

The Golden Hour

It was the last suggestion. *Bake your own bread.* Strange what you remember. The way he looks now reminds me of that time. There was a magazine article at the doctor's about fifty ways to save for a holiday. *You deserve it,* it told me. *Throw in extra seeds for a great pre-holiday boost!* But I didn't want a break, I needed to get away. There's a difference.

The bread making didn't last long. There was something depressing about those big blobs of dough, their slack-jawed shapes oozing onto the kitchen bench.

'Aren't you the real little homemaker,' Eileen said, over the fence. 'I could smell the baking through my window.'

She was eyeing my washing as she spoke, a tickle of amusement on one side of her face. Her own clothes were turning on the line beside her, flapping brilliant white in the first hint of a breeze. Don't look at yours, Helen, I thought. She wants you to look at that tangle of stringy washing on your clothes hoist. Don't do it.

It was Brisbane's hottest summer in recorded history. Everything would be dry in an hour.

‘It must be nice for Phillip,’ Eileen prompted. ‘Homemade bread. A little treat.’ And she pulled her lips back into that knowing smirk. The look that always made me wonder how much more she’d learned at her open window. I stood with my hand on the dividing fence, listening to the rattle of Eileen’s laundry trolley going back up the concrete path.

She’s dead now. A lot has changed.

Phillip’s got a doughy face. That’s what reminded me of the bread. I can’t imagine why I never noticed it so clearly, until today. It’s the puffy face of a man fond of cakes and fried food; a man who could knock over a hamburger for morning tea and still have room for lunch. But Phillip’s always been a modest eater. Partial to a scone, certainly – his mother baked them for her weekend visits.

‘Sultana today, Phillip,’ she’d sing out from the front door.

It was the only time he ever made tea.

‘Oh, Helen, there you are,’ his mother would exclaim, swivelling her doll’s head to where I stood. ‘Come and join us,’ she’d say, as if this were her house, her table. ‘You’re very quiet today, Helen.’

Phillip would say nothing, just look at his mother and smile. There were times when he would not look at me at all. I usually stayed in the bedroom, folding the children’s clothes or just staring into the backyard. A queasiness often ran through me as if I’d eaten too many scones instead of none at all.

A moderate, in many ways. That’s how Phillip might be described. Plain meals, no alcohol, the weekly scone,

maybe two, when his mother was alive. He took sandwiches to work.

‘He’s a good man, your Phillip,’ people assured me, as if they could see depth beyond the stencilled edges of the person counting the fete takings, or balancing the books for the scouts. A woman at the church once leaned across and whispered, ‘He’s got great faith, that fellow,’ pointing at Phillip, not realising he was my husband. We both watched as he brought my best roses to the altar and arranged them with exquisite care.

I’ve still got the same clothes hoist, as it happens. I think it’s the only one left in the street. A lot of the new people must have dryers these days, despite the Australian sun burning down just the same as it always did. There are even a couple of swimming pools along here now. The corner place has a cabana, whatever that is. Davina across the road told me.

‘Everything’s different now, Helen,’ she told me. ‘Absolutely everything.’

I’ll open up the house soon, hope for a cool evening breeze. It’s been one of those still, March days when you think the worst of summer is gone, then a great swoop of heat forces its way in. It’s on afternoons like these – I might be gardening, or taking in the washing, not thinking of much at all except the creakiness coming into my shoulders – that I hear Phillip’s words again. They slip into my mind the way a quiet person might enter a room. *If that shadow touches the side fence, I’ll know you’re guilty.*

Phillip was always looking for signs: a bird in a certain tree, rain on a feast day, the pattern of light across the house. For him, sin pressed itself into the landscape like a butter mould. When his words come back to me, I try to force them out. I hum show tunes. I used to sing hymns but that's gone. If I'm out the back, I make sure I don't look up at the dining-room window, don't sense a trace of my younger self there, rigid with fear, not knowing the reach of the sun, or what comes after its shadows.

I'm trying to recall, sitting here on the bed, how it came to this. Hopeful. I was certainly that, once. Patient. Loyal. Worried. I was all these things. Terrified. That, too. All these things but never at the same time. Each feeling was compressed, shaped by tiny degrees into a new form. Too slow to be noticed. Like pitch dropping.

I remember Marian telling me about an experiment at the university, years back, when she started doing mathematics. She was always such a clever girl, even when she was small. The department had set up a piece of tar – solid tar, hard enough to shatter – and waited for it to stir, to funnel itself into the narrow length of glass and drip into the beaker below. It had taken years for that pitch to form its first drop. And in the end, no one saw it fall. One morning, when they went in, there it was: a little lump of black pitch in the bottom of the jar.

'I'd love to see that,' I told Marian, back then.

'Oh, Mum, that's the point. You don't see it, it's so slow,' she said, not realising that it was the glossy

mound, finally broken away, that I wanted to look at. Marian promised to take me to the university sometime. There've been eight more drops since then. She works there now, investigating something to do with statistics. I'll ring her later, when this day is finally over. I'll ring her brother, too.

Joey. He prefers being called that. Always has. 'I'm just walking up the road to pick up Joey from the party,' I told Phillip one day. That's how it started, the worst of it. Phillip stared as if he'd just swallowed the hard lump of the name and was waiting for it to settle. He stood up. 'He's not called Joey,' he said. I could feel his breath on my forehead, on the top of my head. 'How dare you call him Joey.' He laboured every syllable. 'He is Joseph. Nothing less. Nothing else. Do you understand?'

After that, it was always dangerous when the children weren't there. When he brought out the candles, especially. Even now, I won't have one in the house. Sometimes, when I see a crowded table of them in a shop, I have to steady myself, wait for the tremor to pass.

One night, Phillip got out the big wooden box where we kept the Christmas decorations. He started setting out candles on the table. Church candles. There were no decorations; I never did find the old Christmas ones. Then he took out pictures of the saints, laid them in tight rows. There were statues: little fluorescent ones, some of lurid plastic, an old one made of ivory with dark recesses of grime in the sleeves. There was a large statue of Saint

Joseph, smiling fondly into the table, a piece of the tableau clearly broken away. Phillip set it at the top.

‘Kneel down, you blaspheming whore,’ he said to me.

Everything’s different now, Helen. I wonder if that’s true. Most mornings I hear the click, click of my neighbour’s shoes as she walks to the train. How she bears working all day in those stiletto heels is a mystery. She’s about Marian’s age. Same confident step. I watch her making her way along the footpath and she looks perfectly fine. If I’m trimming the roses at the front, early, she’ll nod or smile. I know her name. I’ve heard her husband calling out to her. ‘Cathy, do you want a coffee?’ I don’t call her by her name. There are protocols. She has not introduced herself. It’s that kind of neighbourhood now.

But I think about her sometimes. How can I know that everything in her life, behind the same biscuit-coloured brick, is normal? And how could I possibly judge? I have never done a day’s paid work in my life. I am a mother. A wife. I have a chipped tailbone that still gives me pain, a slight limp that nobody notices. I cannot wear high heels. All the old bruises are still there, hidden, unhealed. I have no religion at all.

Joey loves his job driving an ambulance, up on the coast. He likes surfing, and looking after people. He talks to me about hospital life, about the way patients are when they’re in pain, when they’re scared. I like hearing about all the medical conditions. Mostly, we speak on the phone.

He doesn't like coming back to the house. He has long ago stopped asking me to leave his father. In recent years, I've stopped thinking of it myself.

I'm ready now, to make the call. I feel sure of everything. Joey has talked about the golden hour, the sixty precious minutes, the crucial time to act. I remembered that. And it's passed very quickly. I've spent it walking around the house. Sitting at the table, which is still pocked, in places, with candle burns. Thinking of Joey and Marian stuttering out their evening prayers, tears running down their cheeks, Phillip breathing hard into their faces. He was greedy for more words, more piety. We were all guilty.

Standing in the hall, I recalled once hesitating in that air-locked space, feeling the ridges of the bronze and cream wallpaper, its thin pelt of flocked leaves comforting, somehow. A body can ricochet along a hall's length and stay standing, for a time.

Mostly, I've waited here, in the bedroom. The little clock my grandmother gave me chimes each fifteen-minute interval with a single fairy-bell note. I've been trying not to remember too much all at once. Through the window, I can see my new vegetable garden along the side fence. The freshly turned earth surprises me with its rich, opened-up colour.

Phillip is on the toilet.

'Helen! Come quickly!' They were his words. He was shouting for help, but no one else could hear him. He kept gasping for air, but then his breath became so faint,

so choked, that it was hardly more than a whisper. Like a prayer. I could see he was in agony. That's when I sat on the edge of the bed, where I could watch him.

Just once, he lifted his head and looked straight at me. I did not look away.

I waited. The clock sounded. Such a dainty little bell. I've always liked it. Soon, another chime. When the third one came it seemed to ring out in the room, louder than before. By then, there were no other sounds. That's when I stood up, pressed my skirt flat with my hands. I resisted the urge to look in the dressing-table mirror. This is the moment, Helen, I said to myself. The pitch dropping. And no one will see it.

Phillip's body seems to take up most of the cubicle. This house was one of the first in the area to have a bathroom ensuite. How pleased I was when I first saw it. In truth, it's a modest sort of affair – a rather silly powder-pink that, at the start, seemed cheerful and fresh.

There's a phone on Phillip's side of the bed. The receiver feels cool in my hand. I see that Phillip's skin colour has changed, surprisingly quickly. So white. Joey mentioned that happens. *Pallor mortis*, he called it. Pallor. Phillip's mother used to use that word. 'Are the children getting enough to eat, Helen?' she'd say. 'Their pallor doesn't seem right.' And she'd look at me with that glittery certainty in her eyes. 'I'll bring over one of my casseroles. That's what I'll do.' And Phillip would say, 'Wonderful. That would be wonderful.'

His jaw has slackened. His eyes are open but I know he can't see me anymore. His underpants are tangled around his feet.

I dial. It's good to recognise the voice on the other end; she trained with Joey.

'This is Helen Coonan,' I tell her. 'It's my husband. I think it's his heart. I've just come in from the garden and found him. He's not moving. Not breathing. Come quickly.'