

AFTER STORY

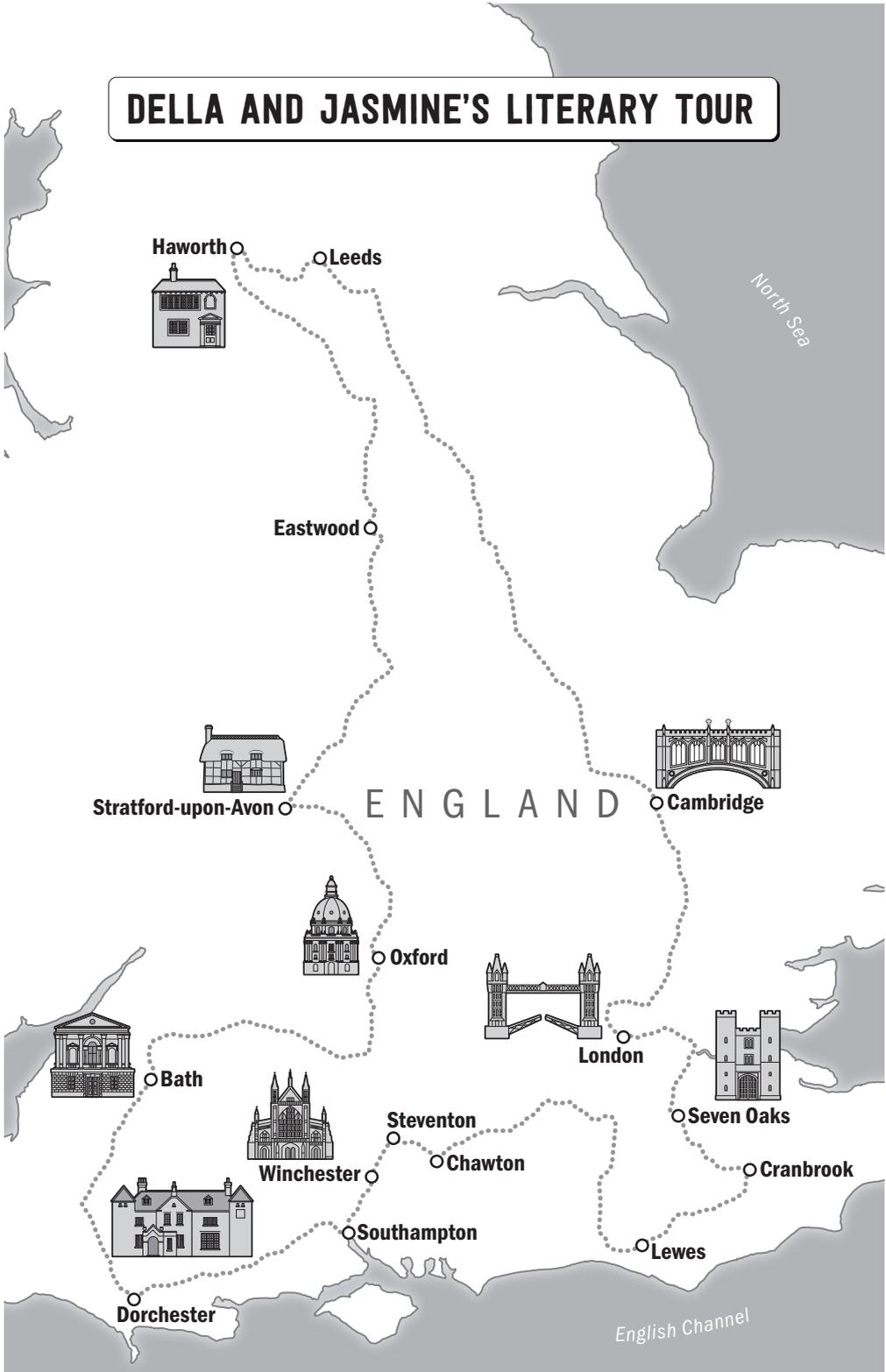
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UQP

*But what after all is one night? A short space of time,
especially when darkness dims so soon, and so soon a bird sings ...*

—Virginia Woolf

DELLA AND JASMINE'S LITERARY TOUR



ALL I CAN REMEMBER, and this is what I told the police over and over again, is that there was a party at the house and I'd been drinking.

I went to bed at midnight, one o'clock? The girls were in the bedroom with me. That's how it was back then, all of us in one bed – Brittany was seven, Leigh-Anne, five, and Jazzie only three. I slept right through to morning.

I was never much good at knowing what time it was or describing in measurements how far something was from something else. What I do know, is that when I did finally wake up sunlight was streaming through the holes in the sheet that covered the window, making rays of light in the floating dust. You'd have thought something so pretty was a good sign but luck was never much on my side.

I laid there for a while watching dust fairies dancing in the air. I felt groggy, like the alcohol I'd drunk the night before had affected me much more than it should've. I wasn't surprised that the girls were already up. They always did their own thing and there were plenty of people around to keep an eye on them. It's hard to imagine that now but back then you just never worried.

When I walked out of the bedroom, Jazzie was in front of the television playing with her cousin, plump little Kylie. My head was thick as stew so I made a cup of tea and took it out to the porch, more

than ready for my first smoke of the day. We had some plastic chairs there so you could sit and watch the street, right down to the end of where the town turned back to bush. From here I could see who was coming and going, see who was visiting who. It was the type of place where the neighbours would stop as they walked by to have a quick chat over the low rusty mesh fence.

The houses only ran down one side of the road; on the other side was bushland hiding a nearby creek. We called the part of town we lived in 'Frog Hollow' because it flooded first, although it was never called that on any map. The kids in our street didn't have much but never seemed bored because they made their own fun.

I could see Leigh-Anne riding a small pink bicycle that belonged to next door's girl – up and down their driveway she was peddling, full of purpose. One side of the bike had streamers on the handlebars; on the other they'd all been ripped out. It's funny, the things you remember and the things you forget.

As I rested my head, tired and heavy from the night before, I scanned the street. 'You seen Brittany?' I yelled out to Leigh-Anne, so she'd know I was there, watching. She shook her head and kept concentrating on working the pink pedals with her little feet.

I wasn't concerned at first. Brittany's father, Jimmy, was living two doors down and she could just as easily have been there, or in any of the houses along our street. So, I can't tell you why, but as I sat in the slow-warming autumn morning I started to feel uneasy, like there was a fishing line in my stomach looking for something to hook.

I walked over to Jimmy's house and found him nursing his own savage hangover. Brittany wasn't there, so I went to Auntie Elaine's house, the last in our street. She rang my sister, Kiki, who lived two blocks over, close to a row of small family-run shops on the main road. By the time Kiki arrived, I was going from house to house knocking on doors. That deep, crawling feeling kept growing, spreading out like dark honey spilt over a tablecloth.

Together, Kiki and I tried every friend of Brittany's we could think of. No-one had seen her; no-one knew where she was. We searched down at the creek and in the surrounding bush, our voices echoing in the silence. And all the while, that darkness inside me kept growing.

By late afternoon, Kiki took me to the police station and we reported Brittany missing. Even then, I was hoping – against the howling blood in my veins – she'd walk through the door, oblivious to all the panic she'd caused.

But that's not what happened.

And life was never the same again.

PACKING

DELLA

I SHOULD'VE KNOWN that Kiki couldn't be happy for me when I told her I was going on a trip overseas. That woman has resented everything ever since we were kids. It's water off a duck's back to me now; that hard turn in her mouth, the lift of her eyebrow when she's none too impressed.

'I'm not looking after your pets,' she said.

'That's okay, I've made other arrangements,' I told her, even though we both knew I hadn't.

She couldn't dampen my mood this time. It's not every day you get to go on a holiday. Fact is, I've never been outside Australia before. I've been to Sydney and Brisbane on the train but mostly I've stayed here, in the town where I was born, where my parents and grandparents all lived, too. I'm just not one of those people who's always dreamed of going places. I'd rather stay at home with my memories and what I know. Pat at the salon goes somewhere every year, adding postcards to the wall of her shop when she returns. But I've never seen the need. I wouldn't know how to do all the organising, wouldn't know where to start.

To be honest, when Jazzie – or Jasmine as I'm supposed to call her now – rang and said she wanted to take me on a holiday to England, I said I'd think about it but I was really leaning towards 'no'.

It was Kiki who decided it for me when she said, ‘Do you really think it’s a good idea?’ She used that same tone she always uses when she’s criticising me. She’s been using it on me since we were small and uses it mostly now when she has advice about my girls – and she always, always has an opinion about them.

Right then, when I heard her tone, I made up my mind to go. ‘Jasmine picked it. It’s a tour about books and writers. She thought it would be interesting.’

‘What do you know about books and writers?’ Kiki’s always been one of those people who sees the world as half empty rather than half full, so when she asks a question I don’t think she means it to sound as rude as it sometimes comes out.

‘Jasmine says it doesn’t matter. There’ll be a guide to explain everything and it’ll be all things I’ve never seen anyway. She just wants to spend some time with me.’

‘Can’t she do that by just coming back here?’

‘Well, she wants to do it this way, away from everything.’

‘Jimmy’s passing’s been very hard on the girls. Six months is nothing. It’s all still very raw,’ Kiki told me in her know-it-all voice, as if I didn’t understand.

And here’s what I wanted to say to her: I loved him too. Loved him right through to the soft parts of me deep in my bones. Even though Jimmy and I never got back together after what happened with Brittany, we’d been close to it. But in the gloomy fog that followed, so many things were broken. And Jimmy and me, we were just one more thing. So, I’d lost him all those years ago but in my dreams he was always there and it was like I’d lived another life with him, even though it was one I’d only imagined. When you harbour a longing for all those years, well, it becomes a very big part of you. So losing him for real, losing the very being of him, was just as hard. There’d never be anything more between us.

These past six months I’ve asked my own questions of him.

His dying didn't stop my need to ask him things, it just stopped the chance of an answer. There's no consolation, no solace in his passing, but I know what he suffered in life so I feel a certainty in my guts that he's found his own peace now.

In the days after Brittany went missing I couldn't sleep. The world went on around me but time didn't count for anything. I could sit for hours, my eyes fixed as a raindrop on the rusty guttering would grow fat like a pregnant belly, weighed down by its own being, and then drop with a splat on the floor below, mixing with a pool of water and becoming part of something bigger, but lost to itself. Then I would stare as another made its way through the same cycle. How long did I keep doing that? Well, it could have been all the days I've ever known.

One night, during that half-life time, I went outside for a smoke. It was in the early hours where you can feel the promise of dawn. It was biting cold and I had a jumper on over my nightdress, but my feet were bare and I was suffering the numbing pain of the cold concrete porch. I remember savouring the hard hurt of it.

I shivered, drawing in warm, calming gulps of nicotine, and looked to the end of the street into the darkened bushland. Creeping down the road in a slow march was a thick mist. The whole world was still except for this swirling cloud and I can't tell you why but I felt a deep calm. I felt that whatever or whoever was caught in the mist, they were telling me that Brittany had found peace.

It was only after that night that I started to hear her voice, or would catch a glimpse of her in the corner of my eye. Aunty Elaine believed in spirits and I don't doubt her. Not one bit. Sometimes I can feel Brittany with me. Sometimes I hear her call out 'Mum'.

And that's what I wanted to say to Kiki but of course I didn't. She could twitch her mouth all she liked but I was going on that trip. I just needed to find someone to look after my pets.

JASMINE

THE ULYSSES BUTTERFLY lives for only eight months. It's not surprising that once they emerge from their chrysalis after two weeks of metamorphosis – from being something so sluggish, so earthbound, to something delicate and light – their first blind instinct is to fly, to escape, their fragile wings flapping for freedom.

Once, while Mum was going through one of her 'unwell' periods, Aunt Kiki took me and Leigh-Anne up to Cairns. What I remember most was the butterfly farm, a large netted cage filled with thousands of fluttering specs glinting ultramarine in the sky. It seemed so heart-rending that their natural migration had been stopped, even though they probably weren't even aware they were trapped, couldn't understand why they had the driving urge to go somewhere they'd never get to.

I grew up in a small country town – population 1200. There were just eight houses in my street. A highway bypass was eventually built and after that, businesses slowly closed, houses were abandoned, dairy farms sold, the tannery shut. In this stagnating place, I felt like a caterpillar – sluggish, squishy and earthbound. Everyone felt they knew everything about me, and what they knew most was that I was 'Brittany's little sister', defined by the ghost of someone I barely knew.

My years in the city, studying and post-university, should have been the time to spread my wings, become light and fly. But I'm starting to realise you can never escape what you hope to leave behind.

People often assume I chose to go to law school because of what happened to my sister. It's a good story but like all good stories it's not the whole truth. I've always liked to know what motivates people, why they do the things they do. That's what reading books is all about – writers attempt to reveal truths about human behaviour, about our inner workings, our flaws. I'd always thought if I better understood the *why* of things, maybe I could help change them for the better.

As a child, I'd slip unnoticed into a room, enter silently, taking a smug pride in my secret power to become invisible. I'd listen, hidden, to other people's conversations, inquisitive to know what they'd let slip. I thought what I'd hear would make the world easier to understand, that I'd be able to solve mysteries by discovering the things I wasn't supposed to know. My mother would yell at me if she'd find me lurking. 'What's wrong with you?' she'd shout, as though curiosity was unnatural.

The only person who seemed to understand me was Auntie Elaine. She was my grandmother's cousin but like everyone else in town I called her 'Auntie'. I asked her once if she was the oldest person in the world, because I thought you'd have to live a long time to learn everything she seemed to know. 'No, Bub, bless you.' She giggled with delight and winked, 'I'm just the wisest.' She was always making predictions – who would leave, who was about to arrive, when the rain was coming, when the season was about to turn.

'But how do you know?' I'd ask her.

'Just a gut feeling,' she'd say, tapping her large belly. And then she'd laugh her deepest laugh, the one that made the lines around her eyes furrow deep.

People can be sceptical about talk of spirits, but when Auntie Elaine made a prediction it wouldn't be long before the weather

would change, a cousin would come visiting, there'd be a funeral, someone's stomach would start to swell.

I'd go to her place after school to do my homework. I could never study at home, not at Mum's, Dad's or Aunt Kiki's – too many people, too many distractions. Without Aunt Elaine, I'd most likely have ended up like Leigh-Anne, dropping out of school and pretending that getting pregnant was what I really wanted to do.

I'd sit on Aunt Elaine's back porch in the oversized chair with the big cushions. Curled up there, I'd read. She was the only person on our street who had any books in their house. She'd come home on pension day with an already well-thumbed novel from the second-hand store. 'Look what I've found. I've been wanting this one for ages,' she'd say. It wasn't until years later that I realised she never read any of those books but I'd devoured every word on every page. *The Secret Seven*, *Anne of Green Gables*, Nancy Drew, *Little Women*, then Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, Thomas Hardy and the Brontë sisters. I could mark my journey through childhood with these stories, each one offering a world different from the one I was in, with mostly happy endings.

On Aunt Elaine's back porch, I could hide from the world – but I could also watch. Her house was slightly elevated, so I could see back down the street into everyone's backyard and to the pastures behind them. I could see the back of Dad's house and then two doors over was Mum's.

My parents living apart but so close might seem like a strange arrangement to anyone who didn't live in the Frog Hollow part of our town. Here, especially among the poor families like ours who never went anywhere, it was all one big interconnected web of kinship, with every degree of separation leading back to where it started with just two or three steps.

Aunt Elaine would say that if she told someone something on the phone and then walked down the street, by the time she passed

the six houses in-between hers and ours, my mother would already know the story even though what she'd say was mixed up with myth and the bare snippets of what people thought they knew. And these were the suffocating facts: we were 'Brittany's sisters.' Leigh-Anne was the 'loud one', me 'the quiet one' – like labels pinned to butterfly specimens, encased under glass.

Leigh-Anne is opinionated and vocal like Aunt Kiki. And like her, Leigh-Anne has striking blue eyes that flash, coffee-coloured skin and untameable curly black hair. When she arrives somewhere, anywhere, there's a noticeable change in the atmosphere, like a fire has begun to burn. Even without a word, she's loud of dress, of presence; when speaking, she's devoid of any subtlety. Chalk and cheese, my mother liked to say about the two of us.

'Huge mistake. Huge!' Leigh-Anne had thundered down the phone when I told her about our trip. 'Her behaviour at Dad's funeral was unforgivable. I'm so done with her. You're asking for a world of trouble.'

Leigh-Anne had said many times before in the heat of an argument that she was 'done' with Mum but always Aunt Kiki and Aunty Elaine had managed to bring her around. This was their longest rupture and it felt much deeper. I was sure if Aunty Elaine was still here, these bridges would already be mended.

'She's all we've got left,' I'd said, meekly.

'Not me. I've got my kids, remember? And we've always got Kiki. You know, Jazz, you can talk about all that stuff you read at your fancy university but I'm not going to say it's okay when it's not. I'm not making any more excuses for her. She's never going to change, you know. Even with all that study you've done, you're still not smart about people.'

The loud one; the quiet one.

You'd think that what happened to Brittany would engender nothing but sympathy for Mum and Dad, but as the years went by people thought it should become a thing of the past – 'you have to move on', 'time will heal', 'put it behind you'. The truth for my parents was that it never got easier, never stopped being a raw wound. Then the time came when people just didn't know what to say in the face of such entrenched, lingering grief. Mum and Dad made them feel awkward. They would look at Mum like she had a terminal illness, surprised she'd survived so long.

Dad, on the other hand, always had a gentle strength. He smelt of wood, stale alcohol and sweat, and while that might sound the antithesis of comforting, my visceral reaction to his smell was to feel soothed. Dad worked sporadically, first at the tannery until it closed, then at the local mechanic, fixing cars. He always preferred his own company, liked staying at home, drinking and watching television. I'd sit on the arm of his chair as he told me stories – about the time when he was a young boy and his old uncle warned him about the giant cod in the bend of the river. Swimming there one day he'd felt something brush up against his leg. He ran out of the water so fast, and never went back in there again. Or the time he went to a circus that was passing through town. He had no money, but the old blackfella running the carousel let him on at the end of the night for free. I'd heard these few tales over and over, but each time I laughed as if it was the very first time.

And Dad could sing, a voice rich and heartfelt. He would, in the right mood, craft a song of disillusion, of disappointment, with his own complex interpretation. I'd be there right beside him but he always seemed to be talking or singing to someone else, like I was never enough. Even as a child, I could tell he was already beaten. When he passed away, sitting in his chair watching his football team, I felt like he'd left me a lifetime ago.

Aunty Elaine would say, ‘They weren’t always like this, not before.’ I was only three when Brittany disappeared, so all I knew was the ‘after’. I often wonder whether more could have been done to help Mum and Dad, to keep them with us. It was this that led me to a career where I could help people work out their problems – identify what was wrong and what they needed, so everything could be different.

Then the Fiona McCoy case crossed my path.

Fiona was sixteen years old when she was accused and then convicted of murdering a man by stabbing him thirty-six times with a pair of scissors. That’s a lot of rage. The brutality of the attack attracted media attention. ‘Monster Child’, one of the newspapers called her, under a photo of her thick, hefty bulk and hunched-over frame, her face blurred.

Fresh out of university, new to Legal Aid, I had to assist in the preparation of her defence, pull together psychological assessments from experts, background information for the judge, particularly in anticipation of a guilty verdict and sentencing.

Law school teaches you about law, it doesn’t teach you about cases. It teaches you about the rules of evidence but it doesn’t teach you about what it’s like to be a victim of crime, to live with the impact of a brutal murder. It teaches you about the factors that can be used to mitigate responsibility for a crime or lessen a sentence, but doesn’t teach you how to understand a client who has been accused of the worst kind of violence, who has killed someone in a fit of anger.

When we first interviewed Fiona, she sat in shackles, hands restrained. Her hair was cropped short, her wild darting eyes switching from fierce to frightened as quick as a twitch. I’d been trained to evaluate and assess a case but I couldn’t disconnect from the emotion of it. I’d dream about Fiona covered in blood, breathing hard. I’d wake up tired, unsettled.

Even after she'd been sentenced, I worried I'd not done enough to put her case forward properly. Her circumstances were complex and the rules of evidence allowed some things in and kept other things out, so what did the court really know about her other than the facts of the terrible crime she committed? I'd felt out of my depth with too little experience to really do justice to her case. Even with a barrister briefed, I was never sure I was up for the task of preparing the evidence, of keeping a professional distance.

My first instinct was to ask Aunty Elaine about it. She'd understand. But then I'd get that deep pang of loss that comes long after the death of someone you love. In the next instant I'd feel a primal need to have my mother comfort me, despite the long-surgng resentment that would flow along with it. It seemed strange to still want her when she'd never really been there for me. Just like Dad, always absent.

I knew enough about loss to know that grief is a slow burn, an infinite void. Aunty Elaine passed away – a fatal heart attack – during my first year at University and I hadn't been able to fill the empty spaces left in my life by her loss. It had been disorienting, trying to navigate life without her in it.

After Dad's death, and on top of the case, I felt unsettled, unsteady. It was my friend Bex who came to the rescue. 'You need a holiday,' she pronounced. She'd been in my close group of friends from university and had studied communications. Her father and mother were both academics – Aboriginal professionals. I'd never met one of those before. Bex was comfortable with having money in a way that was alien to me. She had confidence and ambition and shared her positivity with everyone around her. After university, she got a job as a junior producer at the national broadcaster and was toiling away, grabbing every opportunity she could.

She'd decided that she would do a series of travel articles, visiting different sites in England, and from there build her profile as a

travel writer. Then perhaps try to get a spot on one of those travel shows. 'I think I'd be great at it,' she stated with enviable certainty. 'It would help give me a niche.'

I'll say this about Bex, if you looked at her from afar, you'd think she was a good-time girl who spent way too much time promoting herself on social media, but behind all of that she was a really hard worker and took very little for granted. She knew what barriers would stand in her way because she was an Aboriginal woman, so she worked four times as hard as anyone else around her.

I suggested the tour – I'd seen it on the internet one night and it was a dream for me. Bex liked the idea, too. 'That totally fits my plan,' she declared. 'They'll have a guide whose brains I can pick and you know all those books, you'll almost be like a research assistant.' She didn't say it unkindly, but to reassure me when she offered to pay half the price of my trip so I could afford to go.

Then, six weeks before we were due to head off, Bex rang to say she had bad news. Well, it was great news as well. She'd been asked to fill in for one of the newsreaders. 'If I don't take it, one of those other bitches will do it and who knows when I'll get the chance again.'

There was no point in asking about the travel writing and the travel show with the chance to now be on air. She needed to prepare and her first week was the same one as the tour. So, with the luxury of being able to throw money at the problem, she offered her ticket to someone else to go with me. I could have taken Annie or Margie, my other university friends. But something in my head, in Auntie Elaine's voice, said, 'Take your mother.'

It was more instinct than reason because she is the last person you would hold on to when you thought you were going to fall. I didn't have the same anger towards Mum's faults and failings that Leigh-Anne had. I could still distinguish her from the complications that surrounded her. I wanted to be closer to her but I didn't want to get caught up in the cycles of drama and routines of home.

Bex loved the idea when I said it out loud. And once she loved an idea, there was no backing away from it.

There was a part of me that was certain my mother would say no. She'd be pleased that I asked and then she'd decline. So, I was surprised when she said she'd spoken to Aunt Kiki and, whatever was said, she'd decided she wanted to go.

I took a deep breath, Leigh-Anne's words of warning still ringing in my ears.

DELLA

I CAN TELL you, I almost didn't make it. Jasmine sent some forms up for me to sign and send back. Kiki took me to the chemist to get a photo taken. We had to take several because I kept blinking at the flash. A passport – my first ever – arrived in the post. Those moments were all exciting, but packing just did my head in. Jasmine kept ringing and asking me about it and I'd just say, 'Yes, yes, it's coming along,' but I really didn't know where to start.

As the day to leave drew closer, I felt sick, it was all too much. I rang Jasmine and told her I couldn't go anywhere. I just wasn't well enough to travel. She pleaded and begged but I told her I just couldn't and there was nothing more to say on the subject.

Then Kiki turned up with a big suitcase. We sat down and made a list. I ticked things off as we put them into the case. She even drove me over to the next town where Leigh-Anne now lives and where they have a bigger supermarket. There we bought all the things I needed for my trip but didn't have, like lotions and shampoo in small bottles with plastic cases to put them in.

We packed everything in – clothes that didn't need ironing, travel-size toiletries, comfortable shoes for walking. I had to sit on the bag so she could close it, my bulky behind trying to squash everything down while Kiki, bigger than me, fumbled with the zip.

I don't remember the last time we laughed so hard together, both of us rolling on the floor.

And she agreed to mind my two cats and two dogs. So, there I was.

Last time I was in Sydney, Kiki and I stayed at a hotel in a tall building. I got dizzy going up, clinging to the handrail in the elevator. I had to go through the ordeal every time I wanted a smoke because Kiki wouldn't let me bend the rule that said you couldn't smoke in the room.

If you asked me, I'd have said I was afraid of heights but it turns out flying is different. It's cramped, I'll give you that, but I like how the food comes on little trays, all nicely laid out in little square containers or in little plastic wrappers, and I like how all the drinks come in tiny little bottles. I'm not used to being waited on, having someone fetch me what I want without it being any trouble at all. It's nice being where people judge you on what they see, not on things they think they know. I can see why Pat at the salon likes it so much. The hardest thing is not having a smoke for such a long time. I've been chewing that gum but it's really not the same.

I looked at Jazzie sitting next to me, my sweet, patient girl, her head always in a book. Her straight hair, light skin and big brown eyes are so like Jimmy it sometimes hurt to look at her. We used to call her Jazzie because we spelt her name Jazzmine, our special way we worked out on a piece of paper. But by the time she'd finished high school, she insisted we use her full name and even went to all the trouble to have the spelling legally changed to the way she preferred it, taking out all the zeds that made it special. That hurt me a little bit because I remember how much Jimmy and I loved the name but she was headstrong in her quiet, firm way. So, Jasmine she became.

Leigh-Anne, when she's not angry, is whip smart and always makes me laugh. I go red with shame sometimes when I see what she wears. I did tell her no-one will buy the milk when you get the cow for free. She tells me that's not the way the saying goes but it makes sense to me the way I say it.

It's hard not to compare, not to think about how Brittany would be if she were still here. Would she have gone to the city like Jasmine, or stayed close by like Leigh-Anne? Would she be sweet-tempered or always growling and rowing? Would she have gone to university or dropped out of school to have a baby like Leigh-Anne, and like I did?

I was only just sixteen when I had Brittany. Jimmy was the same age but ten months older than me. When I was pregnant, my stomach tight and bulging, I dreamt I was having a little girl. And I had one, all curly hair and smiles. I'd never known a moment when I was happier than when the nurse put her into my arms and I held her – of having someone to care for, someone who needed me, but also the promise of everything being different. They might have taken her off me because of my age and having no support from my parents but Jimmy's mum, Mum Nancy, and Auntie Elaine, both as fierce as feral cats, had taken me in and helped – and in time my other two came along.

At Jimmy's funeral, after all these years, his sisters, Lynn and Jenny, still gave me the icy-cold shoulder treatment. You'd think you wouldn't get blamed for old mistakes, not if you never meant any of it to happen, not while you're mourning someone you love. And I thought to myself, well, you don't know everything that happened. No, you don't. People think they know all about it even though they don't see all those secret moments that pass between two people, binding them over a lifetime.

I'm thankful that the girls and Kiki were with me at the funeral because, whatever people think of me, Kiki frightens them and

Leigh-Anne is starting to frighten them in exactly the same way. Leigh-Anne seemed protective of me at first but afterwards, at the wake, we had a humdinger. I can't even remember all the details now – how it started, or what it was about – but I do remember the last thing she said, with her hand on her hip, chin pushed out. 'Kiki was more of a mother to me than you ever were.' That's what she said. Bold as that, in that same 'I-told-you-so' tone that Kiki loves to use.

'You watch too many movies,' I said back to her because of all her dramatics.

I forgive her for being mad at me, for saying such hurtful things, for taking it all out on me. We all have to grieve in our own ways. I know that better than anyone, but right now she's frosty cold and giving me the silent treatment. It's especially cruel because it means I don't get to see my grandkids. It's football season now and I would usually go to all of Zane's weekend games, but this year Leigh-Anne hasn't invited me along to any. And the girls, little Teaghan and Tamara, will be six next month and she hasn't let me know about any parties. I know I rub Leigh-Anne the wrong way sometimes so I just have to wait for her to get over it in her own time. She always does, always has in the past.

Many secrets died with Jimmy that are now buried deep in the dark earth with him. But I think back most to that time when we were both teenagers, when he was an escape before we became trapped again by what happened with Brittany, sharing our secrets into the night and having that feeling that a heart can be whole.

I thought of those times on the plane as I played the country music through the headphones. They played a song that Jimmy used to sing to me, back in the days when we were truly happy, the singer's voice all smooth as syrup like Jimmy's was. And the singer's name was Jimmy, too. *Telephone to glory, oh what joy divine. I can hear the current moving on the line.*

I pretended I was asleep as I listened and imagined Jimmy and me together once more – his gentle, unassuming nature, his tender lust when it was just him and me, skin against skin, hard to tell where one of us ended and the other began – and I had my own little cry.

JASMINE

‘YOU’RE NOT GOING to get much of a holiday if your mother’s there,’ Aunt Kiki had warned me. I rang her after Mum said she’d changed her mind about coming. I would have lost the money for the flight and the tour but, worse, would have had to put up with a big self-satisfied ‘I told you so’ from Leigh-Anne.

When Mum got on the plane, you wouldn’t have known that she’d been paralysed with doubt. She’s not yet fifty, having had us all so young, but she took a child’s delight in the free travel pack with its cheap socks, eye-mask and miniature comb. She’s a beautiful woman by anyone’s standards but the type who never thought about how she looked as a way to define herself. Her face may be aged with the frown lines of worry and the effects of her drinking but she still has soft, warm features, high cheekbones. The hostesses were charmed by her unassuming way and quaint turn of phrase. They didn’t question her, jovial as she was, as she merrily asked for more vodka and lemonade, delighted by the tiny bottles.

In the final hours of our flight, I looked over at Mum. She’s always been an amiable drunk – not angry or spiteful, mostly chatty and giggling, and occasionally melancholy. It took me a long time to realise that her drinking was a problem. I’d heard Grandma

Nancy say once, as I pretended to be asleep on her couch, that my grandfather – Mum’s dad – was a violent alcoholic. In my child’s mind, I thought it was the violence that was the thing that made drinking bad, and my mother and father were never that way. Drinking just seemed a normal part of life. Into my teens I began to realise that when Mum was ‘unwell’, when we’d be sent over to Aunt Kiki’s, it was because she was on a serious drinking binge or recovering from the effects of one.

I asked Aunty Elaine once how you could tell if someone was an alcoholic. ‘Goodness, Bub, what a question!’ she exclaimed.

There were clinical answers to my question: if you stopped drinking and had withdrawal symptoms; or if you drank, did something destructive but kept drinking again. Aunty Elaine responded, ‘Some people have so much pain they know no other way to ease it.’ It was the kind of answer she’d give that wouldn’t seem like one until you really thought about it.

Now, looking at Mum’s face, with the light trail of a tear still visible, it suddenly hit me, the risk I was taking. I could hear Leigh-Anne’s brassy voice – *big mistake*. But when you love someone, your most basic instinct is to want them to love you back. It’s evolutionary.

Charles Darwin believed that who we are is determined by our biology, by our genes. It’s in our DNA. Fate is out of our hands. The philosopher John Locke said we are a blank slate – a *tabula rasa* – on which our destiny can be written. The debate about whether our lives are determined by nature or nurture once deeply divided scientists but now it’s accepted that both play a role in determining who we are and the new debates focus on where one stops and the other begins. We’re all somewhere on a sliding scale. While one seems predetermined (nature) and the other is man-made (nurture) most people haven’t got control over either, especially not while they’re children.

Fiona McCoy had been on remand in a juvenile detention centre when, during an art class conducted by a volunteer, John Andrews, she took a pair of scissors and in front of the other horrified girls, she repeatedly stabbed him. John was athletic in a sandy blond surfer way, brushed by the sun. He worked as a furniture maker, hand-crafting wood, but on Sundays he taught a class to troubled teenagers. In hindsight, the department authorities conceded, Fiona shouldn't have been placed there – it was supposed to be only for non-violent inmates – and no scissors in workshops in future either. But that didn't diminish Fiona's culpability and was no consolation for John Andrews' family.

John's widow had turned up every day during Fiona's trial. Petite, raven-haired, she entered the courtroom surrounded by friends. Although they were physically very different, there was something about her that reminded me of Mum – that same bewildered, fragile look, like life was happening around her.

No-one from Fiona's family came to the trial. Her legal team were her only representatives in the court. On the second day of the trial, Fiona asked to speak to me. I leaned over so she could whisper in my ear as she sat handcuffed in the dock.

'Do you think they'd let me have a pet? Maybe a kitten?'

'In prison?' I asked.

She nodded, her eyes wide and expectant, hopeful.

'No,' I said. 'No, they won't.'