want the pianola moved,' says Troy, trying to grin but too tired to pull it off.

'I'll get tea and cake on the go.'

'A beer might go down a bit better,' he replies, forlornly.

On our first evening at *Tarrangaua*, we sit on the verandah as the sky segues from blue to pearly pink. There's a bottle of champagne on the table but it stays unopened. Five scruffy kookaburras line

up on the rails, looking for dinner. They fly away in disgust when we ignore them. Two king parrots, a male and female, land in an explosion of red and green, like performers in a medieval play. The white cockatoos, louder than banshees, salt the bush on the other side of Lovett Bay. At dusk, two brown wallabies with rusty chests edge their way cautiously onto the lawn, wide-eyed and beguiling.

'Not bad for openers,' I say to Bob, reaching for his hand.

'It only gets better,' he replies with a smile.

Then we head down the hill to Stef and Bella's for dinner. 'Too hard to cook after a move,' Bella had insisted. 'I'll take care of food for all of you.'

John and Therese are already there. Their bed is made, they tell us, and they are looking forward to another chapter in Pittwater living. 'Not as far to come to dinner now,' John says to Bella. 'Easier to get home, too.'

'I love Pittwater,' I mutter later, when we're stumbling up the hill, exhausted and slightly pizzled. 'It's family without the baggage, and they're always there.'

'Yeah. They're great neighbours, great friends. But nothing beats family.'

Early the next morning, not long after the kookaburras and cockatoos shatter the dawn quiet, I walk down the hallway past a photograph of Bob and Barbara where their heads are touching and Bob's dark eyes are almost closed. Her blue eyes are filled with laughter.

'Well, he's back,' I tell the photograph. 'And I'm here too. Hope that's ok.'

I am full of bravado but despite Bob's careful courtesies, sleeping, dressing, reading and resting feel like trespassing in another person's inner sanctum. Vaguely voyeuristic. For a long

while, I hesitate to open bedside drawers even though I know – because I have cleaned them – that they are empty of the remnants of another life. Only indifferent flotsam remains – cedar balls to ward off moths and silverfish, fragrant paper lining cupboards. But it is impossible, now and then, to hold back the guilt of still living when Barbara does not.

In the kitchen, I fill the kettle. Through the window, Lovett Bay ripples with light. Same tawny bay. Same orange escarpment. Same empty sky. Yet utterly different. Up here on this *high, rough hill* where there are no houses close by, the physical world embraces tightly. No wonder Mackellar made *Tarrangaua* her refuge and retreat.