CAROL LEFEVRE

THE TOWER

A perfect mosaic of women's lives and rooms lit by sinuous, perceptive writing.
SUSAN WYNDHAM

SPINIFEX

Carol Lefevre holds a PhD in Creative Writing from the University of Adelaide, where she is a Visiting Research Fellow. Her first novel *Nights in the Asylum* was shortlisted for the Commonwealth Writers' Prize and won the Nita B. Kibble Award. As well as her non-fiction book *Quiet City: Walking in West Terrace Cemetery*, Carol has published short fiction, journalism, and personal essays. She was the recipient of the 2016 Barbara Hanrahan Fellowship, and is an affiliate member of the J.M. Coetzee Centre for Creative Practice, where she was Writer-in-Residence in 2017. Her most recent book, *Murmurations*, was shortlisted for the 2021 Cristina Stead Prize for Fiction in the NSW Premier's Literary Awards, and for the Fiction Prize in the South Australian Festival Awards. Carol lives in Adelaide.

Also by Carol Lefevre

Murmurations (2020)
The Happiness Glass (2018)
Quiet City: Walking in West Terrace Cemetery (2016)
If You Were Mine (2008)
Nights in the Asylum (2007)

THE TOWER

CAROL LEFEVRE

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women@spinifexpress.com.au
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We are all prisoners of our upbringing. Some people thrash around in that cage all their lives; only when you find the door and get out do you learn to fly.

Margaret Olley

Margaret Olley, Far From a Still Life, Meg Stewart

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THE TOWER

Dorelia was driving her friend Bunty to Bowen therapy when they took a wrong turn, and then another, until at the end of a quiet cul-de-sac, set among sheltering trees, stood the most adorable house. Its front door was shadowed by a graceful porch and above the porch rose a small tower.

"Oh look!" Dorelia stopped the car.

The house was painted a pale vanilla with carriage-green trim. Above the porch was a plaster head wreathed with plaster flowers, its feminine face calm, its hooded eyes lowered to watch over the entrance. In the front garden a 'For Sale' sign on a stake carried the name of a local estate agent. Dorelia wound down her window.

"I wonder …"

In the passenger seat, Bunty was peering at her phone.

"We should have gone two streets further."

Dorelia executed a neat three-point turn and drove on, but the little tower came with her. She saw its pinkish walls flushed under the pearly, late-winter light, leaf shadows dappling the glass in its narrow windows. As she waited in the clinic's carpark Dorelia saw herself climbing a wooden staircase into the tower. If it were hers, she would set her most comfortable chair beside one of those windows, with a side table for her cup of tea, her

pens and papers, and the stacks of books she would read. Dorelia imagined the windows filled with drifting clouds, with birds coasting on air currents, and for the first time since Geordie's death the knot in her chest, which felt as she imagined an overwound clock must feel, relaxed a notch.

When her Geordie died, it had been a shock to come up against that sudden, implacable absence. It was like being slapped hard by an icy hand. Then, in the terrible limbo between his dying and the funeral, she'd caught glimpses of him everywhere, so that coming indoors at dusk, as she reached for the light switch, Geordie's shadow would darken his favourite armchair; in their bedroom, she surprised a flash of his old mustard corduroy coat sleeve in the wardrobe mirror. Every mirror in the house held fragments of Geordie, even the little circular hand-mirror with the crack in it he had used for shaving.

Dorelia would have covered them all with cloths if it hadn't been for the children. They would have pounced on that as a sign that she was not holding up – she imagined Laurence and Hannah frowning and reaching for their phones. Apparently, they stored within those devices lists of suitable places they had researched on their parents' behalf. Retirement settlements and aged care facilities where they – and now Dorelia alone – would feel secure, and where she would be cared for if anything went wrong. By that they meant if she were diagnosed with a serious illness – which was bound to happen at some point – or if her mind began to give way, which was what they expected.

Dorelia knew she sometimes forgot things, but they were usually things she was keen enough to banish – like the name of Hannah's loud and opinionated mother-in-law, or the whereabouts of the personal alarm Laurence had bought and was furious about whenever he turned up and found she wasn't wearing it.

"But Mother, it's in case you FALL."

Since Geordie died, Laurence had taken to shouting at her, perhaps attributing her slow responses to escalating deafness

rather than the tightness that ticked and creaked in her chest. But Dorelia heard well enough. And she was not afraid of falling, or not desperately afraid. A lifetime of long walks had kept her reasonably nimble, and she still walked every morning. It kept her mind clear, and even with Geordie's death she had only missed five or six of those early tramps around her neighbourhood route.

For years now, her three adult children had seemed to Dorelia like beloved aliens. If she had not birthed and raised them herself, she would have wondered where they could have sprung from. Geordie hadn't lacked empathy, like Laurence, nor had he been critical and patronising like Hannah. The youngest, Gwenyth, who had been born when Dorelia had thought herself well beyond childbearing, was far kinder than her siblings, but deplorably self-focussed. It puzzled Dorelia that children who'd been as tender as lambs could harden until they were almost unrecognisable. She supposed it was her fault, that she had failed in some vital aspect of childrearing.

The estate agent's name was Pargeter.

"Len," he said, squeezing Dorelia's small dry hand in his large moist mitt. "It's been empty a while," he said. "I suppose it's the sort of place that's gone out of style. Nowadays people prefer new builds."

Dorelia looked around the sitting-room with its open fireplace, and at the kitchen's dated, dark wooden fittings. There was a window above the sink that overlooked a light-washed courtyard; she could put a table and chairs out there and some large terracotta tubs that would be easy to plant up and weed.

"Did you want to see upstairs?" said Len Pargeter.

The wooden staircase was just as she had imagined it, even down to the creak in its second-to-bottom step. But the tower room was lovely beyond anything she could have dreamed – afloat at the level of the treetops, it seemed to Dorelia more like a boat than a room, with everything that might trouble her banished.

“Oh, Mister Pargeter!”

“Len.”

“Len,” she said, “do you think the owner would consider an offer?”

Len Pargeter grinned and ground his palms together. “No doubt at all,” he said. “You just let me have a figure.”

FISH

Leona was leaving them again. Back to Sydney, she said. Whenever this happened Gran or Aunt Nance would arrive and gather up the children, all the while muttering that Sydney was where their flighty mother should have stayed. Leona knew they muttered. Those two had been down on her from the start, she said: nothing she did was ever good enough for them.

From behind the living room curtains Mazz listened as her sister Freddie wept and pleaded with Leona. The twins were out the back under the pergola. Mazz could see them through the smeary window glass, surging back and forth in the dappled light under the grapevine. Skinny legs sticking out of faded shorts, washed-out T-shirts, the boys were oblivious to the storm blowing up inside the house – if their mother left, they might not miss her until bedtime.

Mazz twirled her body more tightly into the rust-coloured chenille curtain. Its weight was like an arm around her nine-year-old shoulders; its dusty cloth smelled of something old and lost she couldn't quite identify. Last time Leona left she had come back after a week, and they'd all got presents. Mazz's was a flower press. Some of the specimens in it were now dry enough to be stuck onto cards. This time their mother would have to take a taxi to the bus station, because the battery in their car was flat.

Mazz considered ringing Aunt Nance to come round and save them, but the telephone was in the hall and Leona would hear. Besides, if she left them there might be another present. Mazz had her heart set on a sable paint brush, but she doubted she'd get one.

Next morning, Freddie gave them their breakfast while Leona nursed the headache she'd had since Aunt Nance – dropping off two dozen eggs from her chooks – had intercepted her climbing into the taxi.

"You might not be much of a mother, Leona," Nance said, "but there's four kids in that house and you're all they've got."

This wasn't strictly true, because there was their father, Sandy. But he was off somewhere driving his truck – as Leona said, "God knows where to."

Nance had snatched the scruffy red vinyl vanity case out of their mother's hand. To the taxi driver, Ray Purdy, she'd jutted her sharp little chin, indicating the boot. Ray had levered himself out from behind the wheel to unload the suitcase and the overnight bag, while Leona, defeated, ran into the house crying and slammed her bedroom door.

It was a relief to get to school. Freddie and Mazz walked there together while Aunt Nance delivered the twins to kindy. Lining up on the dusty asphalt for assembly, marching to their classrooms to the beat of the bass drum and kettle drum, there was a sense of order and predictability to school mornings that Mazz could relax into. She had a spelling test on Mondays, but she wasn't worried; she could read and write much longer words than the ones on the spelling list she hadn't looked at all weekend. Mazz liked school, whereas Freddie hated it. She hated lining up and marching, too, and to avoid it she had put her name down to play the bass drum.

"Frieda Giddings to the front now, please!"

Miss Greaves the music teacher shouted Freddie's name that morning, because with the drama the day before, and doing the

breakfast, Freddie must have forgotten it was her turn to play the drum. She hurried forward, flustered, and slipped her arms into the bass drum's wide leather straps.

Freddie was tall and thin like their father, with Sandy's apricot-coloured hair and freckled skin. The bass drum stuck out in front of her like an enormous belly. *Boom. Boom. Boom boom boom.* Mazz had thought of putting her name down to learn the kettle drum so they could play together, but there were too many mornings when she wouldn't be able to concentrate, mornings when she hated their mother. Most of the time, though, she loved her. Because on her good days Leona was the prettiest mother in the town. She was funny, too, though Gran and Aunt Nance could never see that side of her.

Mazz had been drawing in an old scrapbook, had almost filled it, when Aunt Nance announced she was sending her to art classes. "Mazz is artistic," Nance said. "It's a precious gift."

Leona protested about the cost, but Nance was stubborn.

"I'm paying," she said. "Forget the money."

So Mazz went to an art class on Saturday mornings. The teacher was Dutch, from South Africa, a tall, humourless man with faded blue eyes and a turned down mouth. He taught them to draw dull arrangements of fruit and vegetables, sometimes a sheep's skull, always a draped cloth so as to test their skill in rendering the folds.

There was no joy in the classroom. No light. As she laboured over charcoal shadows Mazz wondered why parents sent their kids there, and concluded it was to get them out of the way for a couple of hours while they sat in Giorgio's coffee lounge, smoking, and drinking cappuccinos.

There was a day when they were asked to draw something from a newspaper and add their own touches to it. One girl drew a portrait of a woman – a goddess with parted lips and

perfect eyebrows – and altered it by adding a nun's veil. When the teacher saw it, he spoke coldly.

"Who is responsible for this blasphemy?"

The class went quiet. When the girl whose drawing it was put up her hand, Mazz had thought the teacher was going to strike her.

"Out! Out! Out!" he screamed, fury igniting in his pale blue eyes.

The girl cowered as he hustled her to the door. Afterwards it was whispered that she had copied a portrait of Christine Keeler. Mazz's parents never bought newspapers. She didn't know who Christine Keeler was, or why drawing her had made the teacher angry. The girl never came back to the class.

At school Mazz came top in most of her subjects. She was smart, Aunt Nance said. People in the town agreed that Mazz had got the brains and Freddie had got the looks, and it was true that Freddie, at thirteen, with her long slim legs and spill of strawberry blonde hair, was striking. But there was a sharpness to her nose and mouth, and her glorious hair was too often dulled with hairspray. Whereas beneath Mazz's dormouse demeanor, her unruly brown curls, she had copped Leona's bone structure. Hers was to be a slow release of beauty.

The school principal and Aunt Nance arranged for Mazz to sit the entrance exam for a boarding school in Adelaide. When Mazz won a full scholarship, Leona threw a fit about her going away, but Gran and Aunt Nance prevailed.

"You can't hold her back, Leona," Nance said.

The twins Don and Jonty were in primary school, and Freddie was only hanging on at high school until she was old enough to leave. Mazz had read Enid Blyton's books and was anticipating midnight feasts and other adventures, while Leona muttered darkly that if Mazz went to the city she would never

come home. She was talking nonsense, as usual, Nance said. Of course she'd come home, every school holiday, but Leona shook her head. There were tears in her eyes, and years later, when Mazz had not only left the town but Australia, she would recall her mother's prediction and be amazed at her prescience.

Those first school holidays, Mazz stepped off the Adelaide bus to a flurry of attention. Everyone who saw her exclaimed at how much she had grown. But within hours, the family had adjusted to make room for her again, and soon it felt as if boarding school was a place she had dreamed. No one wanted to talk about it; it was as if she had never gone away. The town, though, let Mazz know that there was something different about her now. Women came to the door asking for Leona, and when Mazz didn't know why they'd come the women's eyebrows would draw together, and they'd tilt their heads at her in a way that said maybe she wasn't as sharp as they'd thought. It transpired that in her absence Leona had taken up op-shopping and re-selling. The house was choked with her stock and in the late afternoons it filled with a steady trickle of customers.

Freddie had a crush on Ryan Barry and was absorbed with waiting for him to ring, or to take her somewhere. The old closeness between the sisters, the united front they had always presented to Leona, and to the rest of the world, had been breached by an apprentice fitter and turner at the zinc mine. Ryan would arrive in the early evening, hair wet-combed into a quiff, and carry Freddie off to the drive-in, or to one of the town's many watering holes. Only the twins were the same, shyly hugging her when she first arrived, after which she was ignored. All their waking hours were spent kicking and bouncing balls, and in the fortnight she was at home they broke two windows.

It was the long Christmas holiday when Mazz announced that she had gone vegetarian. Not only that, but there was

to be no more 'Mazz'; the nickname was childish, it was an embarrassment, and she would like them to call her by her proper name, Mariel. She asked her sister why she put up with a boy's stupid nickname and insisted on addressing her as Frieda.

Mazz had gone all la-de-dah on them, Freddie said, and the two boys laughed and circled Mazz, chanting: "La de dah, lah de dah!"

Leona, to Mazz's surprise, told them all to leave her alone.

"I picked those names," she said, "and it's about time youse girls started using them."

They were Sydney names, Mariel suspected, but didn't ask. Like the boys, she was silenced by their mother's challenging stare.

"This bloody town," Leona muttered.

But Leona had chosen to marry their father, Mariel reasoned. When Sandy had proposed, she could have said no. Freddie loyally stuck up for the town whenever their mother ran it down, though like the rest of them she was awed by the yellowed newspaper clippings that showed Leona arriving from Sydney to model in the spring dress parades at Pellew and Moore. And then, off duty at the picnic races, her platinum curls and wriggling walk had caught the eye of Sandy Giddings.

All their father's friends had warned him she'd be trouble, Aunt Nance said. But Sandy hadn't listened. Sometimes Leona would tell the story of their courtship with a giggle in her voice, but when things were going wrong none of them would risk reminding her, as their Aunt Nance did, that she had made her bed and now she'd have to lie in it.

When Leona cooked vegetarian lasagne for the first time, they all ate it, though the boys, behind her back, made vomiting gestures. It was that Christmas that Mariel noticed the lack of proper footpaths in their street, the absence of a kerb, or trees, anything civilising. She saw, too, that their old house was shabby, despite Leona's efforts with shade cloth and sword ferns. From the street, blinds and curtains drawn against the sun, it crouched

sulkily in its own dusty shade, its mood reminding Mariel of their mother getting over one of her blowups. White ants had undermined the shed where Sandy stored his tools and were making inroads into the back veranda. Their father was supposed to have got the pest control people in before his last trip, Leona said, but they'd never turned up.

Even Aunt Nance's house, though neat inside, had cracked tiles and peeling paintwork. In its backyard, a ramshackle row of hutches housed the rabbits she and her son Dale bred to eat. The sight of creatures she had once pleaded to be allowed to pet struck Mariel now as gruesome, a sad death row that somehow stood for the town. Their Gran's place, where they had spent so much time as children, was nearly derelict. In her spidery sleepout, with its concrete floor that had never had lino on it, or a rug, its iron beds and ancient wardrobes were furred with dust. But however decrepit that house became, Mariel could never bring herself to hate it. Watching her Gran feed kindling into her wood stove stirred memories of Christmases and birthdays, Gran cooking for them because Leona was having a fit. Mariel had learned to iron handkerchiefs at the kitchen table, and she still knew where everything belonged in the drawers and cupboards from helping with the washing up.

But at home now the op-shop clothes had spilled over into the bathroom, at times even dangling from the shower rail. They had migrated into Mariel's wardrobe, and she was relieved when it was time to return to school.

After boarding school, Mariel funded her courses at the Central School of Art with waitressing and cleaning jobs. She had a room in a big, rundown share house at Glenelg, and the trips home became fewer. In their place there were long telephone calls with Freddie, who was getting engaged to Ryan Barry.

"You'll come home for the party, won't you?" Freddie said.

“Of course. When is it?”

“As soon as Ryan pays off the ring.”

“How’s Leona?”

“Too thin. I’m worried about her.”

“She’s never been fat.”

“No, but never like this. I mean, she’s got the body of a sixteen-year-old.”

“Well, half her luck,” Mariel said. “At her age, a sixteen-year-old body is something most women can only dream of.”

One rainy night there was a frantic tapping at Mariel’s window. It was a woman from her life drawing class. Diana’s hair was wet, her clothes flung on anyhow, and she had lost her shoes. With her face blotchy from crying, she told Mariel she had run away from her husband. He’d hit her again and she’d been afraid that this time he was really going to hurt her. Mariel put her arms around the shivering woman. She made hot chocolate, and when Diana’s teeth had stopped chattering, she improvised a bed for her on the floor. This arrangement lasted for weeks, Diana repaying Mariel’s kindness by cleaning and tidying the house, until a room became vacant and she moved in with her belongings.

Mariel had always known that men would use their fists against women, that they could terrify them into running barefoot from their houses in the middle of the night. Her own father hadn’t been violent, but there were plenty in the town who were. Ray Purdy had broken his wife’s arm once over something she’d cooked, yet people were reluctant to interfere between a husband and wife. In the street, or at the supermarket, women with bruised arms and blackened eyes behind sunglasses dared you to look at them.

Leona had never forgotten the murder that had happened the year she arrived in the town, when a girl of seventeen, Flora Helsden, had gone to a dance and was found dead the next morning on the oval.

"That could so easily have been me," Leona said.

This was what could happen to girls who went off into the dark with men. Leona was mainly warning Freddie, but later she would make sure that Mariel knew about Flora.

Diana's brother, a lawyer, was helping with her divorce. As soon as she got her settlement, she was going overseas.

"Karl is furious he's had to buy me out of the house. I want to get away before he boils over again." She was going to London. "Why don't you come too?"

Mariel had some savings, but she was planning to finish out her year at the art school. Yet it stirred her, watching Diana plan her escape, and the glamour of Europe was an undeniable pull. She was tempted, but resisted, much to Diana's disappointment, for the two had become close these last months, even though Diana, at thirty, seemed old to Mariel.

Freddie's engagement party was held at the end of February. There was to be a formal celebration in the function room of a hotel on the Saturday night, jointly hosted by Leona and Sandy, and Ryan Barry's parents. Freddie sent Mariel a photograph of her dress and shoes inside the invitation card and warned that on the Friday night there was to be a private party at home.

It had already kicked off by the time Mariel got off the bus. Leona had strung fairy lights under the pergola. Mosquito coils smoked in the pots of sun-scorched ferns that lined the patio, and Sandy had fired up the barbecue. Freddie was flashing her engagement ring. She wore a lime green dress that made her freckles stand out, and her hair hung in an exhausted orange wave over one shoulder. When her mother emerged from the kitchen Mariel could barely conceal her surprise: Leona had lost a startling amount of weight and her body was indeed that of a slight teen. She was wearing a teen's clothing, too, gleaned from her op-shop stash: a pink gingham halter-neck top and a

tiny denim skirt embroidered with rhinestone butterflies. There were matching butterfly clips in her hair, which was drawn into schoolgirl bunches on either side of her smoking-ravaged face. Purple shadows, like bruises, lay beneath her eyes, and Leona's too-pale pink lipstick had slipped off the corners of her mouth; she was sucking on one of her interminable mints.

"Hello, Darl! You got here in one piece, then."

When Leona hugged her, Mariel felt her mother's bird-like bones.

Sandy had rigged up a bar, and there was a keg of beer. He lounged beside it in his shorts and a short-sleeved shirt, looking as he did at the races, or the dogs – full of laddish good-humour, expectant, ready to enjoy himself. He'd got the two boys looking after the barbecue, and he showed Mariel the Weber where he was cooking a whole fish wrapped in foil.

Mariel wasn't hungry, and she was still vegetarian, though everyone, including Leona, seemed to have forgotten. A clutch of Freddie's friends arrived and put on music. Mariel looked around for somewhere to sit, as a Neil Diamond song she particularly disliked blared from a small speaker. One of the twins swooped by on a skateboard, lanky inside baggy clothing, taller now even than Freddie. All that night, and for the rest of her visit, Mariel felt the two boys as shadows flitting past her in the dark, while her sister was like a wind-up doll, showing her ring over and over, standing with one arm around Ryan's neck as if she would dangle there for the rest of her life.

Mariel was glad she hadn't brought Diana. It had been a near miss – Diana had been at a loose end and had floated the idea of coming. But at the last minute one of their housemates had invited her to an exhibition opening and the after party. Mariel sweated at the thought of what Diana, with her raw silk sheath dresses and beautiful narrow shoes, would have made of the town and her family.

When the fish was cooked to Sandy's satisfaction, the foil parcel was transferred to a big oval serving platter; it was put in

the middle of a picnic table and the foil peeled back. Everyone gathered round. Mariel had an impression of charred, silvery skin, a dull shimmer. Sandy stood beside it, beaming, and Mariel wondered what kind of fish it was. Someone had said, but she hadn't been able to hold the information. Keeping hold of anything was impossible. The lightbulb on a corner of the patio threw down a cone of cold white light in which dozens of small moths flapped and jittered. With the smell of the food, the smoke from the barbecue, and the heat radiating from bricks and concrete, Mariel felt queasy; her head began to throb.

It was Ryan Barry who leaned in first and cut into the fish. With Freddie still dangling from his muscular brown neck, he picked up a piece in his fingers and pushed it into his mouth.

"Mmmm, it's good, all right," Ryan said.

At that, Freddie plucked at it with her free hand, and the twins dived into the foil and their fingers came out holding lumps of fish. Leona's sliver left an oily smear across her chin. Freddie's friends joined in, it was all hands now, tearing at the fish. Sandy pulled off a big piece and retreated to the barbecue. Mouthful by mouthful, the fish was stripped of its flesh, and the hands and faces glistened with grease and with the fish's juices. Under the harsh patio light, there were dozens more moths.

Mariel hurried into the house and locked the bathroom door. Even Van Gogh's potato eaters in their poor, rustic kitchen had used cutlery. They might have been peasants, their bodies distorted by crushing labour, but they had taken coffee in tiny white cups, they had shown basic courtesy, and table manners. Mariel thought of paintings of people sharing food, and could think of none in which hands had grabbed and stripped, and mouths had gobbled.

Leona's stock had been cleared from the bathroom for the party, but the musty, smoky stink of old clothing still clung to the shower curtain, to the bath mat and the towels, in spite of the chemical air freshener.

It was then, sitting on the closed toilet lid, that Mariel made up her mind to go overseas with Diana. She could defer her courses and work and study in London. It was impossible to guess what her future might look like in another country, but she had known since schooldays that she could not stay in the town, like Freddie. Tonight, even Adelaide did not feel far enough away; it did not feel safe. There was still a chance that some loose thread of loyalty, some inescapable filament of duty, might hook her. Then she would be trapped here, thrashing with distress.

More people were arriving. Mariel heard the slam of car doors, heavy footsteps, shouted greetings over the inevitable Abba track. She thought of Flora Helsden who had gone to a dance, and fought for her life, and lost, on the football oval. She had never got away from the town. But why was she even thinking of that poor dead girl now, at her sister's engagement party?

Mariel stood up and stared at herself in the mirror, at her prim black dress and unpierced ears, her slender, ringless fingers. She was filled with grief that she belonged to this place and an almost equal grief that she could never truly belong. Because the town, with its broad, dust-blasted streets, though so intimately known, could never be real to her. It was not Abba she wanted, but some music she had not yet heard, music scored for violins, a cello, for other instruments she could not name. Her dreams were filled with white damask-covered tables lit by candles, with garden flowers loosely arranged in slender vases. Surely there was no man here tonight who could entice her out into the dark as Ryan Barry had enticed her sister. If that ever happened she would be ruined, like poor Freddie, who was so far gone as to not even know she was gone.

Within weeks Mariel was plunged into the chill beauty of an English spring. In London's daffodil-studded parks the breeze carried a breath of the countryside's cool green abundance, while pale blossom starred the slender branches spread against old stone walls. Glowing inside the cherry wool coat she had bought in the sales at Selfridges, Mariel returned again and again to the National Gallery and the Tate, to stare at paintings she had only ever seen as reproductions. Afterwards, she would walk beside the Thames, clutching the postcards she'd bought in the gallery shop.

It was already dark when she returned one afternoon to the rooms she shared with Diana in a semi-detached house in Hendon. She was still buoyed by the wonder of Whistler's muted masterpieces when she found a letter waiting for her on the hall table. It was from Freddie. They should have guessed about Leona's weight loss, Freddie said. Their mother had flown to Adelaide for tests without telling anyone; she'd never told them the results. And now she flatly refused all treatment, refused even to give up smoking. *There's no point in coming home, Mazz, she'll be gone before you can book a flight.*

Leona was leaving them. This time she was going for good. Mariel propped the Whistler postcards on the windowsill, delight erased by the memory of her mother's bones and by the presence of the town that leapt out at her from her sister's letter – its huddled houses, its heat-beaten streets, its backyards riddled with caged, doomed animals. Mariel flung herself down on her bed and covered her face with the pillow. Her family, the town: she felt their insistent pull and her own cornered, panicky resistance.

Another letter came after Leona's funeral. *I had no idea she knew so many people.* Freddie was pregnant, and their mother had known she would not live to see her first grandchild. *You were her sun moon and stars, though, Mazz. She said at the end, that when she was young in Sydney, she had wanted to be a girl just like you.*

If Ryan Barry had not paid off the engagement ring.

If Diana had never knocked on her window.

If their father had not barbecued a fish.

In the days that followed, Mariel returned to stand for a long time in front of Whistler's paintings. In her cherry coat, her hair a dark cloud floating against grey and blue-green walls, she herself presented a picture that others passing through the gallery turned to gaze at with awe. Before Whistler's girl in white, with her beautiful sleeves and her fan, Mariel's eyes filled with tears. She wished she could have shown it to Leona – not a reproduction, but the real thing.

When she had looked at the paintings for so long that her eyes began to droop with tiredness, she made her way to Selfridges, and there, over tea and a sandwich in the late afternoon lull, she filled in a job application for a hotel receptionist's position. If she got it, it would be a pity to leave London, to move away from the places where she might have studied. But everything was more expensive than she'd bargained for, and her funds were dwindling. Mariel slipped the paperwork into an envelope, and as she was leaving the store a clock somewhere struck the hour, silvery notes soaring like arrows into the darkening sky. Oxford Street was crowded with people hurrying home from work; it was nearly night, and the day was already past.