

The Fountain

May thought it ironic that the agent obscured the photograph of the view with the SOLD sticker. It would have been the house's main selling point. She had a similar view herself and wouldn't put a price on it.

May was watching the labour next door from her front verandah, a narrow and progressively sagging addition to her home made back in the eighties when Mick was still around. Half of it looked in bad need of a coat of paint. The other half was covered by creeping jasmine so you couldn't tell if it needed painting or not, which was as good a reason as any for her not to cut the bush back.

She took a sip of lemonade and watched as the agent stood back, hands on hips, admiring his handiwork. She could only guess at what might be going through his mind. A healthy dose of cynicism inherited from a long dead father made her suspect profit was probably as good a guess as any. He looked over to where May was sitting and waved. To her annoyance he started heading her way.

Her iron gate creaked, as it was prone to do. It was one of her watch dogs. The other was even louder if it needed to be.

'Shut it behind you or the dog'll get out.'

He waved again. 'Right-o.'

The man had deep sweat circles in the armpits of his collared shirt and his shoes were glazed with a fine layer of dust. May had never seen him before, though he walked with confident familiarity along her cracked concrete path to the stairs up to her verandah. He propped himself on the handrail. The dog beside her growled the sound of distant thunder. She laid a reassuring hand on its side.

'I'm Jim Carroll.' The man took a card from his breast pocket and proffered it to May. 'Nice spot you've got here.'

May squinted to study the card before placing it on the wicker table beside her.

He spun his hat round by its brim, scanning from ridge to ridge. 'It's quite the view you've got here. Every Brookfield home seems to have a different one.'

'It's kept my interest for the past thirty-two years, though I look at more tiles and bricks these days.' May, in the shade, wiped condensation from the base of her glass. The man wiped sweat from his brow.

'Sign of the times, I guess.'

Didn't she know it.

‘Looks like you’ve got a lot of land to look after.’ He swept an arm about him to encompass May’s front garden, which wasn’t so large. Most of her land stretched up and over the ridge to the back of her house.

May liked to think of her garden in the same way architects did of their designs nowadays: minimalist. To the front there was a struggling assortment of shrubs, unchecked by borders. She liked the way her front fence was held up by bougainvillea, making the entrance pretty as a picture in the winter. The back was even more minimal, being mainly lawn, or weed more like, featuring a rusty and lopsided Hills Hoist in the middle of it. Beyond that was a jungle of lantana.

‘I’ve cut my fair share of grass,’ she answered.

He nodded as if he knew the score. ‘You’ve got to learn to love doing that if you want to live out here.’

May thought his nails too perfect, too clean, for him to fully understand the depth of the love.

‘It sold quickly.’ She lifted her glass to indicate the house next door.

‘Yeah. Wish I had six more like it. I’ve got buyers who’d sell their children to get land out here, especially if it’s got a view like yours.’

‘Is that right? Sell their children? In my day, you just went to the bank and asked for a loan.’ May took another sip of her drink.

He chuckled, though May thought it unnecessary.

‘Who’s bought it?’ she asked.

‘A developer and his wife. They’ve got big plans for the place.’

May nodded. Didn’t everybody?

‘The property market’s so strong I could get you a pretty offer for your place by tonight.’

May tried to look impressed, for no reason other than to make it all the more satisfying when she pulled the rug out from under his hopes for another big sale. ‘Is that right?’

‘Uh-huh. How many acres are you on?’ He reached into his back pocket, pulled out a notepad and started jotting notes.

‘Ooh – let me see now – about thirty-five.’

This provoked an appreciative low whistle, the type young girls liked. ‘Wow – thirty-five. We might even be able to subdivide.’

The collective “we” that people put into conversations with her these days was the greater insult to her age, especially by those incapable of hearing the “I” in hers.

‘Really?’

‘Oh, yeah. You’d be surprised what you can do out here now.’

No she wouldn’t. She’d been watching the changes first-hand for years.

‘With that amount of land, we could get you a very good price. Set you up nicely pretty much anywhere you wanted.’ He flicked through his notepad. ‘Let me see, I could come round again next week – say Tuesday – and do a formal market valuation for you if you’d like. I think you’d be pleasantly surprised by what we could do for you. Sound tempting?’

‘I think temptation is something you should only get in a cake shop, Mr Carroll.’

May suspected the man’s penchant for chuckling was likely to make him unpopular in the office.

‘Call me Jim. Everyone else does.’

‘Well, Mr Carroll, I’m not everyone else. And no, I don’t need a market valuation next week or any other for that. Now if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got things to do.’

She slapped her dog’s side. ‘C’mon, Luke. Let’s see this nice man off.’ May and the dog stood, both a little stiffly.

May enjoyed the way Jim Carroll’s mouth fell open for a moment, before he collected up his lower jaw and sprang it into action again. ‘Right – well, thanks for your time anyway. You’ve got my card. If you ever change your mind give me a call. I figure we all need to downsize eventually.’

He walked back down the path and saluted May as he closed the gate behind him. May’s hand remained on her dog’s head. Luke barked, wheezy with age.

May had long ago come to realise that the whole downsizing concept was something the under-sixties were hell-bent on selling to the over-sixties. She wished people, especially her daughter, Denise, would call it by its real name: Early Inheritance.

May’s new neighbours seemed in no hurry to move in. A car occasionally came then went almost as quickly. She would look at the large, characterless brick facade of the house from her verandah and think the partially drawn curtains were a sad reminder that nobody had cared enough about the place when they’d left to either completely open or close them. It was as though the house’s contents were what had made it a home, the house itself being little more than an archive box for them. For May the blemishes to her walls and floors told as much about her past as the photos on her sideboards. The cigarette burns to the carpet around Mick’s old chair reminded her of one of the many reasons she was glad he’d left. The painted-over gouges to the laundry skirting board reminded her of a once bored pup who’d long since learned the adult dog good sense to know that time spent waiting had its own rewards.

Next door the summer grass grew long and went to seed and then, with still no rain by February, browned off. It reminded May of an old photograph album, looking across to the ridges and valleys from her verandah. Like the old pictures, the colours she saw today were in varying shades of sepia. And the dams, usually glossy black sequins dotted here and there, were gradually getting smaller and smaller. The dam next door, being large and deep, remained

however. It reminded her of a time of balance when the water that collected in tanks and dams was enough and there wasn't the need, like now, for water tankers to drip and slosh their way up steep drives just to keep swimming pools full.

One morning May woke to loud voices travelling on the still air through her bedroom window. Getting up, she looked out her curtains and saw work vans and tray-back vehicles parked next door. A truck was just lowering a large skip onto the ground in front of the house.

Over the weeks the skips came and went, piled high with nail-spiked timber, doors, bath tubs and broken sheets of plaster. Whole cupboards, rolls of old flooring and sinks were mounded like bad Turner art into those large industrial bins. The very innards of the house seemed to be getting ripped from it to the point where May wondered what could possibly be left of it except the outer walls. But more trucks arrived carrying the replacements. Bundles of timber, pallets of tiles and bricks and plasterboard were hoisted from the backs of those trucks. Then the work vans and utes arrived, with Plumber, Electrician or Master Painter printed down their sides. Workmen streamed in and out of the house's front entrance like ants following a trail of honey.

While all this was happening on the inside of the house just as much was going on on the outside. The brick facade disappeared beneath a layer of render and paint and the chipped and faded front door was replaced with grand double doors made of auburn-coloured timber. A double-peaked Bali hut was erected by the pool, jutting from the ground like two pert breasts. Trellises were installed around its open sides and large decorative ceramic pots were positioned at their base. The old wooden handrails and balustrades at the front and sides of the house were replaced with fashionable metal and glass. As the front was illuminated with new lighting, May thought of the new Queen's Plaza shopping emporium. All that was missing was an escalator to the front doors.

Great mounds of topsoil arrived and even larger mounds of mulch. Then came the plants – zillions of them. Two curving rows of pencil pines were planted either side of the drive, stretching all the way from the house down to the newly constructed gated entrance of Buckingham Palace proportions. Between the pines, lighting had been installed, making it resemble an aircraft landing strip at night, in a place where not even street lighting existed. Around the house itself lavish borders were created, and terraced beds filled with colourful shrubs cascaded down the sloping block. Expensive trees, already standing two and three metres tall, were dispersed as liberally as confetti all the way down to the road. In a matter of weeks the neglected beds had been transformed into a perfection befitting a Toowoomba flower festival entrant. This was no home; it was a resort.

Just when she thought the transformation must surely be complete, the fountain arrived. Perched on the back of a large truck, it looked like a tiered wedding cake, but instead of a bride and groom on top there was a large cherub holding a sizeable urn on its shoulder. There was

much shouting of 'Steady! Steady!' as it was winched from its timber crating and positioned like a grounded meteor beside the dam. Over the next days a concrete footing and platform was created in the centre of the dam. May looked on with dread as the parched cherub sat waiting to be positioned and given flow, she just knew, in the dam. And sure enough, at seven o'clock one morning, a crane arrived and the cherub was hoisted onto its new resting place in the middle of the dam surrounded by bulrushes and water weed. And as if this weren't bad enough, to May's further horror the concrete manifestation of someone's Versailles holiday snap was positioned so that its smug face looked directly at her verandah. Morning tea, it seemed, was to be taken under the surveillance of a clichéd conglomeration of unlikely wings, ascitic abdomen and a face improbably old for the size of its penis.

That night May couldn't sleep. The cascading water had the effect of making her evening diuretic work better than ever through the night.

'Damn that thing!' she complained after her third trip to the loo. She parted the curtains to her bedroom window and looked at the cherub, illuminated like a church spire. If she had been religious or charitable she might have been moved to like the thing, but as it was she thought its seemingly bottomless urn epitomised not heavenly plenty so much as extravagant waste.

May knew who would be on the phone before she even answered it.

'Hello, Denise.'

'How did you know it was me?'

'Let's just call it motherly intuition.'

If Denise knew that May could also predict what her daughter was about to say next, she'd probably freak out.

'I'm not going to be able to make it today, Mum – sorry. I'm caught up.'

'Not to worry. Maybe next week.'

The next week tended to stretch to four but May didn't mind. Because when her daughter did squeeze her in between lunches and pedicures it was only to remind her that the place was too big for her, and shamefully unkempt, and to question whether she'd given any more thought to that early inheritance.

'Have the people moved in next door?'

'No, not yet, only a cherub.'

'A cherub?'

'Mmm, you know – chubby little thing you find on fountains and the like.'

'So what's it on?'

'A fountain – in the dam.'

'Wow – bet that looks special.'

‘You think cranes on a city skyline look special.’

‘They do in their own way. They tell us that this city has come of age. You can’t say I didn’t warn you about not being able to hide out there forever.’

‘I didn’t know what I was doing was hiding.’ May could feel Denise’s shrug down the telephone line.

‘Well, maybe not hiding so much as thinking you’d dropped off the city’s map.’

May didn’t like the ‘Welcome to my world’ tone of her daughter. ‘You make it sound as though you’re pleased it’s happened.’

‘I just think it’s an important reminder that this notion of old, rural community you have out there is a dying one. That’s why I think you should bail out while the market’s strong and we’ll find you a nice protected community where you can live similar to what you’ve been used to.’

May knew this community would be one with an administrative conveyer belt leading from independent unit to nursing home. That way she could be rolled through with the minimum of fuss.

She hung up from her daughter feeling as she always did after a conversation with her – bloody determined to do the exact opposite to what she suggested.

Within days of the cherub’s arrival, May was finally to meet her new neighbours. She was brought onto her verandah by the sound of a truck, this one a removalist’s, working hard in low gear. She followed its journey up the steep drive, her fist encased in a tea towel and rotating around the inside of a cup.

The truck was head-and-tailed by two vehicles. Up front was a gold four-wheel drive that flashed past before May could get a good look at the driver. The other, in stark contrast to the first, was a low-to-the-ground and slow-moving black sporty number that she could see was barely able to contain the bulk of the man inside.

The convoy of vehicles stopped on the forecourt of the house. From the driver’s seat of the sports car a broad man levered himself up by the frame of the car’s door, where he stayed a moment, arms resting along the top edge, scanning from left to right. From the driver’s seat of the four-wheel drive, a woman stepped down with the assistance only of a long spine. She was thin and her movements were fast and feverish, though few seemed to serve much purpose – the opening of a car door, only to close it again, empty-handed, or taking several paces in one direction, turning and pacing back to where she’d started. Not once did she rest back on her heels, hands in pockets and take in the view.

All morning men carried large pieces and small from truck to house. Their backs were wet and their faces red from their efforts. Cherub rage aside, May decided to bake Anzac biscuits to take over. Old-fashioned she knew, and some would even say unreasonably patriotic these days,

but May's Anzacs had always won prizes at the Brookfield Show, so she figured if she was to do anything then it should be her best.

With Luke and flies leading the way, May carried a dented Arnott's tin across to her new neighbour. Luke's tail wagged when they got close to the removalist truck despite nobody being around, the prospect of attention enough to set him off. May went to the open front door and poked her head inside to look around a pile of cartons to a marble and glass grandness that still sparkled through the chaos. 'Hello. Anybody there?'

'Just a minute,' a female voice called back. 'There. I want it right there. You've put it too close to the window.' There was the sound of rapidly clicking heels across tiled floors. The thin woman marched with piston arms towards May. 'Yes? Can I help you?'

'Hello. I'm May Clarke – your neighbour.' May pointed out the door to the direction of her property.

'Oh, yes – the little house we pass coming up our drive. I'm Stella Jackson.' Stella thrust a hand with long, tanned fingers toward May. Bangles clattered down her arm toward her elbow. 'As you can see, things are a bit mad here.'

'Yes, moving does bring a madness all its own.'

Stella looked over her shoulder toward the workmen. 'It's still too close. To the left. It needs to go more to the left.' She turned back to May, eyes rolling heavenward. 'Sorry. It doesn't matter what I tell them. They still put things where it's easiest for them.'

May felt her cheeks flush for the workers. 'I wanted to give you these.' May pressed the tin towards Stella. 'A welcoming gift – something to have with your coffee. It's hard enough finding your bed to sleep in the day you move, let alone something to eat.'

Stella lifted the tin's lid. 'Oh. Biscuits. Thank you.' Closing it again, she looked around as though trying to locate a surface on which to place it where, by the tone of Stella's voice, May suspected it would still sit tomorrow. Stella looked the type to be more interested in low GI and fat-free foods than her butter rich Anzacs.

Luke, who'd looked on dolefully as May had put the freshly baked biscuits into the tin, nudged forward through the front door and tried to sniff the tin again now. Stella jerked it up out of his way. 'A dog. Is it yours?'

'Yes, this is Luke.' May patted his side. 'An old friend.'

'I can't have dogs in the house. My children have allergies. Would you mind taking him out?'

May stopped patting Luke at the request, which wasn't really one, to look at Stella. What she saw was a set of pink lips fixed in a way that made her think her new neighbour was accustomed to ignoring charity collectors. 'Of course. C'mon, Lukey.' May turned on her heel, taking Luke by the collar. 'I wouldn't mind the tin back when you get a chance. It's an old favourite.'

‘Yes. Of course. Thanks. The biscuits will be – nice.’

Nice was the kind of word that got May’s back up. She half-turned to look back at Stella.

‘That fountain – is it on a timer?’

Stella looked confused. ‘Timer?’

‘Yes – you know, time on and time off.’

‘Oh, no. It’s so pretty we wanted it on all the time.’

‘Not outside your bedroom window you wouldn’t. It sounds like a burst water main.’

‘It’s hardly that loud. More a tinkling, really.’

‘The only thing tinkling is my bladder through the night. I’d appreciate it if you could switch it off in the evenings.’

‘I really don’t have time to be worrying about this sort of thing now.’

‘Well, when you do maybe you could come down and see how loud it is from my place.’

‘But it’s such an attractive feature that both our houses benefit.’

May turned to fully face Stella. Luke, overheating and bored by the lack of progress home, flopped onto the Welcome mat and started licking where his balls once were. ‘What benefits one is a very personal thing, wouldn’t you say?’ May thought of her mother. ‘What benefits one? That’s rich!’ she’d have said. Pomp was something her down-to-earth mother had despised to the grave and would cut May down double fast if she’d ever heard her try it on. There was something satisfying about getting away with it now.

‘Well, yes – yes, I suppose it is. But how could you not like a fountain? They’re so exotic – bring a touch of class to the area.’

‘Exotic? We’re talking rural suburb here, not Raby Bay or the Gold Coast’

Stella flashed May a smug, knowing smile. ‘I think you might be a teensy bit jealous, May. But grand doesn’t suit every place, you know. So don’t be disappointed – you still have a lovely outlook which I’m sure people envy.’

So it was cherub envy May was experiencing, not cherub rage. How silly of her not to think that a Las Vegas approach to her home was something everybody would want.

May came to understand the meaning of water torture and the ducks came to understand the meaning of a stable perch. The ducks showed gratification by soiling the base. May showed her lack of it by taking pot shots at the cherub with a slingshot. Childish behaviour she knew, but it gave her a certain amount of satisfaction to sit in the cool, though no longer silent, evenings on her verandah and try to lob pebbles into the urn. She’d not managed it yet, and in fact most fell into the water with a splosh a good ten metres short of their target, but she was ever hopeful that one would eventually go far enough to lodge in the urn’s outlet, choking its flow. Luke had

become bored with the whole affair. When she'd started he'd lifted his head and barked to her hoot of excitement at feeling a good launch leave the slingshot. He now only twitched one ear and rolled his watery eyes up at her. If Stella drove by May would drop the slingshot onto her lap and watch her pass. Few friendly waves had been exchanged since their first meeting.

May woke one morning and thought she must have cotton wool stuffed in her ears. The cascade of water was still audible but muffled. She peered out her bedroom window and snorted with laughter. White foam bubbled up to the second tier of the cherub's pedestal and a steady stream was being added to it from the bottomless urn. It made the chubby figure look as though it were about to step into a luxuriant bubble bath.

May watched the clean-up operation from her verandah. A stormy Stella paced, one arm folded across her chest, the other pressing a mobile phone to her ear, as a clean-up crew neutralised the water. She cast hard looks in May's direction from time to time, before May's presence must have got the better of her and she marched across to their dividing fence.

'I suppose you think this is funny?'

May shrugged. 'Made for a quiet night.'

Stella narrowed her eyes, sizing May up. 'I've advised the police, you know. They've said it's an act of vandalism.'

'Vandalism? I thought your cherub had run himself a bubble bath.'

'It's no joking matter, May. The pump might be damaged.'

'Well, I'm very sorry to hear that, Stella.'

Stella eyed May warily. 'My children told me what you do with the slingshot. You do realise they're illegal?'

May stared back at Stella hoping her face hadn't given away her surprise.

'I just don't understand what it is you don't like about it. We've had water softener put in the system to tone it down a bit so it can't be the noise. Look at it – it's beautiful.' Stella gestured toward the fountain with both hands spread wide.

'What do you see beyond the fountain?' May asked.

'What do you mean beyond the fountain?'

'Behind it. Above it. Beneath it. What do you see?'

Stella looked about her, confused. 'I see the workmen and their van. The drive. My house. You get a good view of the Bali huts from here, don't you? I'm not sure what else you mean.'

May felt tired all of a sudden, tried sighing off the fatigue but failed.

'I didn't sabotage your fountain, Stella, if that's what you're thinking. I heard some kids larking about last evening. It was most likely them.'

Stella looked sceptical.

May saw Stella only as a flash of gold most days. Sometimes she would drive past slowly enough for May to glimpse her behind the wheel, neck muscles taut as ropes, as she ferried a row of backseat bobbing heads to and from school and wherever else it was her children went in a week. She could only guess at how Stella must rattle around inside that big house on her own during the day, though there was a day or so each week when like-sized vehicles parked on her forecourt for a few hours. May supposed the gatherings were reciprocated at other similar-sized homes so Stella probably did little lonely rattling at all.

Late one afternoon there was a knock at May's front screen door. She put the potato and peeler in the sink and walked through to her front door drying her hands on a tea towel. Through the mesh she could see Stella, turning a large ring round and round on her finger. 'Hello, Stella.' May greeted her through the mesh.

'I've hit your dog.'

'What?'

'Your dog. I've just hit your dog.'

'Is he all right?'

'I don't think so. He was on the drive. I didn't see him.'

'Where is he?' May pushed the screen door open and from the verandah looked all round Stella trying to see where she'd put Luke.

Stella pointed out to the side of May's house toward her own. 'He was knocked into the long grass.'

'You just left him there?'

'I've got the children with me. What with them being upset enough already, on top of their allergies, I was hardly going to put a dead dog in my car.'

'But how could you not see him? He's a big dog.'

'Because I don't expect to see a dog on my drive. It's not my fault. He shouldn't have been there.'

May spent two hours digging a hole large enough to bury a Labrador. The earth was dry and shaly and her hands were blistered across both palms by the end of it. At one point she'd needed a crow bar to prize large chunks of rock away in order to get through to the soil beneath. As she laid Luke's body on his side in the hole she knew it should be deeper but she didn't have the strength to make it so. Instead, she laid the rocks she'd dug from the hole to form a cairn on the soil that covered him.

May's eyes had been dry for years but that night she wept.

When Denise visited a few days later she didn't notice Luke missing, only the mound of rocks May had made under the fig.

‘Have you been clearing out some of the gardens?’ her daughter asked.

May followed Denise’s gaze, feeling a crush of sadness come on her. ‘Yes,’ she said, ‘I’ve been doing some clearing out.’ May sipped her coffee, though it was a drink all wrong for the heat in the day.

Denise looked about the front, trying to see, May knew, where it was she’d made a difference. ‘Funny place to stack them up.’

‘It was in the shade.’

Denise nodded, accepting the logic. ‘Just out of interest, I stopped by one of the Kenmore agents on the way here. Talked with a man called Jim Carroll. Said he knew your place.’

‘Did he now?’

‘Yes. He told me what properties are going for out here. I was staggered. I think you should talk to him.’

May got up and poured her coffee out over the edge of the verandah. ‘I have talked to him and I don’t plan on doing so again.’

Denise perked up, sat forward in her seat. ‘So you have talked to someone about selling, then?’

May rested back on the handrail, risky she knew given its state of disrepair. ‘No. He talked to me about selling. Big difference.’

Denise flopped back in her seat. May could feel the weight of her daughter’s frustration but she still had trouble understanding why it was there to begin with. She stared off in the direction of the fountain, wishing her daughter would leave now.

‘What do you see beyond the fountain?’ May asked after a while.

‘Oh, don’t do this to me again, Mum. There are a whole lot of brown hills. There are always a whole lot of brown hills. They were there when I grew up and they’re still there now.’

‘Sometimes they’re green, you know?’

‘Not bloody often.’

The silence came between them again. It was the silence of difference. Denise had always been more like her father; he never saw the green at his own fence either. It made May worry that her daughter would never recognise the colour of contentment.

May sat on her verandah drinking ginger beer straight from the bottle. The fountain seemed louder now Luke’s heavy breathing wasn’t beside her. She looked across at the cherub. He was wearing a wig of bird poo from where the birds stood there and dried off after using the urn

as a bath. May also noticed how the concrete pedestal base on which it rested was becoming exposed more as the water level dropped. It was a lot to expect the dam, though sizeable, to maintain such lavish gardens.

A car pulled up in front of her house and May recognised Stella's gold four-wheel drive. The gate creaked on dry hinges as she opened it. May saw no reason now to remind her to close it behind her.

Stella stopped at the bottom of the verandah. She looked as well done out as ever in shades of pink but it was a superficial floral cover for a woman whose worry folded on her brow like a veil.

'May, I feel awful.'

And she looked it. Wrung out, as dry of good cheer as the land was of water.

'Come and sit down. I'll get you a drink.' May motioned Stella to sit in the chair beside hers. Returning to the verandah with a second ginger beer, May looked at Stella sitting upright in her seat, hands clasped on her lap like a girl sitting before a headmistress, and wondered if she ever relaxed back and allowed her feet to stretch out before her. Stella took the bottle, hesitated a moment, wondering perhaps if there was a drinking glass to follow. Shrugging, she said, 'Thank you.'

May sat back down and took a long drink.

'I don't think I handled it well – with your dog,' Stella said.

May nodded, biting back how the loss really made her feel.

'I wish I'd seen him, that's all. Then maybe I could have slowed down in time.'

'You probably would have hit him eventually, anyway.'

Stella looked up sharply, defences ready to fire.

'He liked to sleep on your drive, under the shade of that big fig. He'd be hard to see in the shadows, being a chocolate Lab.'

Stella let her shoulders fall. May wondered what it must be like living a roller coaster ride of being at the ready.

'That's very – generous of you, May.'

May supposed it might be but she knew it would be too exhausting to remain angry.

Stella pushed back a little in her seat, crossed her legs at the ankles and took a mouthful from her own bottle.

'You've got the better view from here, haven't you?'

May watched Stella as she scanned from east to west. She had always thought her a pretty woman. Up close she could see she had the telltale beginnings of the creases and folds that all women get. May liked the lived-in look they lent her face.

'I've not noticed how Mount Coot-tha has a purple tinge to it before.'

'Some days,' May said, looking to the east, 'it's almost blue.'

'Really?'

The phone rang inside the house. May let it ring.

'Do you want to get that?' Stella asked.

'No. It'll be my daughter to say she's not coming. She'll leave a message.'

'Oh. Does she live far away?'

'Clayfield, so far enough.'

'Did she grow up in Brookfield?'

'Yes.'

Stella seemed to think about this for a moment. 'She must miss it.'

'Not for a second.'

May felt Stella looking at her, weighing the comment perhaps. They each took a long drink from their bottles.

'I think I would.'

'Me too,' May replied.

They sat in silence after that, watching. The fountain, in the background, gently patted the dam's surface.

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