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Both inside and out, the dilapidated worker's cottage had taken on the appearance of a condemned property. It had shed most of its paint and looked as if it hadn't been occupied for a very long time. Four of its six windows were broken. Their makeshift covers of nailed-down cardboard, keeping the rooms in semidarkness, looked as if they'd barely survive the next heavy downpour. Some of the pasteboard carried commercial inscriptions such as FRAGILE, DANGER, THIS SIDE UP. There were holes in the roof and a few of the floorboards in the hallway had collapsed. The leakage was worst in the kitchen, lounge and bathroom. Regardless of the weather a number of receptacles – cooking pots, saucepans, bowls – were permanently placed at various locations spread over the house.

Returning home, Nanda was greeted by the familiar stale smell of cigarettes, alcohol, urine, cheap perfume, sweat and sex. Routinely she balanced her way across the remaining safe boards to the back of the house. A croaky female voice called out: 'That you?' Her exasperated reply, 'Yes, Mum' was promptly answered by a grumpy 'You took your time!'

A room to her left had its door wide open. Indignantly Nanda cast a glance at a naked man lying on the bed next to her mother. His chest was thick with black curly hair, his face covered in stubble. His arms and abdomen bore large tattoos.

The stranger occupied most of the bed. Although it wasn't an unusual sight for Nanda, it still filled her with disgust and despair. The guy looked like a gorilla. Strewn over the chair next to the bed Nanda recognised the scattered clothes of her

mother's visitor. Why couldn't she have a normal family like most of her school-friends? It was difficult enough to be the only child of a single parent!

For a moment she stared at the man and woman with undisguised hatred.

Her mother had long grown indifferent to Nanda's disapproval. Ignoring her daughter's indignation, she asked: 'Got the cigarettes?' Loath to come any closer, Nanda threw the pack across the room where it landed on the visitor's face. Startled and angry, the gorilla responded with a cranky shout: 'Oi! Watch it!' Shutting his eyes again, he burped and dragged the woman back to his side.

Nanda ignored the warning bellow and went to the kitchen for breakfast. Pouring milk into a bowl of cornflakes, she thought about the curious guy she'd been talking to on the CityCat. He seemed harmless after all, even friendly. Still, she doubted whether he could be trusted. There was something mysterious about him. What was he hiding from her? Whatever it was, she didn't want to know. This morning hadn't he offered, practically begged to tell her what was on his mind? Briefly she wondered why he'd been so anxious to reveal himself to her.

Her curiosity didn't last. Worrying about someone else was the last thing she needed. She'd make sure they remained strangers.

Her reflections were interrupted by the shrill voice of her mother. 'Come on, Frank, let go! You hear me? What do you think you're doing?' Nanda forced herself not to listen. She didn't want to know what was going on in her mother's bedroom. It had taken years to train herself not to hear things in the house she couldn't handle. It was more difficult not to see what was going on: men taking over their home, smoking, drinking, running around half-naked; an unmade bed, a mess of ashtrays, empty glasses and money on a bedside table.

Having finished eating her cereal, Nanda retreated to her room at the very back of the house and changed into her school uniform. A thudding noise came across from her mother's bedroom, sounding like something thrown against the wall. She

ignored it as she quickly checked the contents of her overnight bag: textbooks for Maths, Biology and Economics, a Penguin copy of *Macbeth*, a computer studies booklet, a lecture pad, a USB stick, a pencil case, calculator, the mobile, her iMac and earphones, velcro wallet and a small cosmetics bag. Satisfied it was all there, Nanda collapsed on the bed. Arms folded behind her head, she stared at the ceiling in motionless concentration. Like so many times before, she rehearsed her escape. Why couldn't she just disappear like her father? To get away from this prison that was home she'd crashed at Libby's again last night. How much longer would she have to run away like this?

By the time Nanda was ready to leave for school her mother was rummaging about in the kitchen. A half-smoked cigarette dangling from her lips, she greeted her daughter with feigned maternal concern: 'Just checking you've made yourself some sandwiches for school.' Nanda rolled her eyes in disbelief.

Mornings were the most difficult time for both of them. Even in the semi-darkness of the rundown cottage, the new day forced them to confront the sordidness of their life together. When Nanda returned home in the early hours from wherever she'd spent the night, the greatest challenge for her mother was having to face her, going through the fake ritual of parental concern, pretending to make sure the girl was ready for school. Mothering was not an instinct Angela had been endowed with by nature.

Nanda didn't have to say much. Angela could read only too clearly what her daughter thought of the home she was providing: to her it was little more than a place of humiliation, anger and disgust. No amount of large glamour photographs hanging on the walls could obscure the fact that this was what neighbours and visitors knew as a house of ill repute. The days of Angela's modelling were well and truly over. What may once have been a valuable series of artistic nudes by a famous Australian photographer had turned into a collection of titillating prints for her sleazy customers. Mornings were the time when Angela, shamed by what she was dragging Nanda into, would promise her rewards or presents, a new dress, a computer

game, even a holiday. It wasn't that Angela failed to keep most of her promises. What cast Nanda into ever deeper depression was the pathetic transparency of her mother's inability to mean anything she said. In desperate collusion Angela and Nanda related to each other almost entirely by telling lies.

'You remember Phil, darling, don't you? The one with the four-wheel Lexus. You liked him.' Her mother sounded like a car salesman. 'He called yesterday to say he was going to Airlie Beach for a bit of fishing and said we could both come along. What do you think, Nan? It'd give us a bit of a break.' Her voice grew hoarse and tense in its attempt at fake enthusiasm.

Dragging her bag, Nanda walked out of the kitchen mumbling that she had to go. Barefoot and unkempt, her mother ran after her. 'Wait!' she called. 'Wait, darling! I've got a little something for you.' In sudden panic she threw away the cigarette stub and grabbed a couple of notes from the pocket of her silk dressing gown. 'Take it, Nan!' she begged. 'Take it! Go and buy yourself something you like!'

Nanda didn't turn around. By the time she'd reached the front door her mother had given up. Standing on the edge of a hole in the floorboards, she yelled out, 'Have a good one, darling!' As soon as the door was shut she returned to the kitchen, cursing and swearing, her hands shaking as she tried to light another cigarette. From the bedroom came a grumpy, demanding call: 'Come on, Angie! How much longer do I have to fucking wait for you?'

In the depth of suffering Brett may have ignored all formal condolences and well-meaning expressions of sympathy just as he'd refused continued grief counselling during his lengthy recovery in hospital, yet his self-imposed detachment was itself intended to be entirely therapeutic rather than a hostile dismissal of friends' and colleagues' good intentions. He simply needed to be alone for however long the terrible pain would last. Brett had convinced himself that only by complete withdrawal from the brutalities of the so-called real world might he one day gather

the strength to return to it. Almost a year after the accident he still hadn't recovered enough to resume even a semblance of his former life.

Perhaps there was no survival without shelter.

Brett was neither offended nor discouraged by Nanda's rebuke during their two encounters. He regretted her brusque refusal to let him explain what it was that had made him withdraw from the company of people. Remembering his own daughter's dramatic mood swings, Brett suspected that, quite apart from having hinted that her mother was a loose woman, right now Nanda was most likely experiencing her own painful despair of adolescent alienation. He knew that puberty could be a state of solitary confusion and hopelessness as challenging as his own. According to the latest worldwide research, adolescence was the time of life with the highest suicide rate. He'd witnessed Portia's puberty completely unaware of a potentially deadly threat to his daughter's self-confidence. Hadn't she always felt safe knowing that her parents loved and supported her? He'd spoiled her rotten. In his eyes she could do no wrong.

Thinking of Portia brought back memories both precious and painful. In their most intimate moments Brett had shared many of her secrets and fears. Having reassured her, Portia's hugs and kisses were the ultimate reward for his unconditional fatherly support. How proud he'd been of having gained his daughter's confidence and trust! On more than one occasion Linda had ironically commented: 'You are like two lovebirds!' She'd meant it as a compliment. With such complete paternal devotion he'd surely earned the flirtatious tribute from the other love of his life. How could he ever forget the charm and glamour, the enchantment, delight and pleasure of his girls!

But Nanda was different. As far as he could tell, the only thing she had in common with Portia was a young woman's responsive sensitivity, an emotional knowledge that could only express its thoughts and needs in feelings. Would that be enough for him to put his trust in her, now that his wife and daughter were dead? Could he expect sympathy and solace from a pretty schoolgirl? Would this angry daughter be able to understand

the incurability of fatherly love? Nanda had come across as anything but a romantic. What *was*, in her case, the opposite of ‘romantic’ – callous, calculating, cunning, crafty, cold-blooded? Brett sensed it wouldn’t be as simple or clear-cut as that. Their two brief encounters on the ferry had revealed the wilfulness of Nanda’s contradictory behaviour. Yet he remained convinced there was more to the girl than had been uncovered.

To him, Nanda’s manners seemed a deliberate camouflage, similar to the way she managed to disparage her remarkable beauty with rundown clothes and unkempt hair. There was something studied, he felt, about the provocative carelessness of her appearance. If Nanda couldn’t depend on her good looks, she’d have other ways of getting noticed. Whimsically Brett wondered if he was so different. Wasn’t he in the habit of taking the early morning ferry dressed in a baggy tracksuit? But surely that wasn’t the same! He was an older man with no compulsion to look attractive. As with so many other things, Brett had managed to hide his own vanity behind his faith in the splendour of art.

It was true: he’d been disappointed when Nanda refused to listen to him. But he resisted any inclination to judge her. There had to be a reason for her suspicious caution. No doubt her parents had told her to be ever alert about her personal safety. They might even have told her to be particularly wary of older men. (‘We’ve been warned about men like you.’) If there’d been anything truly disturbing in Nanda’s behaviour, Brett thought, it was that once or twice she’d flown off the handle with a brutality clearly designed to hurt and offend. He had no idea what had prompted these violent outbursts, but told himself that despite his protestations of innocence he must somehow have managed to insult her after all. Perhaps she really did find him repulsive.

Nanda’s contradictory responses were in fact the very reason why Brett found it hard to forget her. More than the daily messages on his laptop, the regular reports from his galleries and a small amount of personal correspondence, the CityCat stray, the Botticelli kid, remained uppermost in his thoughts. In his state of almost complete withdrawal he no longer much cared

about acquisitions, sales, exhibitions, profits or anything else to do with business. Brett was perfectly comfortable letting his associates run his local and overseas galleries. Shortly after arriving back in Brisbane he'd informed his staff that he couldn't predict when he would return to work. He quickly found that his employees didn't depend on him. Apart from consulting him on major sales and purchases, the gallery ran itself. Even complex authentications were now handled by a distinguished interstate colleague who had no need to consult him. Brett couldn't believe how easy it was to be replaced.

It seemed his days of wheeling and dealing were over.

If for the first time since the accident somebody other than his girls preoccupied his mind, Brett knew his obsession with the forthright young woman on the CityCat was not unrelated to the memory of his dead daughter. It was in honour of Portia that Brett felt compelled to convince Nanda of his trustworthiness, that he was entirely motivated by paternal instincts to protect and nurture someone else who could have been his daughter. In the name of his undying love for Portia he wanted to help Nanda overcome whatever it was that caused her bitterness and anger.

Alone in his spacious riverside apartment, surrounded by furnishings and personal items reminding him of his girls, he was discovering a commemoration of love that did not threaten to destroy him. It was a different way of recollecting the past, evoked by this mysterious, strange and beautiful young girl. Brett began to take the task of remembering quite literally. Part of his painfully slow recovery was his need to remain connected to his wife and daughter. Like the prolonged healing process of his burns, fully regaining his consciousness depended on what he himself compared to delicate emotional surgery. The only hope for curing his damaged feelings would be an operation that didn't amount to an amputation. One reason why Brett was so convinced the wilful girl on the ferry would be able to nurse him back to health was that Nanda met the most important requirement for the task: he had no doubt she was herself seriously damaged. If she, too, experienced pain and grief, she

would understand what he was going through. If only he could make her listen to him!

Brett was aware that dealing with Nanda in his own precarious state of mind could prove beyond him. He'd witnessed how both of them were capable of causing damage to each other. Remembering one of Portia's favourite expressions, the blind leading the blind, was enough to make him feel discouraged. On the few occasions when his daughter had got angry with him, she'd been scathing in her condemnation. Referring to his international reputation as an expert on the Italian Renaissance, for example, she'd proclaimed dismissively: 'All art is make-believe!'

Was that why he had chosen his profession? Was that what he'd done all his life – lived the pretence of creative imagination? Had the girl Nanda blinded him with the adolescent beauty of her obstinate temper? Was he projecting his own wishful thinking onto the very real needs of a strange young woman?

Brett's top floor apartment offered an uninterrupted view of the city's riverside centre. How Portia had loved sitting on the veranda looking at the shadowy reflections of the skyline on the water! Now he was doing the same on his own and found it hard to censor his memories. The two women he loved and had lost would not stay among the dead. Like clinging shadows they accompanied him wherever he went. Their ever-presence comforted yet exhausted him. In the beginning he had joined them by losing all sense of self in an artificial nirvana of drug-induced obliteration. They'd met in a pain-free state of suspended animation, a sharing of death that Portia might have defined as make-believe art without consciousness. He'd been with them by not being anywhere. He'd found them by losing himself.

Since meeting Nanda all that had changed. Sitting on the terrace, watching yachts, small craft and ferries sail to the mouth of the river, Brett was joined by seductive ghosts of the past. He could hear Portia's happy laughter once more, Linda's loving calls, the lively amusement and chatter of his dead wife and daughter.

How fortunate and content they'd been! Looking back at his

life it seemed to Brett that he, most of all, had taken their happiness for granted, as if pleasure were a claim to which they were entitled. Only now did he realise that perhaps it had all been too easy for them. In a world of turmoil and terror they'd taken their harmony for granted. Did happiness always preclude a consciousness of itself? With the return of his consciousness Brett lived in the company of ghosts, suffering his survival by acknowledging the continued presence of their love, hearing voices in the wind assure him of undying devotion. Why had he not been more conscious of the fragility of his good fortune while his girls were still alive? He'd been busy extending his business assets, buying, selling, travelling abroad, opening new galleries, visiting museums. More than anything, being an art dealer had meant accumulating property and wealth. Over the years he'd become obscenely rich sponsoring new painters and mediating the sale of some of the world's classic masterpieces. Art held the promise of ever-increasing affluence, almost effortlessly providing the money for the charmed lifestyle he shared with Linda and Portia. There seemed no end to the profits of his trade. Among his best clients were multinational conglomerates, insurance companies and global banks that acquired the works of prestigious artists as a hedge against inflation. Only after the loss of his girls did Brett see that the silent partner of his lucrative dealings had been death.

A late morning breeze swallowed Brett's whisper. 'Forgive me!' he begged. 'Please forgive me!' The ghosts of Linda and Portia didn't answer, but he knew he'd been pardoned. Since the doomed transaction leading to last year's fatal air crash he hadn't been involved in the sale of another painting. He'd suppressed all memory of his involvement in a fraudulent scheme to smuggle a Raphael out of New York. It wasn't for that crime he asked forgiveness.

On his own, Brett found he had limitless time at his disposal with nothing to do, something he'd never known before. In the early stages of his lengthy burns treatment he'd considered the excruciating pain almost merciful. It had served as a constant, brutal reminder of what had happened, his punishment for

having been responsible for the death of his girls. Stupefied by drugs, he'd spent most of the time sleeping, yet even with the aid of powerful narcotics the agony of visitations of horror, voices of darkness and terrifying nightmares could not be suppressed. When at last the skin graft settled to an itching irritant and his broken limbs began to heal, his reawakened mind asserted a different kind of torment. The judgment of consciousness was harder to bear than the terror of distorted images or the bewilderment of heavy mist that had invaded him before. He had no other means of voicing his despair.

It seemed he would not be given a reprieve. The weight of his guilt had burned itself too deep inside his flesh. Brett suffered a knowledge he could not share with anyone. No longer able to communicate, he fell silent. Doctors and nurses praised the stoicism of their brave, uncomplaining patient. In truth, Brett was blown away by the memory of a voice, an image or a touch. He was fighting an avalanche of calls and visions, the temptation to let go. He was afraid to drown in echoes of the past. But neither did he dare surrender the lifeline that tied him to those he'd loved and lost.

When Brett returned to Australia immediately after his release from the hospital in Boston, he walked around the apartment like a zombie, exhausted and lost, able to carry out only the most basic tasks. In the beginning he pretended his wife and daughter were still alive. He'd set the table for three, making up conversations as if they were still with him. Over dinner he tried to persuade Portia, who'd been in her senior year at school, to take up Law at university instead of Science. Brett staged the animated make-believe exchanges, which Portia always won. In the past their father-daughter discussions had never been resolved by the persuasiveness of argument. Rather, their talks followed the ritual pro-forma of two lovers whose intimate knowledge of each other made the outcome a foregone conclusion. Ultimately they always agreed to wanting the same thing. Even in her absence Brett simply could not refuse Portia anything.

After months of pretending to share his bed with a wife

who was no longer alive, Brett started to realise that his wishful fantasies had locked him inside another prison. He had turned his home into a museum. One day, in a sudden outburst of despair, he rushed to the main bedroom. With feverish speed he emptied the walk-in wardrobe of Linda's clothes and stuffed them into large green plastic rubbish bags. Next, he stormed into the bathroom and swept away what was left of her cosmetics. Having deposited the bags at a rubbish tip on the outskirts of the city – as far away as possible - he returned to the apartment, greatly relieved.

But when he tried to clean out Portia's room in similar fashion, he found he couldn't bear to touch her clothes. At the sight of her underwear, handbags and shoes he felt like a thief and pervert. Tears of shame and disgust ran down his face as he left his daughter's room in horror. During the following days he tried again to remove Portia's ghostly remains. In vain. Opening an antique Italian jewellery box he'd given her as a birthday present two years ago, together with its precious contents, Brett reverently removed the diamond necklace and ring, kissing the necklace as if it were a holy relic. Overcome with memory of the occasion when Portia wore them both for the very first time, his hands began to shake.

It had been a sumptuous charity ball at the Waldorf Astoria hosted by the New York Museum of Modern Art. Brett had introduced his daughter to the most illustrious guests as if she were a priceless masterpiece of the Italian Renaissance. How grown-up, how elegant she'd looked! Despite her embarrassment over the old-fashioned formal way her father was treating her, she'd been relaxed and gracious, reversing roles in playful irony by indulging Brett's penchant for strict adherence to rules and conventions. He was quite aware of what she was doing. What a glittering night it was! At sixteen, Portia had become a stunningly beautiful woman, nothing less than a human work of art! Brett's pride had known no bounds. Of all the jewellery she had worn during her short life, the ring and necklace he now held were the only ones he could bear to touch. Gently, reverently, he returned them to the box.

It was clear he would have to leave the removal of Portia's possessions to somebody else. Brett would see to it that the packers stored her precious belongings like Sheldon Gallery's most valuable works of art. As curator of his daughter's estate he would make certain that the irreplaceable effects she'd left behind remained untouched, safely guarded. Under no circumstances would he allow her to disappear without a trace in the anonymous bones and ashes of a New England mass grave. For as long as he lived, Portia would stay alive forever, a part of him.

Brett knew his attempts to relate to the ghosts of his wife and daughter were doomed to failure. He was no Orpheus on a desperate journey to the land of the dead. His forlorn hope of bringing Eurydice home would come to an end sooner or later. Nonetheless, Brett clung all the more to a discovery he'd made in the depth of his despair. He was convinced that his love of Linda and Portia had been purified by death. Looking across the Brisbane river, he thought of a series of lectures he'd given at the Uffizi when he'd spent a glorious autumn with Portia and Linda in Florence. He'd discussed paintings of Orpheus recently rediscovered in the catacombs. Now it seemed his wife and daughter had turned into mythological beings, as if they themselves had become works of art. Realising that he was dealing with yet another ghostly remembrance by imposing its deadly logic on his thoughts and feelings, Brett kept asking himself: could death really be the apotheosis of love? Disturbed and frightened, the image of Gustave Moreau's 1865 canvas *A Thracian Maid with the Head of Orpheus* came to his mind. The painting raised its own disturbing questions: was the price of keeping the dead alive losing one's head? Had he already lost his mind, calling so unconditionally for the recovery and preservation of his love? Was love something that could be redeemed?

Brett found that in a strange way, even the girl from the CityCat entered into his relationship with the dead. For all her crude behaviour, he'd sensed immediately that Nanda had not come into his life as a coincidental intruder. If so far as she'd displayed a lack of interest bordering on callousness, Brett was

convinced she'd be more sympathetic once he'd told her about Linda and Portia. He wondered why she wouldn't allow him to talk about his girls. But if Nanda was anything like Portia, she'd be stoutly defending the precedence of her own life over somebody else's. Why should she be interested in an old man's story? Brett had recognised in the girl a competitive temperament: her strong reticence and irascible character, ready to fly off the handle at any time, a deep-rooted suspicion, the guarded way she responded to his pleadings. She'd made it abundantly clear that she didn't trust him, or indeed any man. Yet Brett knew she would be part of his story whether she liked it or not. He needed her as protection from the dead, as a defence against those who he felt he had betrayed, as an angelic attendant appeasing the ghosts calling out for him from beyond the barriers of pain, the living dead he could not let go and who would not let him be.

If he wanted Nanda to become his friend, he'd have to be patient. But perseverance and tolerance were qualities that did not come naturally to him.

He had nowhere to go. His business could do well without him. Was he supposed to spend the time of his so-called recovery watching his skin grafts spread? What the medical staff referred to as his healing and rehabilitation period proved to be the time when he experienced most painfully the real consequences of his survival. Having outlived his girls was hardly a cause for gratitude. It made Brett wonder about the purpose of his existence. Why had he been spared the fate of those he loved? Was he not meant to be part of them?

Except for the early morning ferry rides, nothing much seemed to be happening in his life any more. Days converged in monotonous uniformity. Brett's only anticipation was seeing Nanda again. After his first contact with her, the short ride to New Farm Park had almost acquired the importance of an appointment or a wishful engagement. From the moment he woke up in the morning he wondered: would she be there?

He soon discovered she'd be onboard only on particular, unpredictable days. The reason for this remained unclear, but Brett remembered Nanda telling him her mother was

‘entertaining johns’. Had she been lying? He found it hard to accept that a beautiful girl like her could be cast out of her home so brutally and for such a sordid reason. It would be a horrendous breach of parental care even if she left of her own volition. The fact that she was carrying her clothes in a bag seemed to indicate she needed to be ready at short notice. A horrible thought occurred to Brett: did that mean Nanda’s presence on the ferry depended on the timing of her mother’s prostitution? And, more specifically, did his joy of seeing her again rest on the vice of a criminally negligent parent? He felt outraged.

Yet he soon calmed down again. There could be all kinds of other reasons why the girl was on the early morning ferry. Nanda’s staying away from home was only one of many riddles he needed to solve. The important thing was that they should see each other again.