DANIELLE WOOD

# ROSIE LITTLE IN THE MOTHER COUNTRY

This is a story that begins with the fact that my grandmother on the Little side was frightfully, frightfully English. Although she was prevailed upon, as a young bride, to immigrate to Australia, her Englishness proved quite impervious to the antipodean climate. When my father reached his late teens, Gran sent him ‘back’ to England to complete his education, being firmly of the opinion that while it was one thing to raise a son in a colony, it was quite another to allow yokels with rising inflections to teach him about Wordsworth. But despite Gran’s best efforts, my father’s Englishness was considerably more diluted than her own, and when the time came for him to send me off on my tour of duty to the Mother Country, it was for a holiday only. For the months between the end of school and the beginning of university, I was to stay with my godfather and his wife, a childless couple who lived in the countryside just out of London.

‘The countryside just out of London,’ I said to myself over and over in the excited weeks before I left. ‘The countryside just out of London,’ I told people behind the counters in shops, if they would listen. ‘The countryside just out of London,’ I told my friends, my vowels plumping up with each repetition.

The English countryside I knew well, for although I had never been out of Australia, my childhood had been filled with the kinds of books that had the word ‘hedgerow’ in the opening paragraph. I did not know specifically what a ‘hedgerow’ was, although I assumed it to be a cousin to the more prosaically named ‘hedge’. But my ignorance was about to be rectified. I was about to see hedgerows, and primroses and brambles and cowslips (whatever the hell they were) and to discover, ambling about between them, darling little rabbits and hedgehogs that would eat nuts and berries from my hand.

On the day before I left, Gran gave me the address of her childhood home.

‘It’s not all that far from where you’ll be staying. Go to see it if you get the chance. It’ll stir something in you,’ she said, pouring tea into her best china cups, the ones bearing the likenesses of the Prince of Wales and Lady Diana Spencer.

Soon I was sitting at altitude, wearing synthetic airline socks and carefully peeling the foil lids from cups of orange juice and tiny packages of butter, determined not to overlook one single aspect of my adventure.

‘The countryside just out of London,’ I told the flight attendant, as well as the Asian

gentleman sitting beside me, just in case he'd not heard me tell the flight attendant. When the cabin lights were dimmed, I pushed the button to recline my seat and began to review what I knew of the godfather into whose loving care I would be entrusted, in the countryside just out of London.

Details were sketchy. I knew that his name was Larry Trebilcock, and that he and my father had met within the hallowed halls of their respectably ancient university. I knew, too, that this sounded terribly Brideshead Revisited, but I assumed that my father and godfather had always been too interested in women to spend many summery riverside afternoons wearing cricket jumpers together. I knew that Trebilcock was pronounced 'tre-bill-coe', and that this was an English thing, like St John being pronounced 'sinjin' if it was a first or a middle name, but not if it came last. And that, I realised, was about all I actually knew.

I was met at Heathrow not by Larry, who was in an important business meeting in London, but by his wife Judy. She was a quiet and sandy-faced person who reminded me rather a lot of a flounder, and who had the childless woman's propensity to overfeed her cats. These gleaming and corpulent creatures were at the front door, mewing for second breakfast, when we pulled into the driveway of a vine-covered house, in the countryside …oh, you know.

Both the countryside and the house were as perfect as their counterparts in my seventeen-year-old imagination. On that day, the overcast sky seemed pressingly close, and the ground was covered with wet, satiny grass. I too felt all misty-moisty and soft-focused as I followed Judy through the small-windowed rooms of her home, around the winding paths of the garden and into the garage. In here was a skeletal Aston Martin, with various of its parts and panels piled up or leaning nearby. In a far corner, clear of where they might drip blood on any deep green duco, two headless pheasants were hanging by their feet from a clothesline.

'Lawrence shot those,' Judy said, her placid expression betraying neither pride nor disgust. 'He likes to go hunting on weekends.'

I should make it quite clear that I do not regard childlessness, per se, as a tragic state. In fact, I think that more people should probably give it a try. But tragic it was for Judy, who was unable to have children, yet would have been in her element with a tribe of quiet and sandy-faced kids to feed. She was the first woman I had ever met who was not a stay-at-home mum, but just a stay-at-home wife. I had no idea what this might entail, but I began to find out on that first evening, watching her as she moved around her kitchen like a slow dancer between stove-top and bench, her black cat and her ginger cat keeping perfectly in step as they purred around her slippered feet. She chopped and measured and mixed and simmered, and it was quite clear that neither our meal, nor the cats', was going to be an ordinary affair.

At the precise moment that Judy set down on the table the third of three beautifully garnished plates of sole in dill sauce, the front door opened. I smiled in readiness to greet my godfather, whom I'd last seen at my christening, back before I was able to focus my eyes particularly well. Now, however, I could see quite plainly that the man walking into the dining room was of average height, with straight fair hair, the majority of which was on the back of his head. In front, it receded from an owlish face set with thick glasses that shrank his eyes down to pinpricks. Although he was wearing a suit, I could, if pushed, imagine him in knee-length breeches and a hound's-tooth hunting cap, a magnificently feathered bird slung over his shoulder.

'Hello Larry!' I said, leaping up from the table.

'Rosemary,' he said, nodding in my direction in a way that seemed not to invite hugging.

That was okay, we didn't have to hug. I sat down again.

'Rosie, please! Nobody calls me Rosemary. Not even Mum when she's cross. It's so lovely to be here, and to meet you again. I can't get over how perfect everything is. It's just how I imagined. I love your Aston Martin, by the way. Have you been working on it long?'

He raised his eyebrows and looked at his wife, who looked at me imploringly.

'Oh,' I said, putting a hand to my mouth as it dawned on me that she wanted me to hush.

Larry removed his blazer and placed it over the back of his chair, adjusting it so that its shoulders were equidistant from the edges of the chair-back. I observed a bit of tummy collapse over the waist of his pants and quiver like a poached egg does when it first hits the toast. He removed one cufflink, then the other, and dropped them one each into the left and right side pockets of his blazer. He rolled up his shirtsleeves — three quick tucks each side — then loosened his tie, and sat down at the table. I thought, for a moment, since Judy was sitting with her head slightly bowed and her hands in her lap, that we might be about to have grace. But then Larry picked up his knife and fork and began to flake apart the fish on his plate.

And so we ate, and did not speak. Our speechlessness amplified all the small noises of a meal: the squeaks of silver on china, the setting down of a wineglass on a coaster, the muted chewing of soft fish-flesh. I became aware of a rhythm to Larry's mastication and started to keep count. He chewed twenty times per mouthful, rarely more or less, although sometimes he paused to purse his lips and extrude a small white fishbone and place it, at a regular interval from the last, on the scalloped rim of his china plate. Soon all that remained of his meal was the frame of the fish and this

tidy parade of curving bones. As his knife and fork clattered together on the plate, I breathed out in relief, certain that now conversation would begin in earnest.

‘What’s for dessert?’ he asked.

‘I hadn’t planned —’ Judy began.

‘Sorry?’

‘Your cholesterol? Remember, Dr Maxwell said …and we talked about your cutting back?’

‘Plums and ice-cream, please.’

‘I’m sorry, love, but we haven’t any plums.’

‘No plums?’

‘No, no plums.’

He sat for a moment, thinking, and pursing his lips in the same way as he had done to eject his fish bones.

‘Why, Judith, have we no plums?’

‘We finished all the ones I preserved.’

‘You didn’t think, perhaps, to get some more?’

‘The last time I was at Tescos they hadn’t any plums either.’

‘I am given to understand that you went to a major supermarket and were unable to obtain plums?’

‘I’m very sorry, love, but if they don’t have plums, well, they don’t have plums. There’s not much I can do about it.’

‘Then I suppose I shall have to have prunes.’

‘Rosie?’

I could already imagine the prune stones nestling in the scalloped edging of the dessert bowl.

‘Nothing for me. Thanks.’

Breakfast, I thought, would be the ideal opportunity for a second attempt at becoming warmly reacquainted with my godfather. Perhaps, on the previous evening, he’d been tired after a long day at work. Perhaps his meeting had gone very badly. Perhaps certain stone fruits were his only hope for expelling the substantial carrot that appeared to have been shoved up his arse.

‘Good morning, Larry,’ I said brightly when he arrived at the table and selected a piece of toast from the rack placed there only seconds earlier by Judy.

‘Rosemary.’

‘What excitement does your day hold?’

‘Excitement? I'm going to work.’

‘Well, if not exciting, will it be a productive day, perhaps?’

‘Here,’ he said, handing me a section of the newspaper Judy had set down beside his breakfast plate. ‘This should be to your taste.’

He had folded it open to the comics. I pointedly turned over to the opinion page and, for quite some time, tried to engage with the various debates that were being furthered in the paper’s small dense type.

‘What does supercilious mean?’ I asked absent-mindedly, my mouth full of toast and jam.

‘Why?’ he asked, through the grey tissue of the financial pages. ‘Who called you that?’

True, it was not quite the reception I’d expected. But I didn’t let it get me down; Judy was friendly enough, and I was sure Larry would come around eventually. In the meantime, London was just a short, speeding train ride away.

In the Underground I was Alice, tumbling through the blackened rabbit-holes of the city. I was a child in Willy Wonka’s chocolate factory, hurtling along bright-coloured tubes as they bent and weaved through space at map-neat angles. Wherever in the city I was, I was never far from a magic portal that could take me somewhere else. In Covent Garden, I watched a man dislocate both shoulders in order to pass his body through a stringless tennis racket. In Oxford Street, I bought a brand new pair of sixteen-hole, cherry-red Doc Martens and a hot chocolate. I leafed through, but could not afford, the wares of the antiquarian bookshops of Charing Cross Road. In Trafalgar Square I got pigeon shit in my hair.

But if, in the Mother Country, I had found myself in a kind of Wonderland, then chief among the strange creatures whose unpredictable manners I did not understand was my godfather himself.

‘Where are you going today?’ Larry asked me one morning, as I stood in his hallway putting on my coat.

‘I thought I might go and look at the house where Gran grew up. It’s not too far from here, apparently,’ I said.

‘Is it necessary, do you think,’ he began, leaning in so close behind me that I could smell his breath, ‘for the purpose of visiting your grandmother’s childhood home, to dress like a kindergarten whore?’

‘Sorry?’

My outfit, comprised of findings from a week’s worth of rabbit-hole journeys through London, involved the cherry-red Doc Martens, a pair of torn denim hotpants from the Camden Markets, some Union Jack tights from Soho and a frothy shirt with lace ruffles at the sleeves that I had unearthed at Portobello Road. Only my red duffle coat had come from home. Now I buttoned it up, right to the neck, blushing brightly enough to match it.

‘Don’t be any later than five o’clock,’ Larry said, tweaking a hank of my hair before he walked out the door.

Of course my mother had told me — as all mothers tell their girls at some stage — that the only reason boys pull girls’ hair is because they like them but don’t know how to say so. But I needed clarification. Was this, I wondered as I walked to the train station, a truism that applied equally well to middle-aged men as to schoolboys?

By this stage in my travels, I had learned a little about British public transport etiquette. I was getting pretty good at avoiding eye contact, ignoring beggars and sidestepping spruikers. But on the day I set off for my grandmother’s house, there was sitting opposite me an old woman who did not seem to know that it was rude, on trains, to look people right in the face.

She was a very small person and she wore a dress that was black with white polka-dots, but which had at the throat a large, floppy bow that was white with black dots. She sat not in the way that most of the other travellers did — right back in their comfortless seats, slouched and with their heads in their books/earphones/personal reveries — but on the very edge of her seat, her buckled hands resting together on the handle of an umbrella. Its canopy was also black with white polka-dots, although these

dots, I noticed, were of a marginally greater circumference than those on her dress. Her hair was bright white and her shoes were tiny black lace-ups with a not-inconsiderable heel. She was so marvellous that I wanted to stare at her, but I couldn't, since she was already staring at me. So I took in her image in flickers, my eyes gathering just a little more information each time my gaze moved from the port to the starboard windows and back again. I loved how her saggy cheeks were punctuated with glaring circles of reddish rouge, and how badly painted were her lips. I tried to read her life story from her wrinkles, but could not decide whether her face was set in an expression of concern, or amusement, or an equal mixture of the two.

A Word from Rosie Little on: Facial Lines

No doubt your mother, or some other responsible adult in your life, warned you about pulling faces when a change in wind direction was on the cards. Of course, the idea that you could end up with the tip of your tongue lodged permanently in a nostril just because the breeze swung to the east sounds as ridiculous as green vegetables putting hairs on your chest, or the marrow in your bones melting because you sat with your back too close to the fire. But on reflection (my own reflection, as it happens, in my very own bathroom mirror), I've decided that the saying about pulling faces is not an entirely silly one after all.

Get on a bus full of old people and you'll understand what I mean. It's easy to pick the woman who's spent her life indulging herself in moral indignation, tightening her lips against mothers who are too young, mothers who are too old, young men with dangerous-looking haircuts, and Winifred Martin going off with May Charleston's husband, and at their age, honestly. Yes, you'll be able to pick her in a trice, since she'll be the one with the cat's arse where her mouth ought to be.

I once met a monk called Father Basil and I can attest to the fact that a life of contemplation does magnificent things for your skin in old age. Sit around all day with a beatific smile on your face, pondering the beauty of nature and the essential goodness of humanity, and you really will end up with your face permanently set in an expression of deep serenity. It's too late for me, of course, to achieve such a thing. At just past thirty, I've already laid the groundwork for my old woman's face, and what with all the bemused and quizzical faces I've affected in my time, I'm bound to be a very puzzled-looking octogenarian. Oh, that wind is out there all right. It just takes a few years for it to change you.

'Enjoying your travels?' the polka-dot woman asked directly.

'Who me?' I feigned, but the glitter in her eye told me that she was not taken in. 'Am I really that obviously a tourist?'

'Do you see anyone else looking out the windows?'

‘Oh.’

‘But you appear to be having a good adventure. And adventure is good for the soul, don’t you find?’

‘Absolutely!’ I said, coming swiftly to the opinion that this woman was every bit as wonderful as her eccentric outfit. I was willing to bet she would know the answer to the hair-tweaking question.

‘This next town is very picturesque. I’m sure you’d love it.’

‘I'm sure I would too, but my stop is four on from here.’

‘I like your boots,’ she said, her smile a dare.

‘I like your whole ensemble,’ I rejoined, and she closed her eyes as she effected a slow curtsey with her head.

As the train slowed into the next station, I caught sight of the latticed windows of its village shops and a man with a pipe walking a cobbled street with a sheepish border collie at his side. Enchanted, I jumped up from my seat just in time to clip the train’s exit button and have the sliding doors open out onto a scene straight off an English biscuit tin. And as I stepped off the train, the polka-dot woman caught my eye, and winked.

In the village, I took tea and sent postcards and bought the kinds of sweets desired by girls on their way to a new term at boarding school. I wandered across an ancient bridge and down a grassy way to a riverbank, resting upon which was a very large white swan. There had been a swan in the slender illustrated storybook Gran had given to me one Christmas of my childhood: the story of a girl whose father went to sea and left her in the care of a terrible old woman who didn’t feed her enough, and who allowed her clothes to turn into rags that the girl herself was forced to mend, at night, by candlelight.

The swan came to the girl’s rescue, however, bringing her bread scraps in the basket he carried in his beak and, finally, allowing her to ride on his broad feathered back as he flew out over the sea to greet her father’s returning ship. I approached the living replica of my fictional swan, already imagining how soft its feathers would feel as I stroked the noble curve of its head. But when the swan saw me coming, it reared up to form a cave of white feathers that seemed higher than I was tall. I had never thought of a swan as behaving otherwise than tranquilly, but here was one flapping wildly and almost growling, whipping an angry beak about on the end of a long mobile neck. I turned and ran, but the swan chased me and lashed out to strike me on the bum.

‘Gosh, I saw that. Are you all right?’ called a tallish boy coming down the bank towards me from the place where a book was splayed out, face down on a park bench.

‘That must have looked quite funny,’ I said, embarrassed that my stupidity had had an audience.

‘Funny? No, swans can be vicious. Snap a kiddie’s arm with that beak.’

‘It’s going to be a good bruise,’ I said, rubbing the buttock that would indeed, over the next few days, bloom impressively in shades of purple and green.

‘You’re not from here,’ the boy said, looking quite pleased.

‘Clearly not.’

‘What are you, Aussie or Kiwi?’ he asked, beginning a conversation that swiftly lapped the globe, took in the title of the book he’d been reading, traversed the oeuvres of our favourite writers and circled back to land on the subject of our names.

‘Julian,’ he said, and the hand he offered felt warm and clean.

My nose was level with his sternum and, since his ribbed jumper smelled of the kind of washing powder only a mother would use, I felt quite safe.

‘Rosie,’ I said.

On the riverbank, we continued to talk. And then we adjourned to the darkened interior of a small pub that I did not confess to being eleven and a half months too young to enter. Nothing on tap behind the sturdy oaken bar was familiar, and none of the names on the cans in the fridge meant anything to me either (except XXXX, which I knew that no real Australians drank anyway).

‘I’ve got no idea,’ I said. ‘What would you be having if you weren’t driving?’

‘Snakebite and black,’ he said.

‘Which is?’

‘Cider, lager and blackcurrant juice.’

Remembering Rene Pogel, I did a quick cocktail-safety check, but could discern no particular threat in Kcalb dna Etibekans.

‘One of those then,’ I said. ‘Thank you.’

I sipped so slowly that my pint of snakebite and black lasted for all the time that it took for us to tell each other our whole lives. And just before I was going to be late getting back, Julian drove me home in his tinny little car. Outside Larry and Judy’s house, he settled a hand protectively on top of mine.

‘I have two little sisters, you know, and I would hate to think that either of them would ever get into a car with a strange man like you’ve just done. I want you to promise me that you won’t ever do it again.’

It was funny to hear this sweet boy refer to himself as a strange man, but his face was so serious that I resisted the temptation to giggle. Instead, I risked a quick kiss on his cheek, and dashed up the path to the front door, wondering how, exactly, I was going to describe to Larry and Judy my gran’s childhood home.

Over the next few weeks, I determined that my mother’s hair-pulling advice did not apply in this case. Larry most definitely did not like me. On some days he treated me in the same indifferent manner he treated Judy, and on other days he flustered himself up into a performance of patriarchal zeal, all curfews and rules and telling me to tidy my room. I did feel sorry for him that he had no children of his own to discipline (well, okay, not that sorry), but at seventeen I felt too old to be told which train to catch and what time to be home. And was it my imagination, or was his behaviour becoming increasingly erratic at roughly the same rate that I was getting to know Julian?

I always think of getting to know Julian as like being let loose in a confectioner’s workshop. He had the kind of caramel skin that it is unfair for English people of Caucasian origin to own, given the climate they live in, and his honey-coloured hair flopped down over his eyebrows into rum and raisin eyes. I spent hours nibbling at his lips, which were large and impossibly plush, pale-pink and soft, like pillows of Turkish delight. Remembering my classmate Geoffrey Smethurst’s dichotomy of penis dimensions, I assumed that Julian’s was on the long and thin side of things. But it wasn’t revolting. At all. When you first touched it, it was mushroom-coloured and pliable as marzipan. And then, quite rapidly, not like that at all. One afternoon in Julian’s bedroom, when I had been playing with this marvellously changeable sweetmeat for quite some time, it alarmed me by making a warm puddle in the palm of my hand. The contents of the puddle were kind of gelatinous, and kind of creamy, but not even a bit like toothpaste. I wondered if there were any other major surprises still to come.

There were.

In a bordello-like cinema that had beanbags and couches in the place of seating banks, with my legs and tongue twisted around Julian’s matching parts, I began to shiver. But

not the kind of shiver that puckers your skin into gooseflesh. In fact, not the kind of shiver I'd ever shivered before. It moved through my body, seeming to inject my bloodstream with some kind of magical cordial as it went. I was flooded with warmth, first in my pelvis, then in my stomach, and then somewhere dangerously close to my heart. I was sure that if I looked down at my wrists in the darkness, I would be able to see my veins picked out in pulsing blue light. What the hell was that? I wondered.

I thought that I could successfully conceal these newfound pleasures beneath winter clothes and a girlish manner. But now I suspect that those little blue lights, which began to pulse whenever I so much as thought of Julian, were visible to others in the small margin of flesh between my cuffs and the heels of my hands, and that they probably showed at the throat, too.

One morning during those days of getting to know Julian, I stood in the shower deciding that I had always accepted too readily the wisdom of Geoffrey Smethurst.

'I mean, you're cute, but you'll never be exactly sexy,' he'd told me once on the bus on the way home, as he compared me with our exquisite, buxom, part-Brazilian drama teacher.

Julian thought I was sexy. He'd told me so. Although I doubted that I would share this with Geoffrey. If we ended up at university together, I would just give him the odd superior smile.

The shower was of the pathetic, drizzly English kind, in which you don't exactly have to run around in order to get wet, but you do have to alternate your body parts under the water in order to stay mostly warm. I was doing this, and practising my superior smile, when I heard the bathroom door open. I knew that Judy would already be at the markets, buying the day's provisions. Larry, I thought, would have left to go shooting with his brother. But here was the shape of him, including the peak of his hunting cap, visible through the thin membrane of the shower curtain. I stood very still, feeling triply naked, and soon I was cold everywhere.

'Where are you going today?' he asked.

'Actually, I wasn't planning to go anywhere,' I said, the arms I wrapped around my chest making me feel no less exposed.

'You're not going out?'

I measured in my mind the metres between the end of the shower curtain and a big green towel hanging on its rack on the wall.

'No, no, just staying around here,' I said, trying to sound normal, and wondering why

this seemed as if it were an important thing to do.

For what seemed like a long time he stood there, although I couldn't hear anything except water trickling around my ears, not even the sound of him breathing.

Christmas wasn't so much white as crystalline. Stretched across the narrow window of my bedroom at Larry and Judy's house was a spider's web threaded with sparkling beads of ice, and through it I could see the lawn frozen into spikes. Downstairs, there was a single, lonely present under the potted Christmas tree on the sideboard. It was for me.

'Merry Christmas,' said Judy, as I unwrapped the gift of a pair of lamb's wool slippers. Guiltily. I was almost certain that she didn't know about the gift I'd already received, the one I'd found at the end of my bed when I'd woken: a three-pack of Marks & Spencer underpants (white, embroidered, dainty) that wasn't wrapped, but had a gift tag that read 'FROM SANTA' in Larry's uptight capital letters. He had been in my room when I was asleep. Ick. I bundled the knickers into a discreet compartment of my suitcase in the hope that out of sight would soon transpose into out of mind.

Lunch, held in the formal dining room and attended by Judy's parents and Larry's aged mother, involved a Royal Worcester dinner service, two pheasants with chestnut stuffing, and an entire vegetable patch roasted to perfection.

'You are so lucky, Lawrence,' said his mother from beneath her orange crepe-paper hat. 'Judy is the most superb cook.'

'Why do you think I married her?' he asked, carving into the voluminous breast of a bird.

Nobody laughed or smiled. Maybe it wasn't even meant to be a joke.

It was on Christmas night, at Julian's place, while his parents were safely turkey-and-red-wine replete in their part of the house and his younger sisters asleep, that I got the present I really wanted.

'Have you done this before?' Julian asked me after a couple of moist hours of petting, his naked and caramel-skinned body poised for entry.

'Technically, yes. Effectively, no. What about you?'

'Not even technically, I'm afraid,' he said, trying to coordinate himself to hang onto the base of the condom and find the right spot at the same time.

'Oh no,' I said, catching sight of the time on his wristwatch. 'It's already midnight.'

‘Mmmm?’

‘I’m supposed to be back by now.’

‘Oh, you want to go?’ he asked, disappointed but polite as ever, as he pulled away.

‘No, no,’ I said, taking matters into my own hands.

‘You should go.’

‘Shhh,’ I said, kissing his Turkish delight lips.

‘What will you tell Larry?’

‘I will tell him the truth.’

‘You will not.’

‘I will. I will tell him the honest-to-goodness, absolute truth.’

‘What?’

‘I will tell him,’ I said, ‘that I was out in the woods, picking flowers.’

Three hours beyond my curfew, light in the head and sticky between the legs, I stood on the footpath outside Larry and Judy’s. Avoiding the dead giveaway of the white gravel path, I crossed over the grass and went quietly through the garage — past the place where the Christmas pheasants had bled onto the floor — and around to the French doors that led into the living room. Slowly, slowly, slowly, I pushed down on the handle and eased the door open into the muffling thickness of the drawn curtains within. Quietly, I slipped through the gap in the curtains to find Larry, sitting in his pyjamas, dressing-gown and slippers, waiting up for me. The lights in the room were dimmed. Someone like Carly Simon sang a smoky song through the speakers of the stereo.

‘I can just imagine what you’ve been up to,’ Larry said.

As he came towards me, I backed away, and soon he was between me and the door I’d just come through. His owlish face, normally quite waxy and pallid, was flushed as if he’d drunk too much port.

‘While you are here in my house, I am responsible for you, and I cannot have you out behaving like a wanton little slut,’ he said, with a disturbing amount of relish.

‘I am not having this conversation with you,’ I replied, trying to keep my voice steady even though I was shaking and could feel my pulse everywhere, even in the tips of my ears.

‘I am in loco parentis here, and I have no intention of sending you home to your father pregnant,’ he hissed.

‘Well you are completely loco if you think that I’m going to let you talk to me like this. My father doesn’t talk to me like this.’

‘What you need, you smart-mouthed little tart, is a good —’ He lunged at me. ‘— spanking.’

But I was too quick for him. I was up the stairs and behind the locked door of my room before he could catch me.

I was safe. But trapped, since even if I’d been prepared to find a way down from the upper-storey window, its double-glazed security panels opened out only a few inches. I could hear, out in the hallway, the sound of Larry placing a call on his rotary dial telephone. He was dialling an awful lot of numbers, and I realised that because of the time difference, it was not an even slightly unreasonable hour at which to ring my parents. He would catch them on the back deck, eating sandwiches full of leftover ham, while they listened on the radio to the Boxing Day test.

‘Nymphomania,’ I heard Larry tell my mother (another word I would not have been familiar with if it had not been for Geoffrey Smethurst), and ‘inappropriate behaviour’, along with ‘might need to get some professional help’. None of which bothered me half as much as when I heard him say ‘and the odd bit of cash has gone missing out of Judith’s purse, too’.

And so it was that my adventure in the Mother Country was cut short. Although special dispensation was granted for me to have a stilted and supervised lunch with Julian before I was plunged, lily-white and lovesick, into the sudden, roasting, redbrick heat of a suburban Australian January. Mum and Dad took me to a counsellor who pronounced me quite normal, but it took a while, nonetheless, for the trace of suspicion to disappear from my parents’ faces when they looked at me with loving concern.

‘What exactly happened?’ my mother asked repeatedly during the weeks I spent indoors with the curtains drawn, oscillating between wilting and pining.

Everything, I wanted to say. But then, not really anything at all. There were no fingerprints. There was no evidence. Even the underpants looked innocent with their

forget-me-not trim.

‘He does care about you, darling, he’s your godfather,’ she said.

‘Not anymore he’s not,’ was all I would say.

What had my parents seen in him, I wondered? What had been the basis of their friendship? I took down the baby-pink album from a high shelf in my parents’ den and found the images I was looking for on the third or fourth page of my life. There was a picture of me, my face a small, indistinct disc somewhere near the top of a smocked layette. There was a picture of my christening cake, shaped and intricately iced in the image of a baby’s pram. There were pictures of my parents, sometimes separately, but mostly standing together in matching purple outfits. And there was Larry, holding me out at arm’s length as he made his solemn C of E vow to keep me on the straight and narrow. I wanted to snatch my infant self away from him. How would I ever forgive my parents for not only inviting the bad fairy to my christening, but delivering me straight into his hands?

In fact it was only very recently that I did forgive them. Properly. And for that, we must thank my mother’s conversion to the scrapbooking craze. Pinking shears and cropping tools blazing, she took to my baby pictures, and then gave me the revamped collection for my birthday. Perhaps it was the new layout that made me see the photos of my christening differently. Or maybe it was simply the passing of time. Either way, by now the photos stirred up nothing more than curiosity. Which of the crimes my parents had committed on the day of my christening, I wondered, should be considered the more unforgivable? Appointing Larry Trebilcock as my godfather, or dressing the way they did for the occasion? It was even possible, I realised, that each of these lapses of judgment could be made explicable in the light of the other. For if you could choose to attend your baby daughter’s christening in a flared purple suit and a psychedelic black and magenta tie — with your facial hair trimmed, I might add, into the beard-but-no-moustache combination known as the Amish or Abe Lincoln style — then surely you could make dubious choices about friendships. And if you could imagine that you looked fetching in a purple crepe dress with a white ruffle around the edge of the bodice, it might also be possible for you to imagine that Larry Trebilcock was a good sort of a chap to be made responsible for a girl-child’s spiritual guidance. Amish beards once were the height of fashion. Ergo, Larry might once have seemed a good candidate to be godfather to one’s only daughter. Fashions change, after all.