

Book of
Lost Threads

Tess Evans




ALLEN & UNWIN

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organisations, places and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

First published in 2010

Copyright © Tess Evans 2010

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or by any information storage and retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publisher. The Australian *Copyright Act 1968* (the Act) allows a maximum of one chapter or 10 per cent of this book, whichever is the greater, to be photocopied by any educational institution for its educational purposes provided that the educational institution (or body that administers it) has given a remuneration notice to Copyright Agency Limited (CAL) under the Act.

Allen & Unwin
83 Alexander Street
Crows Nest NSW 2065
Australia
Phone: (61 2) 8425 0100
Fax: (61 2) 9906 2218
Email: info@allenandunwin.com
Web: www.allenandunwin.com

Cataloguing-in-Publication details are available
from the National Library of Australia
www.librariesaustralia.nla.gov.au

ISBN 978 1 74237 233 4

Text design by Emily O'Neill
Set in 11.5/15 pt Adobe Caslon by Post Pre-press Group, Australia
Printed and bound in Australia by Griffin Press

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

 **Mixed Sources**
Product group from well-managed
forests, and other controlled sources
www.fsc.org Cert no. SGS-COC-005088
© 1996 Forest Stewardship Council

The paper in this book is FSC certified.
FSC promotes environmentally responsible,
socially beneficial and economically viable
management of the world's forests.

*Dedicated to my father, Colin Websdale,
a great dad and a great lover of books.*

*Rebirth us with Wisdom, as
we are knitted once again
back into wholeness.*

—From 'Ariadne's Blessing', Janet Bristow, 1998

*Others also there are who perished unknown; their sacrifice is not
forgotten, and their names, though lost to us, are written in the
Books of God.*

—Inscription from the Shrine in the Scottish War Memorial.
Reproduced with the permission of the Trustees of the
Scottish War Memorial, Edinburgh.

I

Moss and Finn

‘HELLO. DOES MICHAEL CLANCY LIVE here?’

Silence. The door between them remained shut.

‘Michael Clancy. Michael *Finbar* Clancy?’

‘Who’s asking?’

‘Moss—Miranda. Miranda Sinclair.’

Moss wasn’t a spiteful person in general, but in later moments of honest self-appraisal, she had to admit that spite was one of the less savoury elements in her decision to seek out Michael Clancy. She had nurtured this ignoble spite for months. It had walked with her up the path to his house, stuck like some disgusting mess to her shoe. And it was directed at Linsey. Linsey, who loved her. Amy’s softness offered no resistance and Moss needed hard edges on which to hone this uncharacteristic desire for revenge.

She had checked the timetable when she bought her ticket. The journey from Melbourne usually took just over two hours, but that day the train was delayed at Fosters Creek for nearly an hour, which meant that Moss missed the connecting bus. It was close to eight by the time she arrived, tired, cold and

hungry, wishing she'd never come. Never come and never heard of Michael Finbar Clancy. Amy had warned her: *He won't want to know*. But she'd come anyway.

The chill rain numbed her face as she half-sprinted in the direction indicated by the driver. She stopped in front of a shabby weatherboard house, alive to the tension that crawled over her scalp; alive to the tingling root of every hair.

There was no knocker and she felt around in vain for a bell, finally rapping, louder than necessary, on the glass panel.

'Hello. Does Michael Clancy live here?'

Silence.

'Michael Clancy. Michael *Finbar* Clancy?'

There was a reluctant scraping sound as the door opened a niggardly few centimetres and a soft, uncertain voice squeezed its way through. 'Who's asking?'

'Moss—Miranda. Miranda Sinclair.'

The sliver of light from inside revealed four surprisingly neat fingers.

'I don't know any Mirandas.' The fingers withdrew and the door began to close but not before Moss managed to wedge her foot in the gap.

'Please. I've come all the way from Melbourne. It's freezing out here—not to mention the rain.'

On the other side of the door, Finn was at a loss. Visitors were rare. Especially after dark. He considered his options. He could close the door and that would be that. He could continue to talk through the crack. Or he could simply let her in. The second option seemed safest. The first was rude and the third was risky. It meant asserting some authority, though. Not really

Book of Lost Threads

his forte. His mind searched for something to say and caught at the tail of her plea.

‘It’s been raining since lunchtime,’ he said.

‘And it’s still raining and I’m soaked. Please. Just let me in so I can talk to you.’

A pause. ‘What do you want?’ he asked warily. ‘I’ll let you in if you tell me.’ Regretting these words even as he spoke.

‘I just need to talk to you. I can’t shout it through the door. You knew my mother once. She told me all about you.’ Moss was overstating the case, certain that Finn couldn’t possibly know anything about what her mother might have told her.

‘*All* about me? Who is she then—God Almighty herself?’ Finn’s uneasy chuckle erupted into an embarrassing snort.

‘Please. Just let me in.’ There were tears in her voice.

He applied his eye to the crack. A small figure was huddled under the inadequate shelter of the narrow verandah. ‘Alright. You can come in for a bit.’ A grudging invitation at best.

The door scraped open to reveal a petite young woman—in her early twenties, maybe; a sodden waif with dark hair plastered in tendrils around her urchin face. Her japara was soaked, and he was dismayed to see that she was shivering. He knew then that he had no choice. Noting with a sinking heart her ominously large backpack, he stepped aside to let her in.

‘You’re wet through. Take off your coat and come and sit here by the stove.’ He led her down a dimly lit corridor to a large kitchen where he indicated an armchair clumsily draped with a purple chenille bedspread. ‘I’ll put on the kettle. Are you hungry?’

She nodded and Finn busied himself around the kitchen, making a pot of strong black tea and cutting two thick slices of bread which he tried to ram into the toaster. Muttering curses at the recalcitrant bread, he shaved off the excess crusts. It was still a snug fit. 'There,' he said, pleased. 'It won't take a minute now.'

His guest sat obediently by the large wood-fired stove, warming her hands and looking curiously at Finn and then hungrily at the toaster. Finn had the hunched shoulders of a man uncomfortable with his height; with his long thin legs and narrow face he looked for all the world like an apologetic stork. *Excuse me*, she could hear him murmur at stork meetings and stork functions, *do you mind if I sit here, in this seat at the back?* And there he would sit looking morosely at the more successful storks, the better dressed storks, the richer storks, the whole *network* of storks as they mingled and discussed storkly issues with a confidence, a conviction that he could only wonder at.

The toaster, struggling to expel its burden, gave a kind of *whummp* that was the signal for Finn to perform an extraction and proceed to the generous application of butter.

'Jam? Honey? I'm out of Vegemite, I'm afraid.' He looked at Miranda with eyes so blue, so kind, that she burst into tears. 'If I'd known you were coming I would have got some Vegemite,' he said, bewildered at her extreme reaction to its absence. He hovered over her, flapping his hands, making little soothing noises.

'Honey's fine,' she sniffled. 'I'm just cold and tired.'

His grin was unpractised. 'Honey it is then.' He indicated for her to come and sit at the table and poured tea into two

Book of Lost Threads

mugs. ‘Now,’ he said, stirring his tea nervously. ‘What shall I call you? Miranda’s nice, but it is a bit of a mouthful.’

‘You’re telling me.’ She smiled suddenly. ‘Wait till you hear my full name—Miranda Ophelia Sinclair. There’s a mouthful for you. I hardly ever get called Miranda. Everyone calls me Moss. It’s from—’

‘From your initials. Very clever. A good solution.’ He looked at her with something like admiration. ‘Moss is a very good solution.’

‘Mother Linsey doesn’t think so. She used to insist on calling me Miranda and I would refuse to answer and we’d go on like that for hours. Days, sometimes. But in the end, on my thirteenth birthday, she gave me a book, some sheet music and a new beach towel and promised to call me Moss from then on. It was a good birthday. Even her card said *Happy Birthday, Moss*. Mother Amy only called me Miranda when she was mad at me about something.’

Finn’s alarm had returned when he heard the name Linsey. ‘You said before that your mother knows me,’ he said. ‘What’s her name? Where do I know her from?’

Moss licked honey from her fingers and stole a look at his face. Now the moment had come, panic constricted her throat. The bravado with which she had set out had been washed away with the rain. She swallowed painfully. ‘Amy,’ she mumbled. ‘Her name is Amy Sinclair. You knew her from before I was born.’

Finn slopped his tea as he set down the mug. ‘Amy Sinclair . . . Amy and Linsey.’ He stood up abruptly and fussed with the kettle. It was so long ago. The person he was then

no longer existed. What was he supposed to say to this . . . this *interloper* who had materialised on his doorstep? Crouching down on his haunches, he poked at the fire and looked at her covertly from under his eyebrows. She was obviously waiting for him to say something. He frowned. There was something not quite right . . . What was it? It came to him suddenly.

‘Obviously you didn’t turn out according to plan,’ he observed in what he hoped was a normal voice. ‘What did Linsey have to say about that?’

Moss flinched. Despite Linsey’s assurances to the contrary, she had always believed she was a disappointment and here at last was confirmation. She’d been right all along. Her resentment was justified. Her pain was real. She looked straight at Finn, her tone carefully neutral.

‘She left just before my fifteenth birthday. Mum says it was for the best.’

‘Possibly . . . Possibly . . .’

Finn lapsed again into silence. What more could he say? He saw that the fire was burning low, and with some relief escaped out the back door, muttering that he needed to get more wood. He grabbed his tobacco pouch on the way out and stood on the back verandah, rolling a cigarette. Shielding the flame he lit up and drew deeply, his mind a kaleidoscope of shifting images—a tall blonde woman, a small dark woman, a rose garden. Gilt chairs. A glass jar . . .

Moss was grateful for time in which to compose herself and looked curiously around the room. Considering the outside of the house with its sagging verandah and peeling paint, inside it was, well—*cosy*. The kitchen was warmed by the wood-fired

Book of Lost Threads

stove where the large black kettle bubbled and steamed on the hob. On the mantelpiece above, a sturdy little clock measured the minutes with an uncompromising tick. The table, piled at one end with newspapers, was old and heavy, with a slight depression in the middle from years of scrubbing. None of the chairs matched. Two were padded dining chairs, one with worn green velvet upholstery, the other with a brocade of doubtful pattern and hue. The sideboard, probably quite handsome in its day, retained some of its former dignity if little of its original surface. It had what antique dealers call *patina*—years of patina, she guessed. On every inch of its shelves, glasses jostled with plates, bowls and mugs, and books teetered in ziggurat formation among cooking utensils, pens, pencils, notebooks and a self-important orange ashtray. A steel spike speared an alarming amount of what were probably bills, and a brave little jar of wild violets sat precariously but hopefully on the edge of it all. The walls, roughly plastered, were a cheerful if streaky yellow, and several tattered art posters were affixed with what must have been whole rolls of sticky tape. They were bold and colourful. Matisse? It didn't matter; she felt comfortable here. Living with Amy, Moss was used to clutter. She closed her eyes for a moment, starting guiltily when she heard Finn stamp his feet on the backdoor mat as he returned with an armload of wood.

'Still raining,' he said. Perhaps if he ignored those wounded eyes, she would go away and leave him be. She had breached his first line of defence and he felt besieged. Rightly aggrieved. At all costs, they mustn't continue where they'd left off. Change the topic of conversation—to what? Anything. Anything but Amy and Linsey.

He sat down, not sure what to do with his hands. 'I understand what you were saying about being called Moss. I like people to call me Finn—for Finbar, you know. Your mother, and my mother too, for that matter, called me Michael, but he was an archangel, you see—not me at all.' His tone became judicial. 'Now, you might well point out that Saint Finbar was a bishop. And that's certainly true. From Cork, he was. But most of his life was spent in a monastery. Did you know he was even a hermit at one time? You can see that's more me than an archangel. I just shortened Finbar to Finn. It's easier.' Having completed his story Finn sat back, hoping his diversion had been successful.

Moss was defeated. She was warm now, and tired. So tired that her head was sinking under its own weight. Fearing that Finn would continue to babble about bishops and angels, she decided to take the initiative.

'Look, I know it's a bit of a cheek, but can I doss down in front of the fire? It's too late to find somewhere else to stay and I brought a sleeping bag and a blow-up mattress. I won't be any trouble. You can send me away in the morning, if you want. I guess we both need time to think before we, you know, talk properly.' Did he understand her meaning? she wondered, both hoping and fearing that he did.

Despite the abruptness of her request, Finn was relieved, on two counts. There was no accommodation to be had in town now that it was past closing time at the pub, and he couldn't simply send a young woman away into the night. Regardless of why she had come, he was now responsible for her safety, at least in the short term. There was also his realisation that his

Book of Lost Threads

Finbar story had seriously depleted his fund of small talk. The only things left to say were too big to approach tonight.

‘Good idea,’ he said. ‘Let’s call it a night. Bathroom’s through there.’ He put the covers on the stove top and ensured that the back door was secure. Picking up the orange ashtray, he headed off down the short corridor, but hesitated at his bedroom door. ‘Um . . . goodnight, then, Moss.’

‘Goodnight, Finn.’

Finn sat on the edge of his bed and rolled another cigarette. He was trying to give up yet again and was down to four a day. His routine had always included a cigarette before bedtime and he often smoked in bed even though he knew it was dangerous. But tonight he sat upright while he drew in the acrid smoke. With someone else in the house, his carelessness could have serious consequences. Abstracted, he smoked his second and then third cigarette before climbing into bed. His sleep was fitful and he struggled to keep at bay the dreams that drew him back to the house with the rose garden, back to the house where Amy and Linsey had greeted him with so much hope, all those years ago.