

Flying

A novel

By
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Part One

What images return

1

I know this place as well as my own skin, every curve, every furrowed line, more colour than form, lapis lazuli melting into aquamarine, the bleached arc of sand edging walls of textured jade. The rush of breaking waves, leaves rippling against leaves, a tui calling; the sounds flow through me like a river, lifting me up and up, higher into the dream, where gannets turn on wheels of air.

And in the distance the island, floating like a dream between sea and sky.

A girl on the beach, her hair a bright ribbon in the sun. She seems to draw the light to her. I want to stay but my dream moves me on. Behind the beach a house, in the house a room, and in the room a man between youth and middle age. So much pain.

My son. My beloved son is here

Now my dream lets me wait. Is this my face this mask of skin and bone? Why could I not have dreamt myself as a child like the girl on the beach? This is the body that won races, was once a child. The body that once bore the man standing in the river of white curtain.

This poor, broken thing

2

The room breathes to the rhythm of the cerulean sea. The murmur of waves, the rattle of letters, of open books and magazines shifting in the circling air, the whispering of the restive curtains.

Chris stands motionless by his mother's bed. He has come so far, and now he finds himself dreading the moment of her waking. He turns away and walks to the open French windows, trying to build a case of steel around his pain, wrapping it deep inside himself. Framed against the blue on blue of sea and sky, he lets the curtains twist around him, an old childhood habit, feeling the reassuring caress of the fabric on his skin. On the beach, Josie bends to collect shells. Once he played on that same beach, his skin darkening through elastic summers, secure in the knowledge that the world was immutable. Perhaps the cancer had been there in his mother even then, a thread of darkness invisible in the sunlight.

Behind him, his mother's voice. "Chris."

The turning of his head seems to take an eternity. He tries to smile, moving as if through water to the bed where his mother waits. So much love. It seems to Chris that she must burn up with its intensity.

She takes his hands, smothers them with kisses, holding, holding. In spite of all the distances between them, the child and mother remain.

Josie hears her father calling but chooses not to respond immediately. In front of her, a gannet rides the uplift from a cresting wave, wing tip tracing a line in the hollowing green wall for a moment before the wave crashes down green into white, lifting the gannet into the sky on an invisible fountain of air. The bird banks tightly and spears

down again into a cloud of small fish flickering like silver tinsel inside the green mound of the following swell. The gannet disappears into a plume of white; a moment, then it bobs to the surface like a dazzling cork, a fish struggling in its beak.

"Josie."

The voice closer now, that familiar, impatient edge.

"Didn't you hear me calling?"

"No," she says, bending to pick up another shell, carefully avoiding eye contact.

She knows how to find the spaces for resistance.

"Josie, please don't do this. Don't make things more difficult than they are."

And Josie knows that they are very difficult indeed. She had not wanted to come, not at all. But her mother had asked her to.

Her father sees some of this on her face. His tone softens. "Your grandmother's awake."

The house is cool and still after the bright movement of the beach, the walls gathering shadows and binding them with silence into the corners of the rooms. An unseen clock measures Josie's steps towards her grandmother's bedroom. Outside the closed door, they pause for her father to make stiffly unfamiliar adjustments to her hair and clothes.

"You look lovely," he says and smiles. She can tell that he means it. It's funny how his affection stings now. It only makes things harder.

Her father stands and opens the door. Josie has never felt so alone.

But instead of the curtained gloom she expected the light dazzles her with its white intensity. Her imagination had painted heavy, drawn curtains, a closed world of

perpetual twilight, not this. Not the open windows, the waterfall of sunlight, the bright paintings on the walls, the vases of flowers and their unruly tumble of colour.

There are other things in the room too: her grandfather, sitting by the bed, his face filled with loss; her father who hopes for too much; her grandmother propped on her hill of pillows, whose whole world is within this moment. Her mother and father had both warned her, but nothing could have prepared her for the translucent pallor of her grandmother's face, the way the skin falls across the bones, and something deep inside Josie recoils instinctively, wants to send her running from the room.

"Here she is. My little Australian."

The voice is as thin as the skin across her grandmother's cheekbones. Josie feels her father's hand on her back, moving her on towards the bed. Her hands close even more tightly on the shells curled in her palms like talsimans. Bottles of medicine crowd the bedside table. The chemical smell almost overwhelms her.

"Give your grandma a hug."

Josie leans forward into thin, bony arms, holding the embrace for the shortest possible moment.

"Thank you for coming all this way to see me."

Josie can feel all the eyes watching her. Everybody wanting. What do you say to a dying person?

Her grandmother smiles, and Josie can feel her kindness. Just briefly she looks into her grandmother's eyes and sees understanding.

"So, what do you think of our beach?"

"Good."

"I expect it's a bit different to Sydney."

Josie nods with the first suggestion of a smile. "Yep."

She would like to do better. She would like to be what her father wants her to be, right now in this room. But how can she be more than herself?

Her grandmother pauses, watching her. “Well, the important thing is that you have a nice time while you’re here, so I think you’d better get out there and enjoy this beautiful day. There’ll be plenty of time for us to talk.”

Josie can hardly believe it. Release. She glances at her father for confirmation, but looks quickly away when she sees the disappointment on his face.

“Come and see me later,” her grandmother says. “There’s lots of things to do here, but you need a bit of local knowledge. I’ve made you a map.”

“A map?” Josie likes the idea of a map. A map suggests hidden places.

“Yes, a map. Hard to find your way around a new place without a map.”

Josie smiles. “Ok. Thank you.”

Emma returns the smile. “No, my darling. I’m the one who should be thanking you for coming. What were you doing on the beach?”

“Collecting shells.” She opens her hands to reveal her small collection.

“Ah yes, it’s good beach for shells. Those small round holes, as if someone’s drilled into the shells. Do you know what makes those?”

Josie shakes her head. She had wondered about that. They were such perfect little holes and only on the flat shells. “No.”

“Other shellfish. They drill in.”

“With what?”

“Their tongues.”

“But how can they do that with their tongue?”

“It’s not like our tongue. It’s covered little teeth, and it squirts out acid to soften the shell to help it drill. Then it uses the hole to squirt in stuff that turns the other shellfish into a kind of a smoothie and sucks it out.”

This is truly and impressively appalling. “I thought they were just little holes,” she says, and it occurs to her that this is so like her father. Now she knows where it comes from.

Emma smiles again. Josie likes the way her grandmother smiles. She has lines around her eyes and mouth that fit the smile exactly. It’s a smile that’s been used a lot. “That, my dear, as I am sure you are discovering, is true of so very many things. When you just think something is something, it so often isn’t. It’s often something else altogether. But that’s the fun in it. Finding out. Don’t you think?”

Josie does. She’s always liked the finding out. “Definitely,” she says.

“Alright, I’ve kept you from this glorious day long enough. Off you go.”

What Josie doesn’t see as she passes back out through the doorway and on through the cloistered house, back into the sapphire day is her grandmother sinking back grey-faced into the pillows, utterly spent.

3

Josie's father had picked her up early in the morning from her and her mother's house, which used to be their house, all of them, until her father moved out. She still hadn't grown to used to it; which is to say that it didn't feel normal yet. It was meant to be just while they "worked things out" – the words her parents used - but they had been arguing a lot for a long time, and Josie didn't think there was actually anything to work out, not unless her father suddenly changed the way he did so many things.

And there was the biggest thing of all, and that wasn't going to change – her father wanted to go to America. He didn't say he *wanted*, of course. He said *needed*, like it was something that had to happen. But he wasn't fooling her. She understood the difference between wanting and needing. Wanting was your choice; needing was the choice being made for you by someone else. No matter what her father said about how directors needed to go to Los Angeles, it was his choice, so it wasn't a need at all. It was a want. Her mother didn't want to move to Los Angeles, and neither did she. And her mother didn't just not *want* to move to LA. She had been there and had hated it.

Her father had made a film that no one had gone to see, and he said, That's how it is in Australia. We don't go to see our own films. Not that Josie had a choice – she wasn't *allowed* to see it. Too young. Not suitable. When she's older. Parents could talk such nonsense sometimes. She would have been fine. A movie's just a movie, and she'd been on the set when the film was being made, and, honestly, it wasn't as if she was going to think it was real life. Once you'd seen a film being made, it was never the same.

But “working things out” wasn’t just about America. America was kind of tacked on to the end of what was really going wrong. It was a small house and her parents had no idea how much she could hear, and she sure wasn’t going to tell them. It was the same for both of them – her and her mother. They both needed him to come back to the person he had been. She can remember that he wasn’t always like this. Unhappy and somehow just never there even when he was. He lived in his head, and he was a writer and she understands about stories, how they swallow you up, but her mother’s right. You can’t make that the way you are all the time. It was so much worse after the film didn’t work. That what they said – “didn’t work”, which meant, she knew, that it didn’t make any money. And her father worked for pretty much nothing on it, so they ended up really broke, and her father had to go back to directing commercials, which he hates. So there was nothing good about that film, really. Nothing at all. It just made everything worse.

But her mother still loves her father. When he moved out it wasn’t good. Her mother shut the door to her bedroom and cried. She still has no idea what her father felt then or feels now. It’s like he’s separated himself from everything except his work and built a fence around anything he feels. That’s the hardest thing - that her mother feels so much and he seems to feel so little. For that there is no forgiving, and she’s determined to find ways to inflict consequences. No matter how small, bit by bit she will make them add up, like calcium on a shell.

When her mother answered the door that morning, she watched how carefully her parents greeted each other, both of them trying so hard to be normal that the effort was a kind of pain in itself. It had been two months of hoping that everything would turn out alright, but watching her parents at the door that morning, she knew that things hadn’t

been working out between them, no matter what they said. All she could think of, standing there, was that it was her father's fault. He had done this to them.

She so much didn't want to go with him, there at the door, but she knew she had to. Her father had suggested they all go, but Josie understood why her mother couldn't. And it would have been horrible – the three of them, pretending. But she just holds it against her father so much.

Because he could be different. Before he moved out, even when things were bad, he could suddenly be there, like the sun coming out unexpectedly. He could be really funny, jumping like an acrobat from one thought to another. Her mother would reach across and touch him then, and for a moment the world was a bright, warm place, the way you imagined it should be. But he hadn't been like that for a long time, and not at all since her mother asked him to move out. Her mother keeps on telling her that he's not unhappy because of them – it's something in him, and only he can change it. But it was all the same in the end.

Her grandmother hadn't told her father or her Aunt Ali than her cancer was back until just before that day at the door, when her grandfather called and said her father needed to come home right now. Her father was very angry and blamed his father, who she knows he doesn't like at all, for not telling him sooner. But Josie is sure no one would do that, and her mother told her that it was what her grandmother wanted, and that she had asked could Josie come too.

So there she was, going to New Zealand with her father. As the plane had circled up into the sky, Josie was amazed at all the red tile roofs that made up Sydney. Thousands and thousands of them, lives upon lives, running from the Blue Mountains to the sea. Centrepoint Tower, the biggest object in her world, shrank away to a tiny needle and

was gone, lost in the vast, untidy olive and tan quilt that was her home. Then they were over the sea, a blueness without end. The world had a new, much larger scale.

But her father didn't see any of it. She looked around at him, wanting to say something about this unexpected new world, but she could see from his eyes that he was somewhere else again.

She read and drew in her sketch pad, and her father told her things about her grandmother that she knew already – that she was a painter, and had been a famous artist. He didn't mention his father. He never did, ever.

She had expected it to take longer before New Zealand appeared as a dark sliver on the lapis horizon, assembling itself as a hacksaw edge of charcoal cliffs and, beyond, a sprawling teal coloured harbour reaching with silty fingers into a patchwork of forests and fields and orchards. Then a city, unremarkable, and yet another harbour, a more certain blue, with islands as far as the eye could see. And finally, the excitement of landing, the onrushing of tarmac and buildings and trees. Someone else's country.

There was no-one to meet them at the airport, their unspoken purpose at odds with the bright tourist posters and their frozen smiles. Carrying their silence with their bags, they picked up a hire car and started to drive.

At first the country called New Zealand looked just like Australia, with gum trees around the airport and houses that didn't look much different to houses in Sydney. The city centre and Harbour Bridge were like Sydney too, except smaller. But the greens didn't match, and the harbour was a soft, pale blue like the shell of blackbird's egg, not the dark blue of home, and when the ribbon of highway began to curl along the coast into Northland, with its whale's back hills and mocca rivers, the transformation was complete. It was the green more than anything else, an astonishing, enveloping

iridescence too bright to be true. The forests, where they weren't military rows of pines, fought for the light with a tangled, jostling tenacity that denied the existence of ground beneath them, the turbulent sea of branch and leaf broken only by the symmetry of giant tree ferns, colonising the forest like fluorescent starfish. It was all so unlike the dry, broken forests of the Hawksbury of Josie's experience that for some time she could only stare at them in wonder as they slid past her window. No-one had told her that New Zealand was full of jungles. Because if this wasn't jungle, she didn't know what was. It like something out *The Jungle Book*.

"There must be a lot of leeches," she had said, imagining the dripping forest floor beneath the trees.

"No leeches in New Zealand."

She couldn't believe him. "There's always leeches where it's wet."

"Not here."

"Why not?"

"Don't know. There are leeches in New Zealand, but they live in water. I've never seen one. I think they're only interested in fish."

She watched him closely, but there was no sign that he was joking. No leeches. Really no leeches. That was good. That was better than good, that was great. She hated leeches. Nasty, slimy, wriggly, blood-sucking worms. Being bitten was one thing but having something slimy and slithery and revolting sucking your blood and then vomiting into your veins when it was pulled off was quite another. The only thing worse than a leech was a lamprey. Lampreys were very possibly the most horrible things on the planet. She's glad she's not a fish.

"No snakes either," added her father.

"No snakes? Why not?" She wouldn't expect most people to know, but her father was different. It was a bit like using the internet. You asked a question and you got an answer. He would read something and then remember it forever. And sure enough, out comes the answer.

"Well, the theory is that the country was covered by glaciers more than once, and the cold temperatures meant the snakes couldn't survive."

She's not going to let him off that easily. "Are there lizards?"

"Yes, but only small ones, and they're found right through the Pacific. They're small enough to travel and survive on floating vegetation, so they probably recolonised after the ice had gone. No spiders that can hurt you, either," he added as an afterthought.

No snakes or spiders. No big black funnel webs with long fangs like curved needles. No taipans or tiger snakes waiting coiled up and hidden in the long grass. What sort of country was this?

"What about bull ants?"

"No ants that can hurt you."

"Scorpions?"

"Never seen one."

"What about sharks?" There were always sharks.

"Down in the South Island where there are seals, yeah. Not up north here."

In the end it was all too much for Josie. "I don't believe you."

"It's true," her father replied, with the calm assurance of certainty. "You could lie down and sleep in the forest and all that'll worry you is the odd mozzie."

And Josie realised suddenly, then, that it happened. She had let her guard down and she had forgotten that they were on opposite sides now. She must not let him think that

everything was going to be alright between them. That there would be no consequences for what he had done to them.

Her grandfather was waiting when their car reached the top of the driveway. Josie thought he was the saddest looking person she had ever seen. Her father's face had changed just before he had got out of the car; it was as if he had to take a breath inside himself. She had expected them to embrace despite everything, but she was wrong. They shook hands instead. That was when she really understood how bad it was between them.

Her grandmother was asleep, so Josie walked down the dunes onto the beach in front of the house. She had never before seen a beach so empty of people.

4

Another dream. Night. The moon has not yet risen and an impossible number of stars fills the sky. I can feel the dark feathers of the breeze on my face, smell and taste the moist salt in the air. The night is full of life, a singing, rustling, whirring chorus of insects, frogs, birds. We shut our doors and windows against the night and forget that darkness and night are altogether different things. The night I dream is full of light.

The wood of the veranda railings feels rough and lustrous beneath my hands. Dark waves break in white plumes on the beach below. I remember a night like this, fishing with my father, staying out late and coming back in the darkness, the wake of the boat an incandescent path of swirling phosphorous across the ebony sea, trailing a finger through a liquid universe of microscopic stars. The crystalline lace of salt on my skin, the oystercatchers' clattering alarm at the wet scrape of the boat hitting the sand. My mother, anxiety giving way to fury, savaging my father for staying out so long. Dad, apologetic but not understanding, not a bit. What you getting' your knickers in a knot for, Else? So we're a bit late. Look at the fish.

Look at the fish. There they were, a great slimy pile of snapper, blood flowing black like oil in the moonlight, all needing to be gutted and scaled. I thought she was going to hit him for a moment, but she laughed instead. You're on your own, boyo, she said, and left us there.

And he turns to me and grins. Got off lightly there, Em, he says, and bends to pick up his knife.

How I've missed him.

At dinner that first night the conversation circles uneasily around long silences punctuated by the rattle of cutlery. The only safe ground for Josie's father and grandfather seems to be her aunt Ali, and when she will arrive. Her grandfather asks, once, about interest in her father from America, but there's no way her father is going to talk about that. As far as Josie's concerned her aunt can't arrive soon enough if every dinner is going to be like this, which it clearly will be with only the three of them. You'd think that her father and grandfather would have *something* to say to each other. The silence feels like a dead weight pressing down on them all. It reaches a point where she simply can't stand it any longer.

"Can I get down from the table, please?"

Her father looks at her plate. "You've hardly eaten anything."

"I'm not hungry." She can find something the kitchen later on.

He looks at her for a moment, deciding. "Alright. Don't say you're hungry later on, though."

Josie slips from her seat and makes her escape to the unpeopled space of the veranda. She's used to noise at night. Cars, sirens, the low rumble you can hear in Sydney when it's unusually quiet. That rumble is Josie's idea of silence. But this is different. Every sound is cut sharp and clear and separate against a silence like black velvet. And the songs. The night is full of songs.

She looks up at a Milky Way so clear it seems to be falling from the sky towards her and the tensions of the adult world fall away behind her like an unwanted coat. It's as if she can hear the world breathing.

Along the veranda, the French windows to her grandmother's room are still wide open, as they had been during the day. Josie wonders what her grandmother does in the

long nights. If she sleeps, if she lies awake, wondering. If you were dying, there would be a lot of things to wonder about. Before she this she had never really thought about dying. Well, as an idea in books, yes. But not as a real thing, something that happened to people you knew; something that took someone real away forever, and no one knew where they went.

She moves silently along the veranda, drawn by the thread of her curiosity. From the edge of the windows Josie can see that all is stillness inside the bedroom, the only light falling in a golden oblong from the doorway. Her grandmother seems to be asleep. Her grandfather appears, a silhouette in the doorway, black on gold, checking, but her grandmother doesn't react to his voice, then he's gone again. The shadowy room with all its mysteries beckons.

She steps inside, willing herself weightless as a ghost, but a floorboard catches her with groaning surprise. Now she's a statue trying to become a shadow, but still her grandmother doesn't wake. Emboldened by this confirmation of her anonymity, she swims deeper into the sunken world of her grandmother's room. The windows frame glimmering mosaics of starlight and tree shadow against the dark walls. Flowers sleep in their vases, resting their colours. On their shelves and tabletops, books wait, whispering their secrets to the shadows. Paintings and photographs crowd the walls with their coded stories.

She moves closer to the bed, to the person who is her father's mother. In the drawn, sleeping face she can see suggestions of her father in the lines of the nose and eyebrows. And there would be other things too, she knows. You'd never know whose heart your heart looked like, whose brain. And then there was who you were like *inside*, the sort of person you were. You couldn't see something like that. People say she looks like her father, but inside she's sure that she looks like her mother.

She knows she shouldn't, but it's good to be able to just stand and look. Easier to see the person past the sickness like this, because even though she knows that her father is right about sickness and a person being two different things, when you see it for the first time, the sickness is all you can see.

The sleeping room is full of beautiful things. Josie looks around at them, all the books and paintings and sculptures and flowers that are a picture of her grandmother dying in her bed.

With all her will Emma tries to hold onto the dream as the gravity of consciousness pulls her back down into her unwelcome bed with its nausea and discomfort and suffocating weight of sheets. Around her, the room assembles itself around her in angles of confinement.

A shadow moves, and she is conscious of another presence. A small shadow becoming a silhouette. Josie.

The child moves carefully from object to object, absorbed in her observations. She pauses in front of Emma's favourite bronze, Terry Stringer's expressionist torso, running her fingertips over the greened metal, her head tilting just so in her concentration, a childhood gesture so reminiscent of her father at the same age that for a moment Emma seems to be watching her young son again and all she can feel is loss. The loss of everything in the world that she loves.

No, she cautions herself, there's no point. Use what time you have left.

Easily said. They could give you drugs for pain, but they couldn't give you anything for despair.

She thinks now to say words but holds herself. At least this way there isn't the sickness between them. And Josie is real, not a dream. Perfect and beautiful, as her father had been. Her father who wears unhappiness like a colour in his eyes.

Emma watches until Josie slips like a memory out through the French windows. Outside. What a magical word.

Later, Josie's mother calls, and she listens to her parents talking, so carefully polite, as if their words are made of china and they are afraid of dropping them. Then it's her turn, and it's so good to hear her mother's voice again, even though it makes Josie miss her even more, and it's hard not to let tears ruin everything. Harder still when she can hear the tears in her mother's voice and in the silences between her words. So she tells her mother about the red roofs of Sydney and the green fields of New Zealand and the extraordinary idea of a beach without anyone else on it but her.

All the colours of this new world. Without the shadows.

"I wish you were here, Mum," she says, and from the corners of her eyes she sees the flicker on her father's face as he turns away.

Later still, in her bed that feels like someone's else's shoes, Josie listens to her father and grandfather talking in the living room, the words coming and going like smoke in a breeze. They talk perfunctorily about practicalities – about picking Ali up from the airport, when the doctor will next visit. Then she hears her father's door close and soft threads of classical music weave through the sound of the surf from the living room. She tries to think of another time when she's gone to sleep to the sound of waves. Just once, that time they went for a holiday in Brunswick heads. Such a lovely sound. It

must be wonderful to have that sound all the time. At least that was something for her grandmother.

She kneels on her bed and leans her elbows on the windowsill and looks out over the moon glimmer sea to the dark island floating like a ghost ship on the horizon. So few lights. Even the headlands at each end of the beach are completely dark. Just this thin necklace of lights along the beach. At home there were nothing but windows. Windows everywhere, crowding out the sky. Lives stacked one on top of the other like boxes on a supermarket shelf.

How strange to find yourself, in the space of only a day, in whole other country, in a place where the stars owned the sky.

From her cloying cocoon of a bed, Emma looks up at the same stars and out across the same sea and remembers the dream: the taste of the salt, the air moving upon her face. And Josie, so close she could almost touch her. If she could choose this crippled remnant of a life or one of these dreams, which would she choose? The giving up of everyone and everything she had ever loved for the freedom of a dream? A dream was just a dream. Not Faith. Not Belief.

You could look through the broken windows of the Gospels and see truth there, but truth wasn't God. You could watch through your framing windows the great wheel of days and nights turning through sunrise and star drift, through wind and rain and cloud and sun; and the sea, always the sea, keeper of secrets, at once ever changing and never changing in the colours of the sky and the shape of the wind and the darkness below. You could see all these things but all you could do in the end was hope it meant *something* as you lay in your bed feeling your death working in the body you had once assumed so carelessly and effortlessly.

And from her darkness within darkness, she asks the sea, How long? How long
will I have to wait?

But the sea can't answer, she knows, because it doesn't understand time.