

MY
CANDLELIGHT
NOVEL

Joanne Horniman


ALLEN & UNWIN

PROLOGUE

ONE MORNING I WOKE and knew that I'd been talking in my sleep again.

I'd been dreaming of my mother of course – on my sleep-talking nights I always did. Kate tells me that my words were unintelligible, like a foreign language – but that was the way I had to speak to my mother, because what I wanted to say to her could not be said.

Hetty was sitting up in her cot, watching the pale light through the curtains on the French doors, and I lay there gazing at her for ages, loving every bit of her. I observed her tender neck and the roundness of the back of her dark head. And all my love for her distilled into the sight of that neck, so innocent, and the dark hair lying softly against it. How silent she was! Sometimes I thought that she'd never learn to speak, but spend her whole life mutely taking in the world, storing up her observations. When she saw I was awake, she grasped the bars of her cot and pulled herself to her feet, holding up one arm in a gesture of supplication. I took her into my arms; she smelt of talcum powder and urine, like an old woman. I fed her at once and changed her nappy and got her ready for a walk.

I pushed the pram along the path that ran parallel to the river, where overhanging fig trees made a dark tunnel through the mist. The riverbank was a wilderness of rainforest trees, black in the pre-dawn light. And as I trudged I recited poetry in my head; I often did this because walking and poetry had a rhythm that belonged together. My best trudging poem was 'A Prayer for my Daughter', by W. B. Yeats. It was a poem full of love and hope, for what else is there when you have a child?

The only sound was the rhythm of my feet and the wheels of the pram on the path, muffled by wet leaves. Moisture dripped from the trees. My hair must have been jewelled with tiny beads of it. When I put my hand to my head it came away wet.

In the gloom I half expected something magical to appear: a witch with a wart on her nose, Rumpelstiltskin, or for preference a dozen handsome brothers, one with a swan's wing instead of an arm. But it was just early-morning Lismore as usual. I came to the deserted Court House, and the council car park, where I saw a man, his face tenderly blurred from lack of sleep, who looked as though he was wandering home from a drinking session.

When I got to the end of our road, instead of continuing down the main street, I turned right. There, a rattly bridge sprang across the river in a sort of leap of faith, from a shop called Planet Music to a hotel called the Winsome, which was a charming building of old, dark brick, with verandahs, overlooking the river.

On the bridge I paused to peer over the railing into the muddy water, and the dream I'd woken from came back to me. I'd been trying to write to my mother, but every attempt failed. I'd found myself writing on plastic (too shiny, and the ink wouldn't take), or on planks of fresh, smooth pine – but the words I attempted came out garbled, and then the ink faltered and gave out.

There was almost always a man pacing up and down on the bridge singing songs to the dawn, a sweet-faced man with curly grey hair, though he wasn't so old. He always smiled and waved to me and kept singing, and the homeless people who slept under the bridge yelled at him to shut up. I don't think he was a homeless person, just someone who had been unlucky in love, like me, and I felt the singing and pacing must help him.

I continued down Bridge Street, past the Winsome Hotel and various old shops and houses and the café where Kate used to work. As I passed the hotel, I always looked up at the side of the building where a white mixing bowl sat on a shelf inside the window of some scullery or kitchen. I loved the ordinary domesticity of it, the white bowl against the dark brick wall. My life at this time revolved around seeing each morning the stillness of the white bowl, and the singing man (or perhaps the still, pale face of the man as he paused to watch the sun rise in the sky; and the singing bowl in the window).

The place where I walked next was a run-down area that the local council had attempted to prettify, by plonking down a rusty old tractor in the middle of the roundabout. At that point I stopped to contemplate yet another old pub, a petrol station, a vegetarian café and a place that sold saddles. From there, the road went past wonky timber houses in the midst of paddocks, and my old school. There was a compound where the school kept farm animals, and I always took Hetty from her pram to pat the horse that hung its head hopefully over the fence, and to call to the cows and calves. They never responded, regarding us with deep suspicion. Then we moved on, over a small bridge that led to the other end of our street, and home.

None of this was ordinary or dull for either of us. I relished this morning ramble with my baby, crossing the river twice over different bridges, making a neat, circular walk, almost an odyssey.

Or it would have been an odyssey if the journey had been more adventurous and marked by many changes of fortune (though who is to say that each wandering walk was not a small adventure, that I did not come home each day a little changed by it?).

At the end of our journey, Samarkand squatted, inscrutable as always, overlooking the river.

The house is a crumbling two-storey weatherboard place on tall stumps; it's a guesthouse, of the cheapest and shabbiest kind. But there is something magical and other-worldly about it. Because it's on the river, in that place where earth and water meet, it sits on a threshold, a margin, a place of change. And it was in this muddy, watery place that I dreamed *I* might one day be transformed.

So this is my story. It will be about birth and death and love and sex, and I will tell it very quiet and slow, so if you want big bangs of action and excitement it's best you stop reading right now.

I will make it something after my own heart, tender and dark, a little candlelight novel, started this late summer night as my lover and baby daughter sleep in the big bed in the corner and my sister Kate leans thoughtful and sleepless against the railing of the dark verandah outside ... and I can tell already it won't even be a novel, but a tell-all memoir of my whole life so far ... but didn't Jack Kerouac write that we have got to *confess* our literature ...

CHAPTER THREE

I AM A READING girl, with a pale face, and glasses. People who become enthralled by the world of books, as I am, are often thought to have dull lives, but I feel that my own life is made of the stuff of myth. Or anyway, I intend to make it so.

Some say that books are an escape from *real life*. But the beauty of books is that they are crammed with real life. No one is more aware of *real life*, in all its trivia and glory, than a novelist. In novels you will find mention of things like measles, chocolate, ferry crossings (and eating chocolate on ferry crossings), train journeys, adultery (and adultery on train journeys), bacon, junkies, the Sydney Harbour Bridge, gas ovens, lost jewellery, wedding dresses, shower caps, snot, randy bakers, honey, miso soup, spider webs, lost mothers, abandoned children, rainforests, immortality, angels, and toe rot.

Not to mention love. Novels are full of life's impurities, and love must be the most impure thing of all.

But now, with Hetty growing older, I couldn't read as much as I'd have liked. It's very easy to spend almost all day reading with a small baby at your breast, but now she needed to be talked to, and played with, and be read aloud to something other than

the Great Works of literature. She had progressed from the plays of Oscar Wilde to board books full of pictures of ducklings and butterflies.

I made a habit of carrying her around the house and naming things for her. ‘This is a wooden spoon, Hetty,’ I would tell her, holding it aloft as I helped Lil make a cake. That day, I had occasion to point out the washing machine, the vacuum cleaner, and the kitchen sink. I hid behind the sheets on the line and popped my head out at her, which made her laugh immoderately.

I took her across the road to the river, and showed her Kate’s fig tree, a special, almost sacred place, since it was where Kate had dreamed her childhood away. Magpies, empty chip packets, and the greyhound racing track across the river completed Hetty’s education that day, and afterwards we were both so worn out we went to our room for a nap.

That afternoon, while I was on my way to the kitchen, the phone in the hall rang. I lifted the receiver and heard the familiar chimes of the HomeLink signal.

‘Lil?’ Kate’s voice was so small it was almost inaudible.

‘No. It’s me. How are you?’

There was a long, shuddering intake of breath. ‘I’m lonely.’ She drew the word out so that it was a wail of self-pity. *Looooooooonely.*

(O Kate!)

There was a sniffle on the other end.

‘Where are you?’

‘In a phone box on King Street.’

I put Hetty down onto the floor, where she crept over to the corner of the dim hallway and found something that interested her, I couldn’t see what.

Leaning up against the wall, I pulled down a strip of photos from where I’d wedged them behind the pegboard over the phone table. Kate had recently had them taken in a photo booth. She had cut her long hair very short; she’d done it herself to save money and it was a bit ragged, but it suited her. I studied the progression the photos took, from the first caught-unawares shot, to carefully wary-looking, to increasingly confident to extravagantly posed.

‘Stop crying, you eejit. Now. Describe for me exactly what you can see right at this moment.’

‘O *God*, Sophie!’

‘What? So you can see God, can you?’

‘Noo-ooo! Okay... I see an ugly little tan-and-white terrier tied up to a post.’

‘Why is it ugly?’

‘Eyes too close together. Horrible gingery colour. Um... I can see a boy with a ring through his eyebrow. He looks really happy about something. Now the woman who must own the dog has just untied it... she’s wearing a coat like a hessian sack, and her hair is all sticking up at the back of her head as though she’s slept on it but I think she might have paid a lot of money to get it looking as terrible as that. Is that enough? I think I’m okay now...’

But she wasn’t.

‘O Sophie... It’s just that I don’t know anyone. No one I can really talk to. And I was so sure when I came down here I’d make heaps of friends and all sorts of exciting things would happen. And with Alex still away in Europe... I really thought he’d be coming back, you know? Marjorie’s in Brisbane... there’s no you and Hetty and Lil...’

‘And Sophie... there’s just something about the long shadows on a winter afternoon, and the light in my room, so tobacco-brown and gloomy, and...’

'How's Hetty?' she finished up in a feeble voice.

'She's fine. Currently about to put a dead cockroach she just found on the floor into her mouth.'

Lil appeared in the doorway that led from the kitchen into the hallway. 'Is that my Katie?' she said. She picked Hetty up, took the cockroach from her with distaste, and threw it away. Handing Hetty over to me, she took the receiver.

I left her to talk, and went to Kate's room. It was exactly as she had left it earlier in the year.

Soon after she'd started university Kate had written:

Dear Sophie,

At last, my life is like a book!

I'm sitting at my table on a Friday night and my teeth are aching with excitement. I've lit a candle in honour of writing to you, and when I've finished I will blow it out. (If Lil is reading this she should be assured that I'm also writing with the aid of electric light and am not ruining my eyes: the candle is there to gaze at and to steady my focus on you, my dear reader.)

Outside lies King Street, Newtown. I cannot sleep for lights flashing through the window (nor do I want to). Living here is like fronting a different kind of river than the one that flows past Samarkand: tonight this river is in flood, with people and traffic going past. There are short, sharp bursts of voices and vehicles above the steady background hum.

Earlier, I went out and joined the throng; most people were with groups of friends, but there were many solitary people like myself. I bought a takeaway kebab and came back here and sat on the windowsill to eat it, looking down into the street.

But already I know the bed, my piles of books, the one cupboard I have for clothes, all too well. The problem is that nothing here will move position unless I move it. I miss coming into my room and knowing that you've been there, by a dent in the quilt not made by me, a black hair left on the pillow, mandarin peel scattered over the desk, or the fact that one of my books has disappeared, perhaps forever.

Whenever I come back to my room here I want to shout, 'Hello -o -o? Is there anyone home?' I would have to answer myself, whispering a small, meek, 'Yes'.

I don't know what university will be like yet, as I've only had one week of lectures. I know no one, of course, and most of the other students seem to know each other from high school, and they mostly live at home, so they disappear at the end of the day.

On our reading list is Ulysses. I've bought a second-hand copy that is at least four hundred years old, a big old doorstopper of a book, disintegrating and well-thumbed. The cover is black, with only the words Ulysses and James Joyce in large white letters on it.

And the cover has been stuck back on with masking tape, and inside there are already notes from previous students. I've dipped into it, and some of it is wonderful. The bit I like best so far is the one that begins, Mr Leopold Bloom ate with relish the inner organs of beasts and fowls.

It describes him going out and buying a kidney for breakfast, cooking and burning it, and throwing the burnt bit to the cat. He takes his frowzy wife Molly a cup of tea, and goes and sits on the toilet reading the paper. (By the way, do you know that Irish cats say Mrkrgrao?)

Some of the book is almost unreadable, and some totally unreadable. At one of those parts a previous student has written in the margin: *Why did I do this course? I will may feel the same by the end, but for now, Sophie, it is sublime! And actually, the unreadable bits somehow make it even better, because life is mysterious and never completely knowable, don't you think?*

My teeth seem to be back to normal now, so I think I'll try to get some sleep. So I'll blow out the candle and say goodnight.

*My best and most fervent love to Hetty and Lil,
Your sister Kate*

I picked up one of Kate's books (*Nausea*, by Jean-Paul Sartre) and took it to the bed and lay down with Hetty. Kate had written with such excitement about her new life, and now she was lonely. I had not written back to her. I am too lazy. Besides, she knows I seldom confide in her, but she is such an innocent, and insists on pouring out her heart anyway.

Opening the book, I found a long strand of her hair that she had left between the pages.

A relic.

Kate was in the habit of absently taking one of her own hairs and marking her place with it. This hair was like a filament of copper wire, but finer. It caught the light and flashed out the colours red, gold, mauve, and even green (yes!). My sister has extraordinary hair.

I remember how I once unexpectedly found one of my own hairs caught between the pages of a book, the shock of recognising it as mine. It was long, coarse and black, the dull black of wood stoves or pieces of ash.

Now, finding Kate's hair was like finding a part of myself.

My sister Kate: who as a child had a tiny, pale, porcelain solemn face and thin red hair lying flat to her scalp. Who now lived in a room above a greengrocer in the inner Sydney suburb of Newtown. She shared a kitchen and bath, and the other residents left squid hanging out of bowls in the refrigerator. Even the forlorn appearance of the little legs dangling over the side of the bowl was enough to make Kate melancholy.

She lived uneventfully, going to university and then home again. She longed to meet someone she felt an affinity with... There was Alex of course, a boy from Sydney whom she'd met here in Lismore last year, but he had gone to Europe and had not yet come back. He wrote to her, which left her with feelings of lingering hope...

She lived on sardines and tinned tomatoes and longed for Turkish delight. She missed us and she was lonely...

As I was lonely. And that was the truth, it really was. Even though I said I relished our walks (and I did!), when I got up early every morning and strapped Hetty into her pram and walked her across the river and then home again, I was lonely, lonely.

Not lonely for Hetty's father Marcus, not any more, or even always especially for Kate – it was a loneliness of the light perhaps, as Kate said, or a loneliness of the world being so large and we just small people in it. Lonely, lonely, said the wheels of the pram under the silent misty early morning fogs, lonely on the concrete path, lonely on the soft fallen leaves. The man who sang on the bridge at dawn knew lonely, so did the people who slept under it. All of us know what lonely is, and we accustom ourselves to it, but that does not stop the loneliness of the light and the world and all the people in it.

But in truth I walked not always unaccompanied. Sometimes Oscar Wilde (Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde) walked beside

me, silent companion of the soul. I felt such an affinity with this witty and outrageous Irish playwright. If he was still alive, he would be more than one hundred and fifty years old, though he didn't even live to be fifty. He said once, 'I have never learned anything except from people younger than myself', so I like to think he enjoyed my company. I always imagined him in a beautifully tailored long black coat with an astrakhan collar (astrakhan: horrible concept, made of the skin of young lambs – or worse, even *unborn* lambs – with wool like fur). But I'm working from wild surmise, as I don't truly know whether he wore astrakhan or not.

And as we walked, Oscar strewed flowers about him, gladioli and lilies.

And did the people of Lismore catch them and take them home?

Well, some thrust them aside angrily; some trod them underfoot, not seeing them (or indeed him, or even me and Hetty for that matter). But others caught them gladly and took them back to their manky kitchens and displayed them in old juice bottles, or in 1930s vases of indescribable ugliness inherited from their maiden great-aunts.

I had spent the autumn and part of that winter reading the works of the Brontës. Emily may have given us the archetypal soulmates in Catherine and Heathcliff, but Charlotte is my favourite. The life of feeling and passion was everything to her. She gave her heroines what she could never have in real life, and the undertones are so lustful I believe her books must be the sexiest ever written. I first read *Jane Eyre* at fourteen; that book is so depraved that it ought to be kept out of the way of impressionable young girls.

Hetty learnt to crawl while Lucy Snowe waited for her Professor in *Villette*. She tore the cover from *Jane Eyre* while I

was reading *Wuthering Heights*. She chewed the spine of *Shirley* and smeared butter and Vegemite over the portrait of Charlotte Brontë on the inside cover. Despite her propensity to destruction, and her frequent tears and grizzles, Hetty was a happy baby, and I think that is the most that one can hope for in babies, that pure and unselfconscious happiness which must surely be our natural state.

And while it seemed to me sometimes that I had a meagre life, and the often meagre lives of the women in the Brontë books shaded into and coloured my own, the richness did as well, the glory of being alive. I would get up at night and wander the house in my threadbare chenille dressing gown the colour of old roses (and sometimes, it seemed, the scent of them as well), then go to the kitchen and sit and stare, my hands cupped around a bowl of hot chocolate (which somehow tastes best in bowls). Or I'd lie on my side with a book open next to me, and Hetty asleep in her cot nearby, while the wind wuthered around the house. And at those times I'd think how lucky I was, really. I had books and a baby and a room of my own and what else does a girl need?