

I'm Rose. Rose Greta Patrice O'Neil. *Rose...* Not short for Rosemary, Rosa or Rosanne. Just Rose. The name is an embarrassment. I'm not beautiful or delicate or sweet smelling. I'm not even pretty.

So it's clear. Rose. My father told me that they took one look at me when I was born and decided on Rose because I was pink and crunched up, and I exuded an air of superiority. Well okay, thanks Dad. But I've seen the photos and I don't look anywhere near as superior as my three older sisters. Hilda. Cynthia. Dorothy. All of them were stunners and they still are. He said it to make me feel better. He is a barrister. They know how to use words.

I never expected *love* to come when it did. Nor the way it came. Nor the complete mess it made of my life. I wasn't hanging out for it either, like some people. My life was fine. Great family. Excellent academic results. I got on with people in my own way and I had a best friend to laugh and bitch with.

But love found me. It came straight at me like a howling wind. Knocked me to the ground, made me blind, chucked me in the air. And when I crashed, well ... I thought everything was over.

But things are never *over* even when they're over. I learned that. They change. You think they won't but they do. Everything changes all the time. That trip I took with my mother was the beginning of things changing for me ...

Road Trip

I can't believe I'm doing this. Can't believe she talked me into it. Had me feeling awkward, obliged *and* compliant all within about a minute. I should have held firm. Should have said no.

I glance at myself in the rear-vision mirror, so pale and ...*mean-looking* with my chopped-off hair and blunt, freckled nose. Mouth like a piece of string. Nineteen years old and I'm sitting stiff as a plank behind the steering wheel, waiting to start the engine. *For God's sake, ease up! Chill out.* When exactly did I get like this? I poke my head out the window and look up at the summer sky, so deep and clear and blue, as innocent as a kid's drawing. *Nothing can be that simple,* I want to yell. *Don't lie to me!*

'Ready then?' I ask without turning around.

'Yep. I'm ready.'

I pull down the seat belt, slip the buckle in and settle it tight across my chest. *Concentrate on what you're doing, Rose,* I tell myself. *Just concentrate on what you're doing and everything will work out.* Turn the key. Okay. It starts first go. So it should. It's just been serviced. The lighted dashboard tells me I have plenty of petrol. Oil is fine too. The blinkers are working perfectly. Even the temperature gauge is smiling back at me with the black needle hovering slap bang in the green band. *Sweet.*

This engine blew once, right in the middle of Punt Road. I lifted up the bonnet without thinking and ... whoa! The cap blew off. Boiling water everywhere. Black smoke. Stinking fumes. The works. Lucky I didn't get badly burned. No one stopped. They just scooted past like I was a terrorist fussing over a dud bomb. Since then, I get scared if that needle goes anywhere near the red.

My bag is in the back. Wetsuit. Surfboard tied on the roof. What a laugh. I haven't even *seen* the ocean inside a year, much less considered surfing! (I do *dream* about it though.) I've got the old rubber mattress. Pillow. Sleeping-bag. There is some satisfaction in knowing that I'm ready for

anything. I push the indicator down and pull away from the kerb. Clutch down and I slam it into second gear. We're away.

'Rose, I think I might have forgotten my credit card.'

I step on the brake and stare straight ahead, hands gripping the wheel. *You've got to be joking!*

'Well?' I say, shitty as hell and not bothering to hide it. 'Have you or haven't you?' I turn and see that she is looking at *me* instead of checking in her bag.

'Don't snap, darling,' she says, before bending to search in her big, bright-orange, ridiculous straw bag. 'It's not *that* important.'

'Sorry,' I mutter, thinking that it really is every bit *that* important. The only way I agreed to her coming was when she said she'd stay in a motel if I decide to sleep a night in the van (which I've already decided to do although I haven't told her). How will she pay for it without her card?

'But you will need it.'

'I know'

'Any idea where it might be?' I ask through gritted teeth.

'Yep.' She slides open the van door. 'I'm pretty sure it's on the kitchen table. Won't be a jiffy.' She hesitates a moment, smiles and stretches one hand out as though she's about to run her hand across the top of my chopped-off, inch-long, totally in-your-face hair. Thankfully she thinks better of it and pulls away.

'I can't get used to it!' she says lightly, pretending that she's open to liking it when she does.

I shrug sourly, as though her problem with my hair isn't any concern of mine. As though I'm completely at home with my new, weird, aggro image when in fact I'm totally freaked out by it and I can't wait for my hair to grow back.

'Don't go without me!' she calls gaily.

'I won't.'

I watch my mother jump out and run back towards our huge double-fronted family home on Alfred Crescent in North Fitzroy. She is dressed in well-cut red linen pants, heeled sandals and those long beaded aqua earrings that I like and wish I'd accepted when she offered them to me some months ago. Her dyed red hair is up in a bun and she looks good for her age. Fifty-two years old now. My sisters threw her a party last month and I didn't even pretend I had something else on. Parties and me don't connect these days and I think everyone understands that now.

I reverse the van into a park just outside our gate and watch as she pushes open the wisteria-covered wrought-iron gate and makes her way up the pathway to the front door. Then I'm gripped with a sudden mad impulse to run after her before she disappears inside. To grab her and hug her tight, tell her I love her, just in case I never see her again. But the moment passes, thankfully. It's gone ... almost before it registers. *Anyway, as though that's going to happen! As though she's going to disappear into thin air. God, Rose, get a grip.*

The rambling garden around our family home is wonderful at this time of the year. It's filled with leafy trees and bright chaotic climbing plants: clematis, sweet pea and roses that cover the fence and creep up along the edge of the house steps. There are ferns and little pockets of bright summer flowers too. It's all so lovely that it could make your throat close up if you let it, which I don't.

I got this van last summer. Only two and a half thousand bucks. I'd saved most of the money over the previous year. There was a year or two left on the tyres, six months rego and the engine – according to the RACV man who checked it out for me - was in good shape. I'm not sorry. When the shit hit the fan I still had the van, which was something.

I turn off the engine and look at my watch. Five minutes already. The credit card is obviously not on the table. Then again, knowing my mother, she's probably in there pulling together half a dozen other things she's

forgotten or thinks she needs. Or she might be making a last phone call, or taking one, or ...

It's eight-thirty on a weekday morning. We're going to be caught in peak-hour traffic on our way out of the city and there is no one to blame but myself. I was meant to be here over an hour ago to pick her up. I slept in later than I'd planned, and when I did get up I messed around. Went to ring her at least three times and tell her that I'd changed my mind about her coming with me. After all, she has her own car. A top-model, stylish Saab with airconditioning, bucket seats, automatic gears and a great sound system. Dad bought it for her when she turned fifty. Driving the Saab the shorter way through Colac and Camperdown she could be in Port Fairy inside four hours. She'd be able to book into a motel before nightfall and be rested when she goes to see Grandma Greta.

Whereas I'm going the long way, around the steep and winding coastal road through the Great Otway National Park, where it's sixty kilometres an hour for *hours*. I told her this. I was frank and uncompromising about my plans. I'm going to stop when I feel like it. I'm going to walk on the beach. Look at the cliffs. Chill out. Put my feet in the water. Have a swim if I can bring myself to. I don't care if Grandma does die before I get there. I mean it. She's eighty-six. According to my sister Dorothy (who is already down there), she wants to die. Where is the tragedy if someone of eighty-six dies when she wants to? I can't see the point of fond farewells and last goodbyes.

But when I got here this morning my mother was waiting for me on the front verandah. Case at her feet and that wide straw sunhat on her head, looking so keen. What could I say? I just gulped, got out, walked over and said, 'Hi Mum. You ready?'

'I've been ready for ages!' she said, and kissed me on both cheeks.

Ah! Here she is and yes, she's carrying a brown paper bag as well as, hopefully, her credit card.

'Sorry love,' she puffs as she climbs in.

'You get it?'

'Yep.' She grins at me. 'And the lunch I so carefully packed for us.'

'Where was that?'

'On the table, too.' She laughs and I can tell she wants me to join in. To indulge her zany forgetfulness with at least a smile. *Oh, there goes Mum again. Dithering along, messing up the practicalities...* But I turn away and start the engine. I pull out and nose my way into the St Georges Road traffic without giving even a hint of a smile. I actually *like* attention to detail. Taking proper care of the small bits and pieces of whatever is going on is what life is about, as far as I'm concerned. Why should I agree that leaving a specially prepared lunch to go to waste is something to laugh about?

'So what exactly did Dorothy tell you?' Mum opens up the conversation in this intimate aren't-we-going-to-have-fun-together kind of way that immediately gets my back up. 'About Gran, I mean.'

We are heading around the zoo now and the traffic is diabolical. Everyone is coming into the city to work and all the roads and intersections are congested. I keep myself from losing it by clinging to the thought that we're going the other way. Once we're over the West Gate Bridge it will be okay. Just got to get out of this.

'Dorothy said Gran is fading fast and wants to see me,' I say sharply.

'But why *you*?' Mum asks, then quickly tries to correct the impression that her nose is out of joint. 'Not that it's strange to want to see you, but why you particularly? Why not ... everyone else?' she adds lamely.

I don't take offence because I don't know the answer. I'm intrigued too. *Why me?* I have never had a particularly special relationship with my father's mother Greta. Hilda, the eldest sister, was always her favorite and the other two also seemed to shine more in her eyes than I did. But I am fond of her in a way. I guess we all are. She is a wiry old bird, bossy as hell and full of punch. Or was. She's on her last legs now. Demanded to be allowed to go home from hospital to die in her bed. Her words, not mine. So I guess she figures her time is up.

My grandfather was a fisherman who drowned at sea when Dad was just a baby. Gran has lived in the same little cottage in Port Fairy all her life. It's where my father, who is an only child, grew up. Four small rooms with a dark hallway leading down to the kitchen. Never renovated but on a huge block. We used to spend our summers there when we were little.

As soon as my sister Dorothy heard that Gran wanted to go home to die, and that there was no one around to stay in the house with her, she managed to negotiate some time off from her glamorous television job and went straight there to look after her. Pretty heroic, considering how difficult Gran can be. Then again, the grand gesture is what Dorothy's good at. Theatrics is her game.

Dorothy is the sister nearest to me. Twenty-three years old and a bit of a flake compared to the rest of us. Not dumb. She consistently came top in just about every subject at university, and she was studying for her Masters in Classics until last year. I don't know anyone else who speaks fluent Latin and Greek, or who knows everything there is to know about everything that happened before 500 CE. It's just that Dorothy has real trouble with most of what's happened since, if you get my drift.

But that's all changing too. Dot's life did a total flip last year when she was plucked off the street - literally - to act in a television soap opera. All of my three sisters are very good-looking but Dot is quite simply gorgeous. I'm not kidding. She's got these huge, deep lavender eyes with lashes like long Japanese paintbrushes. Her hair is thick and dark and curly. She has fairer skin than the rest of us and the loveliest mouth, like a rosebud. (*She* is the one who should have been called Rose!) Even before she was on telly people used to gape at her in the street.

'Gran wants to *give* you something?' Mum murmurs.

'Yeah.'

'Any idea *what*?'

'Dot didn't say,' I reply shortly.

'Maybe she's going to leave you all her money.' Mum smiles.

'Maybe,' I say dryly. We both know that there is no money. Gran has lived on the old-age pension for the last twenty years and the cottage is already in Dad's name.

'Maybe you'll get the Collection,' Mum says lightly, after a careful little pause. This gives me a nasty jolt. *Shit! I never thought of that.*

In my consternation I forget to take my foot off the clutch slowly enough and the van lurches forward, almost collecting a little red Mazda pushing in to the main stream from a side road. I wave in the driver irritably. *Damn it. Mum's probably right! The Collection. Yeah, that will be it. So I'm on a six-hour drive for something I seriously don't want!*

'It's very precious to Gran,' Mum adds cajolingly, like this might make me change my mind. Like I might suddenly start loving a heap of cheap old rubbish because some crazy old biddy in her eighties has held it dear for fifty years.

'You might end up really ... valuing it.' Mum's voice peters out when I turn and give her my best withering looking, daring her to continue. *Yeah right, Mum!*

'Oh well,' she sighs, 'stranger things have happened.'

Naturally I've been hoping for something nice, an antique bracelet maybe, or a ring that Gran had been secretly hoarding all these years for her youngest grandchild. But no ... I try to shrug off this secret hope. Better to expect the worst.

'Do you know this, like, for sure?' I ask after a few moments have elapsed. 'Did Dot give you a hint?'

Mum shakes her head so vigorously that I reckon she has a fair idea but doesn't want to hit me with the full, 100 per cent horrible truth in one hit. Mum is the family diplomat, very good at breaking bad news. 'I'm only guessing,' she says.

'Well, I don't want it,' I mutter sourly.

'But there is no way you could throw it away,' she says insistently. 'I mean *if* she leaves it to you, you can't just ... dump it.'

I don't reply because she's right. No way could you toss the Collection in the bin. It is so much part of Gran and that little house that it would be an extremely sacrilegious and violent act. People don't mess with Gran or they cop it. I'm not normally superstitious, but if I threw the Collection away I know I'd live the rest of my life in fear that she'd get back at me some way - even after she was dead.

The Collection consists of about two dozen cheap, kitschy porcelain cats in a variety of inane postures, with mawkish expressions, insipid colours and broken-off tails with patchy paint. Think the worst and you'll be right on the mark. Gran has always displayed them in her best room on top of the crystal cabinet. A cat lover all her life, each one commemorates the passing of one of her real cats, who were all named after someone Gran admired, like Nelson Mandela or Bert Newton. So they all have personalities and names and histories, right back to the 1940s. Gran is not senile, or crazy in any other aspect of her life, but she dusts and rearranges these cats daily ... *and talks to them*. If she manages to get you in the best room (which, incidentally, is hardly ever used for anything else) for a guided viewing of the Collection, you won't get out again inside two hours.

'What will you do?' Mum is all innocence. 'I mean, if she gives it to you?

'Leave the country. Slit my wrists.'

'Now Rose!' Mum laughs uneasily. She's not sure if I'm joking.

At last the light turns green and we inch forward a few feet towards the Flemington Road intersection. I hold my breath and step on the accelerator. *Don't let the lights turn red again so soon!* They hold and we're across.

'What is Dot actually *doing* down there?' I think of flannels and bed pans and Dorothy's slight frame trying to lift Gran's bulky body. It's hard to imagine my dippy, hothouse flower of a sister in any kind of practical role at all, much less that of nurse.

'Not sure,' Mum says.

'Bath her, maybe?'

'Goodness!' Mum is shocked at the thought. 'I can't imagine it.'

'Feed her?'

'Maybe.' Mum begins to chew her thumb, a sign that she's thinking hard. 'Dot said she just wanted to be there.'

'Oh well,' I say hastily, 'good on her.'

I guess we're both flummoxed. Dot doesn't usually *do* practical life very well.

'Maybe the tablecloth is in doubt?' I suggest. I mean it as a joke but Mum nods seriously.

'That could be it.'

Even though Gran's cottage is packed to the rafters with all kinds of junk, there are the only three things that anyone wants. They are all wedding presents given to my grandparents in 1945. The crystal cabinet in the front room which is all polished cut glass and deep shiny wood; an almost complete set of Royal Doulton 1920s yellowing crockery with little green flowers around the edges; and this incredibly lovely embroidered linen tablecloth, covered in birds and flowers from Chinese mythology. My three older sisters have had these things assigned for years. Hilda gets the crockery - although why she wants it so badly is a mystery. She and her husband could afford a dozen sets twice as good. Cynthia is desperate for the cabinet, for her surgical instruments. And Dorothy believes the tablecloth is rightfully hers because the embroidered Chinese bird motif is her *sign*. As the fourth sister it's always been understood that I miss out, but I honestly don't mind. I'll probably end up doing better than all of them anyway, as each of my sisters feels so guilty about me not getting one of the Big Three that they're always promising to make it up to me in 'other ways' when the time comes. Over the years I've secretly figured that I should be able to play this number for all it's worth when the time comes – and get something out of them that I really want!

For all I know, Gran wanting to give me something may have thrown a serious spanner into their settled arrangement. General gnashing of teeth and forming of secret alliances might already have begun. Then again, if they know I've been given the Collection, the three of them will be lying around weak with relief that they missed out, which makes me doubly pissed off.

'The council provides a nurse,' Mum says after a while. 'Dot is probably just keeping Gran company. Reading to her. Giving her tablets, making tea. That kind of thing.'

'Right.'

'It should be Cynthia,' Mum muses. 'After all, she's the doctor.'

'You have *got* to be kidding!' I splutter incredulously.

'Yes of course,' Mum mumbles quickly, 'only joking'.

They are only fifteen months apart but Cynthia and Dorothy are chalk and cheese. Dot is all airy-fairy and convinced that the world would be a better place if everyone spoke Latin and rode their bicycles to work. Cynthia is efficiency plus, or thinks she is. She's twenty-four and will soon be a qualified doctor, which fills the rest of us with total pity for any patient she'll ever come across. I'm not kidding. She's the doctor who, if you come in with the flu, would tell you to go home and start making your will because you've most likely got a brain tumor. Once Mum had tinea between her toes and Cynthia diagnosed her with some totally weird African skin disease. She didn't hold back with the bad news, either. By the time Mum got to her own doctor - who had never heard of the African disease - Cynthia had her believing that she would be covered from head to foot with pus-filled blisters which might or might not respond to some new cortisone ointment that would have to be flown in from America.

Dad reckons Cynthia will settle down once she gets to the hospitals for some hands-on experience with real people. But the rest of us seriously doubt anyone under Cynthia's care will even survive. Just how many *real*

people will have to die or be sent absolutely crazy before she *settles down* is what we want to know!

So we've just come off the Bolte Bridge with its tall concrete pylons. The flat brown river and city buildings are on our left and a mass of factories is on our right. We travel along in silence for a few kilometres, past service stations and spare parts manufacturers, drive-in food joints and masses of nerve-wracking, heavy traffic. Then I see the lift of the West Gate Bridge curving up ahead like a long-forgotten promise about to come true. I wind down the window and let a rush of fresh breeze hit me in the face. Yes. I push down the indicator, pull over to the right and join the stream of cars and big noisy semitrailers and trucks making their way up onto the bridge.

Once up there everything shifts again. You can see all around in every direction. Oil refineries and factories, and huge container ships docked around the port. In the distance, great tracts of housing estates. And beneath us, the river is laid out like an ancient brown limb still flickering with life. Brightly coloured boats are tied up along the edges like toys. I think of my ex-best friend Zoe. So often it was both of us up here, looking down across the city on our way to the coast. Her mother, sour and mostly silent, would take us as far as Geelong, chain smoking the whole way, and drop us at the bus stop. We didn't care about the sourness or the smoking. Zoe and I would be in the back seat with the windows open, humming, grinning, giving each other the thumbs up. *Soon we'll be there*, was what we were thinking. *Soon we'll be drinking cocoa and reading trashy magazines, eating grilled cheese on toast, or chips from the shop, and getting our things together for the half-hour walk down to the waves.*

I had my first surf on my sixteenth birthday. Zoe and I had just come in from a swim and we were looking longingly out at the surfers skimming in on the waves when this funny little guy came out of the water with his board under his arm. His blonde hair hung in his eyes like old seaweed and his long faded shorts had slid halfway down his bum.

'Hey girls,' he grinned as he passed us, 'how you goin'?'

'How long does it take to learn?' I remember asking him.

'Depends,' he frowned, 'on how much you want to.'

His name was Charlie, and within half an hour he was offering to teach us. By the end of that summer we both had boards.

As we come off the bridge I switch on the radio. I'm desperate for some music but there are just weather reports and traffic updates and the same news headlines that I'd heard at seven o'clock that morning.

'I need music,' I mutter.

'Need?' Mum asks, amused.

'Yeah,' I say gruffly, and begin to flip through the CDs. 'You don't mind, do you?' A certain edge creeps into my voice. *You'd better not mind because this is my trip, my van, and I don't really even want you here ...*

'Of course not.'

I'm still thinking of Zoe so I flip on an ancient Doors album just for the hell of it. 'Break On Through (to the Other Side)' comes roaring out of the speakers.

'Well, I certainly don't mind listening to this!' Mum coos, throwing her head back, closing her eyes and putting both feet up on the dashboard.

'This is *my* music.'

'No it's not!' I snap before I even think. 'Music is music. It doesn't belong to any one generation!' Mum just smiles and says nothing. And I wonder again what has got into me. When exactly did I turn into such an uptight ... bitch?

Zoe and I were the only girls in our year at school to take music seriously. Most of the other girls were into the big easy-listening bands or all the *doof doof* crap. Worse still, Britney and Kylie and the rest of the soft-porn stars. They read the trash magazines and kept up with the frocks and the love lives and the publicity stunts.

From the time Zoe and I were about fifteen we considered all that complete shit. We loved the old stuff from the sixties and seventies and, of course, the great current bands who still know what rock is about. There is a

heap of good, hard rock around, but you've got to know where to look for it. The big stores don't always keep the stuff we're interested in.

At about sixteen, we started sneaking into pubs to listen to the new bands around Melbourne. We got hauled up for our IDs, but never got into too much trouble. Coppers would turn a blind eye because they knew we didn't drink. We were there for the music. We'd often listen to the likes of Black Sabbath and Pearl Jam, or maybe the Peppers or the Clash, just to get us in the mood before we went to see live bands.

'God, Rose!' Mum breaks into my thoughts with a sudden laugh. 'This stuff takes me way back.'

'Yeah?' I say sharply, but I don't comment in case she takes it as a cue to start reminiscing. I'm actually wishing like hell I'd put on something she didn't understand, something tougher and more complex. She's right. This *is* her music. Why the hell am I playing stuff from the *sixties*?

'Do you ever hear from Zoe?' my mother asks.

I shrug casually but the question freaks me. *I didn't mention Zoe, did I? How comes she knows what I'm thinking about?* Anyway, my mother knows the answer. She knows I don't see Zoe, so why ask?

'I miss her,' Mum says quietly.

Bully for you!

'Yeah well,' is all I can manage as I slip up into fifth gear and step on the accelerator, 'I'd get over *that*, if I were you.'

Don'tcha just hate someone bringing up something or someone you are trying your best not to think about ...

The road opens out before us, almost completely flat all the way to Geelong. For miles and miles it feels a bit like we're skidding across this shiny plate of dreamland. Through the industrial suburbs, factories and giant storehouses, engineering plants and nests of refineries that sit there like pieces from a giant's toy shop. Those huge steel girders holding up the powerlines, the acres of housing estates, all that industry and people living different lives. It entralls me, in a way. The road cuts through it all like a

major artery bringing blood in and out. We are flanked at different points by huge sound barriers, and then after a while by wide banks of grass and native shrubs and trees.

When at last we are out on the straight open road, the tight ball that's been sitting inside my chest all morning unravels a fraction. I try to think of some nice thing to say to Mum to make up for biting her head off about music but ... I can't. I'm sitting on 100 and the van is purring beneath me like a lazy big cat. It's weirdly intoxicating to be thundering past the green signs pointing off to other places. Pity the poor bastards going to Werribee or Hoppers Crossing or any of the other shitty boring places! Above me the sky glows deep blue and cloudless in the bright light of morning. There are storms predicted for the late afternoon along the western coast but I don't believe it for a minute. *This is okay. I can think of a lot worse places to be.*

'You want to stop for a quick coffee in Geelong?' I ask. It's the nicest thing I can come up with in the circumstances. I don't want to stop but Mum loves her morning coffee.

'Okay,' she says brightly, and unwinds her window and begins to hum a little. Is she trying to tell me she's enjoying it all so much, that life is a breeze and she hasn't a care in the world? Naturally I find it irritating. Life hasn't been a breeze for my mother for some time, so why pretend?

My thoughts are cut short by a fancy BMW pulling out in front of us, almost causing me to crash into the back of it. I slam on the brakes.

'Shit,' I mutter under my breath, and Mum murmurs in agreement and smiles at me in this dry, offhand way that makes me think I might have imagined her previous false note. Maybe she isn't acting at all. Maybe she really is feeling good. I've spent virtually no time with my mother over the last ten months, so how would I know?

Sometimes I wonder if I've imagined everything. Truly, I do.

Don'tcha just hate it ... when every thought you have is somehow undermined by an opposing thought? You think you've got the situation tied

up and then this sneaking little doubt rolls in, making you question the way you see ... everything?

Ah no. No. That's not going to work. Too complicated, too introspective. Can't make a piece out of that. Or can I?

Don'tcha just hate it ... is the subtitle Roger gave me for the 300-word column I write every week for the music paper *Sauce* - it's free and can be picked up in the bar or café nearest to you! Roger's the owner and editor of the paper, and the twin brother of Danny who owns the café where I work as a waitress.

I approached Roger about three months ago, when I found out what he did - music being the one thing left in my life I still loved. But he told me there were way too many experienced rock journalists around who couldn't get work and suggested I try something else. I thought he meant try some other occupation like picking fruit or answering phones, but I didn't take offence. They're nice guys, both of them: early forties, fat, friendly, nerdy and fast-talking, always out for a quick buck. But I like them all right, because both of them are quick to see the funny side of anything going on, and they're always nice to me. I appreciate that, because I don't see many people these days.

A couple of weeks after being given the dud news about my chances of writing for his paper, Roger comes around to the café to see his brother. He gives me one of his hearty shoulder squeezes, tells me I'm looking good and that I'm the best waitress his brother has ever had. Then he asks me for two *specials*, which means espresso coffee, bitter and strong enough to give an ordinary person a heart attack. When I bring them over to where the brothers are sitting near a window in the café, I can see they are engrossed in a serious conversation - unusual because they usually jostle and laugh and slam each other around like guys half their age. So I put the coffee

down, prepared to depart quickly. But Roger looks up with one of his warm smiles and motions to the spare chair.

'Hey Rose,' he says, 'have a seat. How's life?'

'Okay,' I shrug, not wanting to sit because, although the lunch-time crowd has gone, there is still plenty of clearing up to do behind the counter.

'Just okay?'

'Just okay.' I smile back at him. 'You know how it is.'

'No, I don't.' He is looking at me seriously now. 'How is it, Rose?'

I stand there smiling stupidly, determined not to give anything away. The fact that nothing much is happening in my life is entirely my own fault. I know that. In a weird way it's exactly the way I want it too. Anyway, boring people with oh-woe-is-me-details is not my style.

'Come on,' he insists. 'Sit down, why don't you?'

I sit down and give one of my hey-guys-I'm-already-bored-with-this-conversation groans, then I cross my arms tight across my chest, throw my head back and look at the ceiling

'What's up?' Roger asks.

'Well,' I say, watching a fat blowfly make its way slowly across the greasy blistered paint above me, 'don'tcha just hate it when every day seems more or less like ... every other day?' I wait, still looking at the fly, but nobody says anything so I eventually sit back up again and stare at them. Roger is nodding up and down like an old sage and Danny is lining up the sugar sachets in a straight line across the table - a sure sign he's thinking hard about something. I find myself suddenly shy, hoping he's not thinking about *me* or what I've just said because I don't want sympathy. I don't want anything to change at all between me and these two guys. I enjoy their daggy humor and all that breezy couldn't-give-a-shit chatter. It makes me feel like I'm part of things without having to give anything away.

After a bit of a pause Roger looks up.

'So write a column about it,' he says to me.

'About what?' I say.

‘About the things you hate,’ he replies. ‘It’s exactly what we need, a short, dark piece every week from the young female point of view.’

‘The things I hate?’

‘What do you reckon?’

I shrug, trying to get my head around what he might mean.

‘All the things that piss you off,’ he adds, winking broadly at his brother. And suddenly he throws his hands in the air and starts yelling. ‘The price of bloody drinks in bars, Rose! Guys that don’t come through! Ya family.’ He pauses for a moment and looks out the window before turning back to me. ‘George Bush and the friggin’ war. High heels that crack your ankles. The way lipsticks melt! I don’t know, Rose! Girl things. Big things and small things and every bloody thing in between!’

I nod slowly, a bit taken aback.

‘Think you can?’

‘Why me?’

‘I heard that you were smart,’ he said.

‘Well,’ I shrug, pleased. Danny must have told him about my VCE score. ‘It sure sounds a lot easier than writing about the things I love.’

‘That’s the spirit!’ he says, clapping me on the back, and the three of us suddenly crack up laughing. He pulls out his card. ‘Here. Just email it to me in the next couple of days and we’ll take it from there.’

In case you’re thinking it involves good money and working in some groovy little office full of cool, like-minded music freaks, or free tickets to concerts where I meet famous people backstage - then think again. I email Roger my piece every week and I never see anyone. I don’t have any contact with older, more experienced journalists who could show me the ropes or how to do things better. *And* I have to pick up my copy of the paper from the local café, just like everyone else. Nor do I get any feedback, except for the occasional phone call from Roger telling me I’ve stuffed up in some way. Maybe I’ve gone over my word limit or, more commonly, this week’s ‘rave’ isn’t quite up to last week’s. He’s always telling me to crank

things up a bit. I never know what the hell he's talking about, so I just do what I do, and each week when I pick up my copy of the paper, there's my piece under the name of *Ms Angst*.

I should add that every week I half expect to not find it there, to have been given the heave-ho. It's not that I'd mind that much. I'm *not* one of those people who has always wanted to be a writer. The pay is crap (I still have to work as many hours as a waitress as I used to), and churning out those 300 words takes me more time that I care to admit. At the start of every week I think, *Well, this is it, I've got nothing to write about*. But by the time Thursday comes around I've usually had a bash at two or three subjects. I pick one and spend most of Friday – my day off from the café - polishing it up and sending it off.

So don't freak when you see the *Don'tcha just hate ...* line. It's just me chewing over a possible little diatribe for Roger.

'Let's have our coffee down by the water?' Mum suggests. Then she adds in a more hesitant, cloying tone that makes me want to heave, 'That is if you still want to stop?'

'Yeah okay,' I say.

So we take the turn-off and travel the few kilometres along the boulevard to the newly reconstructed precinct of shops and coffee houses set along the bay. I pull the van into one of the parking bays that looks out over the water. Between the car park and the water there is a long, quite wide garden area with small trees and a crazy pathway zigzagging down to a wooden pier and restaurant. Seats are dotted along the edge.

'Last time I was here it was a weekend,' Mum muses, 'and there were at least six brides all having their photos taken.'

'When was that?' I ask shortly.

'Must have been a couple of years ago.' She frowns. 'Your father and I were on our way to see Gran at Easter. People get married any day now.'

Her wistful tone jerks me into fresh wariness. I reach for the car door and slide it open.

'I'll get the coffee,' I say and point to the seat right in front of us. 'Why don't you go sit out there and I'll bring it over?' I'm determined that this trip will not degenerate into any kind of getting-to-know-you-again experience. Ditto for meaningful conversations about wedding days, past or present, and romantic outings with my father.

'No Rose,' she says firmly, opening the other door. 'Let me, please. I'd like the walk. Want anything to eat?'

'Okay then,' I say with a shrug, happy for her to do it because I'm low on cash, 'just the coffee will do'

Mum heads across the road to the nearest café and I wander over to the lawn and look out at the murky brown, oily water. It's nice with the breeze and the sun shining. I'm wearing jeans with a faded denim jacket over an old pea-green T-shirt. It's warm enough to take off the jacket but I prefer to stay covered. I dig my hands into the pockets of my jeans and edge back to the seat in front of the car, shut my eyes and turn my face up into the sun.

Last time I was here, Zoe was with me. We missed the bus and had about three hours to kill, so we walked on the pier and ate pizza. Must have been about fifteen months ago. It was cold. I can see her sitting under that plane tree down near the water, big legs crossed.

'Am I okay?' I remember her asking that day. 'Do you *really* think I'm going to make it?'

'Of course you're okay, Zoe,' I replied automatically, slumping down beside her, opening the pizza box and handing her a slice on one of the napkins, 'and you'll make it for sure.'

I always answered these questions as though she'd never asked them before, when in fact, especially if we hadn't seen each other for a few days, she would often begin conversations this way. Zoe just can't do polite

conversation starters like, 'How are you? Isn't it a great day?' or 'What have you been doing?'

'Do you really love me?' often came next. I know it sounds gruesome. But I didn't mind because I knew she really had to know. It wasn't a put on. Most of the time she was such fun, but this stuff had to be faced and resolved before we could go on with anything else. I was her best friend, so who else was going to do it?

'Do I love you?' I would often joke. 'What do you reckon, Zoe? That I hang around for your money?'

Zoe lives in Bayswater. Her mother lives on some sickness pension. They often don't have money for proper food because cigarettes and dope and those two stupid mongrel dogs are more important. Like me, she won a scholarship to that big posh school on the other side of town. But unlike me, she really needed that place to get where she wanted to go. For me, deciding to go there was just a way to piss off my older sisters who'd all attended our excellent local state high school. Zoe's life had never been easy. Yet we were best friends from the first day in that place.

'But will any one guy ever *fall in love* with me?' she often persisted.

'Of course.'

Zoe is the ultimate romantic, so this bit, along with getting to the top of her chosen career, was high on her list.

'How will I meet him?'

'For fuck's sake, Zoe. You're only eighteen!'

Zoe is beautiful in a big, in-your-face, over-the-top kind of way. I think so anyway. Wonderful green eyes that sort of glitter in certain lights if she's excited or angry. Heavy black lashes and eyebrows, a wide mouth always laughing - or crying - and short curly fair hair which is usually dyed a few shades lighter than her natural colour, sometimes with a slash of purple in it too, or orange and silver if she's in the mood. But she's heavy. I don't know how much she weighs but she has big thighs and bum and breasts. I was always telling her that in another age she would have been considered right

on the money because she is so curvy. Her middle, waist and belly are proportionally quite slim. But that look is not right for now and it plays on her mind a lot, I guess. She's always trying to lose the weight, going on and off diets.

Of course, all that might have changed by now. I haven't seen her in a while. She might have lost it all.

Right through school, Medicine was Zoe's one goal. And when she knew she had got in to the Med school at Monash at the end of our Year Twelve, it was like all her Christmases had come at once. She had leukemia when she was a kid and was in and out of hospital for about six years, from the time she was eight. Apparently it was touch and go whether she'd actually survive or not. I don't know if her being fat is related to the childhood illness or not. We never talked about it.

It was during her time in hospital that she fell in love with the whole world of doctors and surgery and advanced medical treatments. The doctors were her heroes. When other little kids were mucking around with their mates, playing dolls and computer games, Zoe was fighting for her life, and those medicos were the ones who saved her. Her plan was to eventually become an oncologist, and it probably still is. Unlike me, who has just frittered away my first year out of school working long hours in a nothing job that pays badly (and will probably repeat the performance again this year because I can't see myself at university or going overseas), Zoe will have finished her first year of university by now and be gearing up for the second. I'll bet anything she's done really well in her exams. There was never anything else but Medicine for Zoe.

Apart from guys, that is.

I was never into guys in the same way, which is ironic when you think about what happened later. But Zoe fell in love easily and often, and she was always in some cataclysmic state about someone. She had no qualms at all about ringing guys up and asking them out. Sneaking off to see them. No qualms at all about sleeping with them either. Her heart got broken on a

regular basis but she bounced back quickly. That's how it was when I knew her, anyway.

'One hot latte.' Mum is back with the coffee, smiling. She hands me mine, sits down beside me and holds out a brown paper bag. 'Want some?'

I peer in at the delicious-looking pastries she's chosen, and my mouth immediately begins to water. I was so taken up with travel angst this morning, I'd forgotten to eat anything.

'Thanks.' I break myself off a piece of date slice and pop it in my mouth. The sweetness explodes on my tongue like a sugar bomb and I'm suddenly starving. I pull the rest of it out and gobble it up quickly.

'Sorry!' I say, a bit embarrassed, pulling off the top of my coffee. 'I said I didn't want anything but this is so ... nice.'

'Have another one,' she smiles at me.

'You sure?' I choose the fresh blueberry muffin next, and its warm light texture gives me a sudden longing for all that home cooking that I don't have any more. At home my sisters are always making something delicious to eat. I miss it. Barry, the twenty-five year old tight-arse I live with now, literally doesn't know how to boil an egg. I know because I've seen him try. The other one - I call him Stuttering Stan because he can hardly speak a full sentence - not only doesn't cook, he resents anyone who does. He's one of those skinny, pale, sick-looking vegans who thinks everyone should live on nuts and fruit the way he does.

'Is it hot enough?' Mum asks, watching anxiously as I take the first sip of coffee.

'It's perfect.' I smile at her, touched. I haven't lived at home for nearly a year but she remembers how I like my coffee. 'Thanks Mum.'

We both look out over the water. At the groups of people wandering along, at the sailing boats tied up against the wharf. The crap that is usually lurking like a hungry dog around the edges of my mind has backed off momentarily, and a fizzy lightness invades my head. I like being away from the café. On the road, in the van. Doing something different. *Thanks Gran, I*

think to myself, then I feel mean and try to backtrack. Gran is probably about to die. She doesn't need me being glad about it.

'Before, when I asked if you've spoken to Zoe, there was a reason,' Mum says quietly, not looking at me.

My self-protective antenna immediately begins its high-pitched warning hum. More like a warning screech really. *Don't go there, Mum, please. Things are fine now. Please just don't go there.*

'Oh yeah?' I say as nonchalantly as I'm able, thinking, *Hold on tight, Rose, hold tight.* I do not want anyone, especially my mother, to know exactly how much all this stuff still affects me. I bought one of those self-help books in a second-hand bookstore that's near the house I share with those two morons out in Hurtsbridge, and as far as I'm concerned I'm doing okay. I've got myself through the first couple of stages - denial, anger - all on my own. Now I figure it's time to move on, to forget it all. That's the one I'm working on now. *Forgetting.* I don't want to go backwards.

'Do you know she's in hospital?' my mother asks.

There is a two-second pause as I feel the words crash their way into my skull. *Hospital?*

'What?' I whisper.

'Hospital,' my mother murmurs back.

My heart begins to race. It lurches forward in my chest like an old car. *Chug, chug.* It's going to give out any second and leave me stranded by the wayside, no way forward. Wrecked completely.

'So you didn't know?'

'No.'

'Rose, I know you ... don't like talking about this,' Mum says in a monotone, 'about Zoe, I mean. But I thought I should tell you. I thought you'd be angry if we all knew and you were left in the dark.'

'Right,' I mumble, goose bumps rising along my forearms under the jacket, 'thanks.'

A chill seems to be coming from deep down inside me. I pull the denim tighter around me, suddenly feeling weak with shock. I know. I know what is going to come next and, more than anything, I don't want to hear it.

'The cancer is back,' Mum says.

'Cancer?' I speak the word but it is hard to get my head around it. Cancer. The cancer is back. Okay, we always knew there was a chance of that happening but ... I didn't seriously consider it. She has been through so much already. So much of her childhood obliterated, lying in bed with drips in her, all the drugs and nausea and not knowing if she was going to live or die. The doctors told her that if she stayed clear for ten years, then the chances of it recurring were minimal. When I first met her at fifteen, at the beginning of Year Nine, she'd just come out of years of treatment. I want to beat my fists against something hard, a brick wall maybe, or the roof of my van. *Enough is enough*. She's twenty now. How much should one person have to endure? I know it's only been five years, but ... Someone is laughing at me. *Five years is not ten years, is it?* Five years is worth nothing.

I turn to my mother who is staring out at the water.

'It's in her blood?'

'I don't know,' Mum says. 'All I know is that she's been in hospital for a few weeks of treatment ...'

A few weeks!

'So has it worked?' I ask quickly. 'Is she going to get better?'

'I don't know,' Mum says, 'I don't know any details'.

We sit quietly for a while, maybe two feet apart. I sip my coffee and stare out at the brown water. I hate it now. The water. The bay. I hate the gaudy bright day around me, the breeze and the boats. Even the half-eaten muffin in my hand. Everything. This news has broken into my life like a burglar, sawing my heart open, exposing all the secret chambers. I can't seem to find a way to stem the flood of memory and ... pain. I close off one seeping pipe and another one opens up somewhere else. I never thought this would happen. And I know she never thought it would happen either.

Zoe considered herself cured. We both did. I forget about Mum beside me. It doesn't matter what she says now. I'm tumbling backwards, away from the present at a crazy pace.

'You know it's been over a year now,' Mum says quietly.

'Yes,' I mumble.

'Maybe it's time for ...' She peters out. 'Some kind of ...'

'What?' I come up to the surface and crank out one of my nasty tight sneers. 'For us to be best buddies again?'

'No ... no.' She stumbles on awkwardly. 'I just feel it's time you stopped punishing yourself. It's what everyone thinks.' She is looking at me and I hate it. I hate it so much I want to stand up and grab her by both shoulders and shake her, but I stay sitting there because I don't want her to know what this is doing to me. 'All your sisters ... and me. There has to be some way to ... stop all this.' She waves one hand helplessly in the air. 'Even if it's just to *help Zoe!*'

Tears well in my throat and I gulp them down. *Help Zoe? What about me? I need help too. Why aren't they thinking about me? Am I some kind of monster that is beyond help?*

'Mum,' I say, standing up. 'No one knows ... what happened.'

'We have a fair idea, Rose!' she says.

'No you *don't!*' I try to smile but my mouth isn't working. 'That's where you're wrong.' I can feel a tremor around the edges of my lips and I can't control it. But at least I'm not shouting, and I don't *think* I sound too angry or desperate. There are only a few people who know about ... the full particulars of what went on last summer, and Mum isn't one of them. Ditto for my sisters and the rest of my family. I don't want them to know. It's none of their business.

'You all think you know everything,' I say, completely exasperated, 'but you don't.'

'Okay.' Mum bites her lip. 'I won't mention it again, Rose.'

'Thanks.' I pull the jacket around me tightly. 'I'll just have a bit of walk, okay? Only be a few minutes.'

'Take as much time as you need,' she says, still looking away, biting her thumb. 'No hurry.'

I walk to the end of the pier and stand staring out onto the water. It's blue now. Clear blue, and lovely. How strange that the water changes colour depending on what the clouds are doing overhead. Does that mean that it's not really blue at all? Or brown, or ...? What exactly is colour? Why didn't I pay more attention in science class?

Memories come rushing in. But it's okay. Out on the pier in the sun and the breeze I can manage them. It's when I'm in bed at three a.m. in that horrible house with those two strangers that ... I sometimes freak. Late at night is when it all gets too much. That's when I know I'm fucking up my life but I don't know how to turn things around again.

Right now, though, I'm seeing it from a distance, trying to pick a starting moment for where things went wrong. Well ... I suppose I'd have to say it all began with Nat. Meeting Nathaniel Cummins at the beginning of the summer before the results came out. And Zoe's father, of course, I'd never met him before, although I'd heard about him.

But even that feels like it happened to someone else. In a sense it did, of course. I was someone else then, someone else entirely.