

Wendy
Harmer
Roadside Sisters


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*For my three fellow travellers—
Brendan, Marley and Maeve*

One

‘This is your half-hour call. Technical crew, performers, front of house—theatre doors are now open. This is your half-hour call.’

The announcement from the tinny speakers on the walls of the dressing rooms at the Athenaeum Theatre stirred everyone into frenzied activity. Meredith leaned towards the make-up mirror and attacked her black spikes of gelled hair. ‘Has anyone seen Corinne yet? Where the hell is she?’

‘I’ll check the other dressing rooms,’ Nina volunteered. ‘Oh God! I feel sick. I’ve been to the loo five times already! And wearing this thing . . .’ she flapped the purple batwings of her gospel robe, ‘it takes twice as long. You want anything from the Green Room? I’m getting something.’

‘White wine. Thanks.’ Annie, sitting on the threadbare carpet, held up her plastic cup for another refill. Nina took it and hoisted her hem. She stepped over Annie’s splayed legs.

‘Haven’t you had enough already?’ Meredith gave Annie an evil-eyed reverse squint through the illuminated mirror.

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‘Tonight’s not a rehearsal! Every one of us has to be on-song, note-perfect.’

Annie rolled her eyes. Praise be to Sister Meredith for restating the bloody obvious. ‘Wait, Nina, I’ll come with you.’ She leapt into the hallway and sniffed the air—a lean-limbed whippet at the entrance of a rabbit burrow.

‘ANNIE! I want everyone back here in five minutes!’ Meredith bellowed after her.

Backstage was a dimly lit labyrinth connected by narrow wooden stairs. The sounds of last-minute rehearsals issued from every dressing room door Annie passed by. She noted the odd tootle from a trumpet, the chorus of a song accompanied by a strummed guitar, stray punchlines to half-heard set-ups—and judging by the anatomical detail of the gags, it sounded as if a good many of them tonight would be about Ronald Reagan’s colon surgery.

In the mid-eighties it seemed as if everyone in Melbourne wanted to be up on stage to be a part of this ‘New Wave’ of entertainment. Almost overnight, a crop of stand-up comedians, sketch comedy ensembles, punk magicians, circus acts and tap dancers (with or without small dogs) had sprouted from fallow suburbs to perform with rented sound systems set up in every empty corner of the city.

And if the organisers of the ‘venue’ wanted to call the night a ‘cabaret’, they also booked a musical act. Hundreds of musicians and singers formed and re-formed into groups, like mounds of tzatziki on a plate shovelled by grilled flat bread at a Greek café. A jazz ensemble was piled into a big band, then separated

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into a ukelele, polka or cowboy band, a musical parody duo, trio or quartet (often with hilarious costumes), and finally what remained was scraped into a gospel choir. If you couldn't play an instrument, weren't funny or a natural performer or had no charisma whatsoever, you could always find yourself a place in a gospel choir.

In the Green Room Annie shook the cardboard box of Coolabah to drain the last drops of riesling into her cup. She sidled up to Nina, who was piling her paper plate with wholemeal pita bread and brown rice salad.

'I'm going for a smoke,' she whispered and headed for the stage door. There would be comedians and musicians out there in the laneway—cigarettes, filthy jokes and laughter. She vaulted up the stairs in high-heeled boots, dragging her Drum Blue tobacco out of the back pocket of her jeans as she went.

'Don't be long! Meredith says . . .'

Nina's voice trailed away as she saw Annie disappear. She turned her attention back to her towering plate and saw, with some guilt, that she had enough food to feed a family of starving Ethiopians. She crammed cold rice into her mouth. Nina always ate when she was nervous. Or depressed, or happy, or bored.

On the way back to her own dressing room, Nina knocked on the door of the cubbyhole next door and peeked inside. She saw, through a thick, silvery haze of dope smoke, Genevieve and Jaslyn sitting back in plastic chairs with their bare feet up on the bench. Jaslyn's silver toe rings glinted, catching the light as she crossed chunky, hairy ankles. Genevieve idly picked at the threads of tobacco on her tongue.

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‘You seen Corinne?’ Nina fanned at the pungent cloud. They shook their heads in reply. Nina groaned. ‘Bloody hell! Meredith will have a heart attack if she doesn’t get here soon.’

‘She needs a manipulation,’ drawled Jaslyn. ‘Her Vishuddha chakra is blocked. Or I could give her a reflexology massage.’ Nina dutifully returned to Meredith and relayed the message.

‘The last thing I need now is Jaslyn’s hippie bullshit!’ snapped Meredith. ‘We’ve got twenty minutes until showtime. The biggest agent in Australia is going to be watching us out there. We’ve got no Corinne, Annie’s half pissed, Briony’s still sticking those damned anti-nuclear leaflets on windscreens in Collins Street and I can smell Genevieve’s joint from here!’

Meredith reached for the garish-hued gown hanging on a coat hook. It was an appropriate enough garment for tonight, she reflected. If they screwed up their performance they might as well be singing at their own funeral.

‘Just go and get Annie. She should be dressed by now,’ Meredith instructed as she pulled the voluminous shroud over her head.

Nina flew out the door and wondered why it had been left to her to round everyone up . . . again. She located the stage door, shoved it open and fell into the laneway. She found Annie there doubled over with laughter in the middle of a group of blokes in scruffy tuxedos whom she recognised as members of the comedy tuba quartet, also on tonight’s bill.

‘Annie,’ Nina flapped her robes in urgent semaphore, ‘Meredith wants you to come now.’

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‘Ah,’ said Annie, pointing at Nina’s improbable get-up. ‘Mother Superior’s calling me for vespers. I’ll catch you guys later. Have a good one!’

Annie paused at the doorway, turned, crossed herself with a grand comic flourish and sang loudly: ‘*Gloria Patri, et Filio, et Spiritui Sancto.*’ She blessed those assembled with the tossed remains of her ice cubes.



With five minutes until curtain-up, the six of them were now squeezed into one dressing room. Meredith paused, mascara in hand, and checked her watch. She hurled the brush at her reflection. ‘We’ll just have to assume Corinne isn’t coming.’

‘No!’ gasped Briony, pausing with her fingers plunged up to the second knuckle in a jar of glitter hair gel. ‘She’s got all the solos and—’

‘I know that!’ Meredith interrupted. ‘We’ll have to share them around. I’ll take the first one. Nina, you can take—’

‘I couldn’t. I just couldn’t!’ wailed Nina. Her curling wand clattered onto the bench. ‘Ohmigod! I have to go again . . .’ Nina pushed her way through to the door and hurtled into the hallway.

‘We’ve got two options,’ said Meredith. ‘We either get out there and give it a go, or give up.’

‘Let’s just fucking do it,’ came Genevieve’s muffled reply from inside the bundle of fabric Annie was now forcibly dragging over her nodding skull.

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Meredith poked at the spikes of hair which were threatening to slump into flat, soft petals. The second last thing she needed was directions from Genevieve. She reeked of marijuana and would be lucky to find her way to the stage, unless they all held hands like preschoolers and led her through the dark.

‘Ladies and gentlemen . . . Welcome to the Athenaeum Theatre for this night of stars . . .’ the PA system popped, crackled.

The activity in the dressing room stilled and became a religious tableau painted by Caravaggio. Each head turned to the speaker on the wall, as if the Voice of God was to be heard there. With the first round of applause from the capacity audience in the auditorium, the tiny dressing room erupted in a riot of elbows, knees and metres of noxious purple polyester. Nina returned and squashed in. They jostled for space to peer at their reflection by the stark light of the naked globes.

‘SHOOSH!’ commanded Meredith. She turned and raised her arms to her small congregation. ‘Look, we’re the last act in the first half. That gives us thirty minutes to get it together.’

‘She’s right,’ declared Briony, still red-faced from grappling with a thousand windscreen wipers and her canvas bag of fluorescent orange A4 flyers. ‘We’re wimmin! Sisters Are Doin’ It For Themselves!’ She sang the Eurythmics hit they all knew from FM radio.

Jaslyn shook out her dreadlocks and slapped two large hands on her thighs. ‘We can do this! Yes we can! I threw the I Ching this morning and it said—’

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‘Let’s just find a place to rehearse,’ Meredith ordered, and charged out the door with her robes flapping behind her like the wings of an avenging angel.

The six of them stood outside on that cold April night and did their best to ‘get it together’, even as they kept an eye on the stage door, hoping that the apparition of Corinne would appear and lead them to salvation. It was not until the stage manager gestured for them to follow him through the dark to the wings that they knew for sure they’d been abandoned.

Huddled in the velvety blackness, they twined their arms around each other’s waists and swayed to a silent hymn. Just metres away microphones were illuminated in celestial spotlights. Meredith was suddenly reminded that this was how people described a near-death experience—you were drawn towards a blinding radiance that was the font of all love and understanding. Then, if it wasn’t your time to go, you were sent back to earth, with gratitude, to live again. At least, that is what Meredith hoped it would be like—she had no desire to die out there and end up in cabaret purgatory. Each woman prayed to her own god for deliverance.

‘Ladies and gentlemen,’ announced the MC, resplendent this evening in a powder blue velvet suit with embroidered lapels, ‘please welcome seven—’ Meredith hissed at the stage. The MC turned and peered under the brim of his black cowboy hat to see her upheld fingers—‘no, six women tonight with heavenly voices. Melbourne’s favourite gospel choir . . . Sanctified Soul!’

Two

It was Nina who picked up the phone and rang Meredith and Annie to suggest the three of them should have dinner to honour the twentieth anniversary of the night the group disbanded. She'd only put the dates together when she was sitting at the dining table sorting through a box of photographs. More raw material to feed her latest mania for scrapbooking. She'd found a poster, gnawed by silverfish, advertising their performance at the Athenaeum in April 1987. There was Sanctified Soul, listed in a stellar line-up of comedians, singers and bands. Nina recognised all the names. Some of the comics now had respectable jobs working on ABC radio, while others had become actors, writers or were in the 'where are they now?' file. The musical performers had likewise met various fates—one of them was in fact teaching Nina's eldest son guitar on Saturday mornings.

The keeping of the Sanctified Soul mythology had fallen to Nina, Annie and Meredith. As the three of them went about

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their business in the city they would sometimes drive past a pub, restaurant or town hall where they'd performed. Some of the spaces had been rebirthed as poker machine lounges or cocktail bars. Once Annie had been standing at the cash register of a Prahran noodle shop and suddenly remembered they had played a gig in the spot now occupied by a despairing giant crab in a fish tank.

When Nina, Annie and Meredith had last met—was it a year ago?—they shared a guilty laugh about who had made the least fortuitous escape. They choked on blueberry brioche as they realised the joke was on them. They were the ones still living in Melbourne. All these years later and they still lived within a fifteen-kilometre radius of where they'd sung that final night.

There had been seven of them back then—a goodly number for a heavenly choir. Genevieve had long since been claimed by a heroin overdose; Briony was now hostage to the tourism industry in Cairns; Jaslyn was working with UNICEF in Afghanistan. And Corinne? Corinne Jacobsen was in Sydney and was the one who had apparently 'made it'. After years of hosting morning television she was now a 'household name'—in the same way you knew the brand name of your favourite bench wipes and chose them at the supermarket, someone had cattily observed. How many of the performers from that night, Nina wondered, had walked out of the theatre and never, ever appeared on a stage again? Like Nina, Annie and Meredith.



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A week after that phone call the three of them were sitting around a linen-covered table in a quiet corner of an Italian restaurant in East Melbourne.

‘Remember the time the sprinklers came on at that crappy motel in Shepparton and drenched us just before we were supposed to leave for the gig?’ asked Nina.

Annie and Meredith laughed. They did remember. And a lot more besides.

‘It can’t be twenty years ago.’ Meredith shook her head in disbelief. It was the fifth time she’d said this since they sat down. ‘You were a baby then, Annie. A baby. I can’t believe we took you on the road with us when you were, what? Eighteen?’

‘Nineteen. Yup! Fresh off the farm.’ Annie grinned. She reached for her wineglass and scraped back her trademark tumble of amber curls. ‘I came to the city to “find myself” and I found all of you instead. I never knew women like you existed!’

‘So, you must be coming up to the big four-oh—’ Nina had been doing her sums—‘and you’ve still not remarried. No kids. That’s a shame.’

‘Knock it off, Nina, you’re sounding like my mother.’ Annie drained her glass and poured herself another. Nina registered the rebuke, but couldn’t help noticing that Annie had hardly touched her veal cutlet. But she’d drunk most of the bottle of Barossa red. Was that how she stayed so slim? What a shame to see all that good meat going to—

‘Nina was always the motherly type.’ Meredith patted the sleeve of Nina’s lilac knitted cotton cardigan and turned to

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Annie. ‘She was always nagging us to have breakfast before we got on the mini-bus.’

‘Nothing’s changed,’ Nina grimaced. ‘But I’d swap nagging six grown women for three teenage boys and a husband any day. They never listen to anything I say. I feel like the invisible woman. But then I look in the mirror and wonder how they could possibly miss me. I think I’ve put on a kilo for every year since the choir broke up.’

‘Come on, you still look fine.’ Meredith waved away her concerns. She was reminded that Nina had always moaned about her weight, even when she had been a curvy size twelve. ‘I remember back then you were on the Israeli Army Diet.’

‘Oh, my God! I was too,’ squealed Nina. ‘Two days apples, two days cheese, two days chicken and two days salad!’ She counted on her fingers. ‘I got as far as cheese and then went on to biscuits.’

Annie reached for her glass again. ‘Christ, imagine naming a diet after the Israeli army these days! About as politically correct as the Palestinian Refugee Camp Diet.’

‘What’s that? I might give it a try.’ Nina found her spoon and scraped up the last of her tiramisu. Annie was reminded that her musings always went over Nina’s head.

‘What I mostly remember,’ said Meredith, ‘is battling Corinne for time in front of the mirror. And Briony with her disgusting bircher muesli—containers of curdled yoghurt and grated apple stashed in her vile canvas backpack.’

Annie spluttered into her glass. ‘That’s right! I had to share a motel room with Jaslyn and her stinking patchouli incense

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sticks! I'd never seen a woman with dreadlocks before. All I could think of were the dags on a sheep's bum!

And then it was Nina's turn: 'Do you ever think of poor Genevieve, with her Indonesian clove cigarettes and God-knows-what-else she was on?'

There was a pause as they all remembered Genevieve, dead now for twelve years, but still alive in their minds, swaying with her hands on her heart singing 'Asleep in Jesus'.

*Asleep in Jesus! Blessed sleep,
From which none ever wakes to weep;
A calm and undisturbed repose,
Unbroken by the last of foes.*

*Asleep in Jesus! Oh, how sweet,
To be for such a slumber meet,
With holy confidence to sing
That death has lost his venom'd sting!*

Five of them had sung that song at Genevieve's funeral. They could only hope that she had indeed found peace at last.

'So, Annie,' Nina paused to lick her spoon—and her fingers—'how's the real estate business going?' Nina thought things must be going rather well, judging by the size of the diamond dress-ring Annie was wearing and the price of the wine she'd ordered (\$60!).

'It's all good. Got a cute little place by the beach in Port Melbourne. One bedroom. Nothing like Meredith's palatial ranch out east, of course.'

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‘Yee-hah!’ Meredith swung her napkin over her head like a cowgirl riding a \$10,000 Miele range oven and five-burner cooktop. ‘I’ve just finished another round of renovations. The “ranch” is looking fabulous. You must come and see. And come into the store if you’re looking for something special for the home. In fact, I’ve got my latest full-colour catalogue right here. I’ll give you a discount.’

‘So you’re still in the house-porn business,’ said Annie as the catalogue was waved in front of her. Meredith dropped it back into her bag. She’d forgotten how sharp Annie’s comments could be. Cutting. Right to the bone. Always delivered with that winning, country-girl ‘whaddya reckon?’ grin.

‘As a matter of fact, Annie,’ Meredith leaned across the table and whispered, ‘I just got a shipment in from Sweden and I am in possession of some serious objects of desire.’

Annie remembered that Meredith had always been clever, quick-witted. How old was she now? Fifty? And still rail-thin and utterly intimidating. She was all cream suede and pearls this evening. The eighties feminist firebrand in overalls who had scaled billboards in the dark to deface sexist advertising had been spray-painted over. In her place was a tasteful mantelpiece portrait of carefully understated eastern suburbs affluence.

‘Ooooh, Swedish appliances!’ Annie teased and pouted glossy red lips. ‘Anything with studs and rubber? Maybe I will stop by.’

Nina had been reading the menu in search of one last treat and had missed most of this exchange. ‘I love your hair. It really suits you,’ she said, admiring Meredith’s slim face framed by sleek silvery layers. ‘When’d you stop colouring it?’

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Meredith ducked Nina's outstretched hand. 'Six months ago. Not long after Donald left. I needed a change. How much of a cliché is that? "Husband walks out, wife runs to hairdresser." Let's order coffee.' Meredith turned away and looked for the waiter.

Nina, as the convener of the occasion and self-appointed cheerleader, was torn. Meredith and Donald had been married for . . . it must be close on thirty years. She needed more information. Then again—Nina checked her watch—it was almost 10 pm. She would just bet that Jordy was still on the bloody computer in his bedroom, that the twins hadn't done their homework and Brad was flaked out on the couch in front of the television. She should probably call home in a few minutes.

'How old are Sigrid and Jarvis now?' Annie asked Meredith.

'Well, that's the big news. Sigrid's getting married in Byron Bay in three weeks. Jarvis is coming back from London for the wedding. He's been working at Sotheby's in Asian art.' The name 'Sotheby's' was offered with some pride. Annie was suitably impressed, although she wasn't sure Nina caught the reference.

'Siggie's getting married? No!' exclaimed Nina. 'I can remember her coming to rehearsals in fairy wings.'

There was a brief silence in which they found themselves in a bare Scouts hall, warm breath visible on a freezing July afternoon. Seven grown women shrieked with alarm to see tiny blonde-headed Sigrid tear off her sparkly wings, and her clothes, and dance across the icy floorboards as her little brother, Jarvis, sitting in his stroller, chortled with delight. The moment came to them as a black-and-white scene from an old movie, cast with people they hardly recognised.

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‘So she’d be . . . what? Twenty-four now?’ Annie was groping her way down the long corridor of the past, trying to make sense of it all.

Nina’s congratulations were heartfelt. ‘Well, that’s wonderful! You must be so proud, Mother of the Bride. Who’s she marrying?’

‘I have absolutely no idea. All I know is that his name’s Charlie. Coffee! Where’s that damned waiter?’

Annie and Nina exchanged a second’s glance that said it all. They’d better order more supplies and settle in for the duration.

‘I’d like a nightcap as well. Something sticky and hideously expensive,’ chirped Annie as she swivelled her diamond ring to catch a sparkle in the low light.

‘And chocolate-dipped apricots. It says on the menu they make them in-house.’ Nina clasped her hands and gave thanks for the imminent blessing of sugar.



‘Did you know Oprah Winfrey and her best friend Gayle have known each other for thirty years?’ Nina leaned across the table. ‘And they still call each other four times a day?’ She picked at crumbs of chocolate with pink-frosted fingernails. Nina wanted a friendship like that. Half the women in the English-speaking world did. Oprah had declared her unconditional love for her friend so often that her sentiments had mutated into a global epidemic of female inadequacy.

‘How hard could it be to get someone on the phone when you’re worth more than a billion dollars?’ Meredith scoffed.

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‘They’re probably gay,’ Annie muttered under her breath as she sipped at her dessert wine.

‘And Oprah says,’ Nina continued, pausing to insert a nail into her mouth and suck, ‘that she feels like their friendship has been designed by some higher power.’

Nina caught the flicker of disbelief telegraphed between her companions. ‘Have you ever had a friend like that?’ she persisted.

‘No, and I wouldn’t want to,’ Meredith stated. ‘I’ve got enough going on in my life. Who’s got the time for all that? It doesn’t sound like a friendship to me. It sounds more like some “co-dependent relationship”. Doesn’t Oprah bang on about that sort of stuff?’

Nina wasn’t to be so easily dismissed. ‘What about you, Annie? Do you spend much time with your girlfriends?’

Annie tipped her glass in Meredith’s direction. ‘Same as you. Actually, most of my friends are men. I can’t stand the way women judge each other all the time. You meet another woman and she runs her eyes up your whole body—from your toes to the top of your head—like she’s doing this inventory. Sizing up a piece of furniture or . . . an overripe avocado.’

Nina guiltily ducked her head. She’d done it. Surveyed Annie’s trim figure, checked the size of her diamonds, taken note of the fabric and cut of her sleek black jacket, and her red lipstick, matching finger- and toenails. What had she deduced? That Annie must be looking at her and thinking she’d let herself go to hell. Nina caught her reflection in the mirror and saw that her hair looked like grated cheese piled on top of a baked potato.

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‘And men don’t have this hideous insecurity about their looks and their lives,’ Annie went on. ‘Or if they do they’re better at keeping it to themselves. I couldn’t stand having someone constantly ringing and whining for reassurance. It’d be exhausting. Bore the shit out of me.’

Nina chose to ignore Annie’s detour sign and ploughed on: ‘I was thinking, while I was going through my scrapbooks, that you are the two friends I’ve known for longest.’ She chased flakes of chocolate around her plate with a plump thumb. The rest of the sentence was left unsaid, a silent accusation: *And you never ring me, ask me how I’m going, take any interest in my life.*

Annie thought of her pack of cigarettes in her satin purse. She silently cursed the ‘no smoking’ signs and raised her hand for a Flaming Sambucca.

Meredith sneaked a look at her watch and peered into her half-full coffee cup. She took a deep breath. ‘So, Nina, how *is* everything with you?’



Some time around midnight—over the sound of waiters stacking chairs and clearing glasses from nearby tables—there was an *incident*. It had begun tidily enough as a polite conversation between acquaintances but had quickly slipped into a maudlin, syrupy morass of shared tears and secrets no-one had quite anticipated or was in any way prepared for. The result was—and everyone was hazy on the details of who said what, when, exactly—that they agreed they needed more than a few hours

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together to celebrate their loving friendship of the past twenty years. The unlikely plan Nina hit upon was to drive all of them in her father-in-law's motorhome from Melbourne to Byron Bay. It was a two-thousand-kilometre journey and she estimated it would take ten days. And if her father-in-law picked up the van in Byron, they could fly back after the wedding and be home in less than two weeks.

When she was later accused of setting up an ambush, Nina was prepared to accept liability . . . up to a point. It was true that she had first brought up the idea because she was the one with the vehicle in her driveway, but it was, in fact, Meredith who had cried. That had been a shock to everyone around the table, no-one more so than Meredith. If there hadn't been tears, they could have made their excuses and moved on. It would also have helped if Annie hadn't taken Meredith in her arms and given that heart-wrenching speech about 'mothers and daughters' and 'once-in-a-lifetime opportunities' and 'eternal regrets', and then brought up her own latest depressing tarot card reading for good measure.

In the end, they were all culpable—including the waiter who had brought the complimentary round of 70 per cent proof grappa and said it was a wonderful 'digestivo'.

When they said their goodbyes that night on the footpath, they had hugged and kissed and squealed with excitement at their forthcoming adventure. No-one dared to voice her misgivings and bear the bad karma of ruining the Oprah *Ab-hah!* So it wasn't until each of them was driving home (after joking that the alcohol in the tiramisu had probably put them over the limit,

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and deciding to chance it anyway) that all three began to panic and individually consider driving their cars straight off the Punt Road bridge into the Yarra River at the prospect of spending almost two weeks on the road together and talking to each other forty times a day.

Wrestling steering wheels back from the road's edge and checking rear-vision mirrors for flashing blue lights, each began to trawl their memories for the details on how their fellowship had survived the past two decades. Did they even qualify as friends, they wondered? If the length of time they had known each other counted for anything, then they were. But how much did they know about each other's lives, really? The three of them were as unlikely companions as you could find, but they were part of a matched set, like 1950s kitchen canisters of Flour, Sugar and Tea.

Despite their doubts about the pact they had made, they found themselves humming 'Swing Low, Sweet Chariot'. They had crossed the Yarra River—muddy and wide—and were being carried home in their various chariots: Meredith in her Audi Quattro with the pristine chocolate leather upholstery; Nina in the Honda Odyssey, which had twenty filthy football jumpers and thirty-five socks in the back seat; and Annie in her Mini Cooper, its ashtray overflowing, three empty vodka mixer bottles on the floor and now a good three months out of rego.