THE ACCUSATION

WENDY JAMES

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A 53, Sector 57, Noida, UP, India
1 London Bridge Street, London, SE1 9GF, United Kingdom
Bay Adelaide Centre, East Tower, 22 Adelaide Street West, 41st floor, Toronto,
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To my sister Rebecca, who understands –
and shares – the madness.

PART ONE

Either I am a psychopath in sheep's clothing, or I am you.

AMANDA KNOX

SUZANNAH: JANUARY 2019

She's everywhere.

Google her name and you'll get over twelve million hits. The first thing you'll see is her Wikipedia entry, detailing her life before, during and after her abduction. You can follow her on Instagram, 'like' her favourite places to eat, her latest outfits or whatever #Brand she's currently promoting. You can read her tweets, share her favourite articles, her random thoughts, the occasional video of cute kittens. You can scroll through the numerous images – that first, now almost iconic picture: the desolate little figure, dressed in too-big borrowed clothes, photographed just days after her escape; the pictures taken later, from magazine shoots, interviews, red carpet appearances; the occasional candid shot taken while she's shopping, heading to the gym, dining out with her hot new boyfriend. You can see her in action on YouTube, talking on morning shows, afternoon shows, highbrow current affairs shows, trash TV. Of course, they're all careful to adhere to the letter of the law, only discussing her ordeal tangentially, and never mentioning me by name. I'm guessing there'll be a role for her on *Mountain Climbing with the Stars* or *Celebrity Fondue*, and eventually, I imagine, she'll end up hosting her very own TV show – *Great Escapes with Ellie Canning*. No doubt there's a Netflix

original documentary in production, ready to air the moment the case is settled.

As well as the sites devoted to her case, she's made countless 'guest appearances' on blogs and in magazines. You can discover her favourite designers in *Chic*; her favourite recipes in *Women's Week*; her top ten books (*Jane Eyre*, *Lemony Snicket*, *Great Expectations*, *Harry Potter* – all underdogs, naturally) in *The Chronicle*, her favourite films in the *Global Times*. She seems to have been asked to give her opinion on everything from domestic abuse to Pink, who she met during her last tour (front row seats, backstage passes, invites to the after-party).

She's on her way to becoming the go-to girl of her generation, a kind of downmarket, blonde Malala – her ordeal not as politically interesting, but perhaps more relatable, and of course, far more satisfying for those who like their trauma served up with less politics and more dirt, less high-minded ideals and more sensation.

And naturally, she's the latest feminist pin-up. I watch a talk on YouTube she did a few weeks ago. She's speaking at a luncheon in the city, hosted by some big law firm who specialise in taking on high-profile cases for women, *pro bono*, defending them against workplace harassment, internet bullying, unfair dismissal.

It's a great gig, and I have to hand it to Honor – celebrity agent *par excellence* – she knows just which buttons to press, where this particular client will shine the brightest. She's the perfect victim *and* the perfect survivor; she's just what the cultural moment ordered.

'I'm here to talk,' the girl tells her enraptured audience, 'not just about my ordeal, but the way my trauma has empowered me.' She has her hair scraped back into a severe ponytail, emphasising her

long neck, the small beauty spot just below her pretty ear. If she's wearing any makeup it's invisible. She doesn't need it anyway – her skin is pale, clear, perfect, with just the faintest sprinkling of freckles across a pert little nose. Her eyebrows are fashionably dark, heavy, her eyelashes are thick and spiky – a fringe around those clear green eyes that gaze so bravely and honestly (windows to the soul!) out into the world. She's a long way from the gaunt waif – dark shadows under her eyes, pale chapped lips, sharpened cheekbones – of her early post-release days.

The way she speaks has changed since those first appearances, too. The shrill of anxiety has gone, her voice is low and melodious and has an appealing breathiness. She looks up frequently from her notes – frowning a little, or perhaps giving a surreptitious bite of the lip to let the audience know that she's appropriately nervous, that she's not taking this attention as her due, even if she's taking it in her stride.

Her words hit the spot. She's not aggressive or dogmatic; if anything she's disarmingly tentative. 'I'm not here to make you feel bad for me,' she says. 'I don't want to be seen as a victim.' She says a few times – indeed this is her theme – that she has been fortunate. Bad things have happened, but mostly she has been lucky: lucky she was bright and hardworking, lucky she had such great teachers, good mentors, champions … She counts herself lucky even when it comes to her more recent history – that *terrible time* she can't say too much about for legal reasons – when she was taken by someone who didn't appear to want to hurt her, at least in the beginning. And of course, she was lucky that she was able – fit, determined, resourceful – to make her escape.

Her lesson is simple, and it's one we can all share, whatever our circumstances: that empowerment can come by looking for

opportunities and taking them when we can. 'Sometimes,' she says, looking down and up simultaneously, *a la* Princess Diana, 'sometimes you just have to wait for that opportunity to arrive. That's what I learned. You have to be prepared, always aware that there will be a moment, even if it looks like nothing can get better, nothing can change, when you can get to somewhere better – whether it's away from parents who aren't there for you, or a school, or a job, or even in the sort of extreme circumstances I was in, you just have to have faith and seize any opportunities you can …'

I watch her speech again and again, although not for the sisterhood feels. Even the second time round, the third, and knowing what I know, it's compelling viewing. She's so young, so lovely, so earnest. And so fucking believable.

There should be something that I can see, some sign, a flicker in those beautiful green eyes, some moment where she falls out of character, where I can say, *Gotcha*. I'm trained, after all, to spot these moments: the random out-of-character licking of lips, idle hair-twirling, random blinking, an unscripted step backward or forward, a tone that's not quite authentic. But there's nothing. Her performance is pitch-perfect.

Butter wouldn't melt in this girl's mouth, and I find myself wanting to believe every word that comes out of it.

I feel a vague lick of envy, too. If she's not telling the truth she's missed her calling, because Ellie Canning is a much finer actress than I'll ever be.

ABDUCTED: THE ELLIE CANNING STORY

A documentary by HeldHostage Productions © 2019

EXTERIOR

Camera pans across the valley town of Enfield Wash, Mount Waltham looming in the distance.

VOICEOVER

In the early hours of the morning of August 1st, 2018, John O'Brien, a dairy farmer from the New South Wales town of Enfield Wash, discovered an unconscious teenage girl in a disused shepherd's hut on his property.

O'Brien immediately contacted the authorities, and the girl, who would subsequently identify herself as Ellie Canning, was taken to the local hospital where she was treated for shock and hypothermia. On regaining consciousness, Canning told police she had sought shelter in the hut after wandering the countryside for a number of hours after escaping from a nearby farmhouse. Canning claimed she had been abducted by a middle-aged woman she'd met at a central Sydney cafe and that she had been held captive in a basement room for almost a month.

As the details of her bizarre and sinister experiences were made public, the Canning Affair, as it's known, quickly became a media sensation …

SUZANNAH: AUGUST 2018

'It's the pigs.'

Mary twitched the kitchen curtains across to peer out into the morning. I was too busy trying to find a pair of tights without a run, or a pair of trousers that didn't need ironing, to respond. Not that there was any reasonable way to respond to this latest off-the-wall pronouncement from my mother. We didn't have any pigs.

I was running late, hair unbrushed, still wearing pyjama bottoms and ugg boots, and loath to take off more than I had to until the last minute in the hideous cold. It was a Tuesday, not one of Sally's days, so I had to get everything ready for Mary before I left for work. I'd made sandwiches, cut fruit, poured some lukewarm coffee into a flask, filled a small Tupperware container with Froot Loops, turned the kitchen gas off and the convection heater on. I'd spent precious minutes of the morning forcing myself to eat dry toast and black tea between bouts of retching, and now had precisely two minutes to pull it all together and get out the door, or my Year Eight drama class would be teacher-less for ten minutes – a catastrophe beyond contemplation.

'The pigs, Suzie.' Mary gave a couple of reasonably convincing snorts. 'I wonder what they're saying I've done this time.'

She pulled the curtain across and turned back to look at me, her eyes bright with mischief. 'Maybe it's you they're after. What do you reckon? I always knew they'd catch up with you eventually, Miss Dudley Do-right. Excuse me – *Ms*.' Her cackling laughter turned into a cough.

'There's no one—' I began, but then I heard the distinct sound of feet crunching over the frosty lawn and creaking across the verandah, the quiet murmur of conversation. Three sharp knocks.

'You were saying, dear daughter?' Mary gave me a triumphant glare and tripped down the hallway, arriving a moment before me and pulling the door open.

It was the police. A woman, uniformed, in her thirties, and a man, older, suited, clearly in charge. They both had their wallets out, ID displayed.

'Miss Wells? Suzannah Wells?' The man's words were accompanied by puffs of white cloud. The world outside was crisp and clear and covered in ice.

'It's *Miz* Wells, not Miss. What century are you from, Mr Pig?'

The officer blinked. 'Excuse me?'

I pushed past my mother. 'I'm Suzannah Wells. Is there something wrong?' The sight of the police at my front door had made my nausea return. I was suddenly unbearably cold, and it wasn't just the weather.

'Ah, no.' He glanced at his companion. 'There's nothing wrong, not exactly. But we would like to talk to you.'

His companion stamped her feet. Her nose and cheeks were pink. 'It's a bit on the chilly side out here, ma'am. Do you think we might come in? It won't take long. Just some routine inquiries.'

'Routine inquiries, my arse. The last time a pig told me—'

'Of course. Please come through.'

The officers paused in the entrance as Mary flounced off down the dark hallway, muttering. From behind, her silvery hair caught up in a loose topknot, long dressing gown trailing elegantly along the carpet, she looked like a Grande Dame in some Edwardian costume drama.

'Alzheimer's?' the female officer whispered, her eyes all empathy, understanding.

'Actually, it's—' I began to explain, then changed my mind, shrugged. 'Yes. It's something like that.'

In the kitchen the two officers introduced themselves as Detective Inspector Stratford and Senior Constable Moorhouse, then stood awkwardly until I offered them a seat and a cup of tea. They declined the tea, but sat down. Constable Moorhouse took off her hat and eased out of her leather jacket. Her shirt gaped where a button was missing, and lacy white nylon underwear peeked through. Mary perched up on the kitchen bench, and although the true condition of her ancient polar-fleece dressing gown was now revealed in all its stained and threadbare glory, she still maintained an air of haughty disdain. The officers watched her warily.

'Will this take long?' I hovered, uncertain. 'I should probably ring work first. I'm already running late.'

'You're the drama teacher, aren't you?' Constable Moorhouse asked. 'At the high school?'

'I am. And I have a Year Eight class first up – they'll need to arrange a replacement.'

'Year Eight, eh? That'd be my daughter's year. I don't envy

you working with that lot.' She grinned, began to say something, but was interrupted by her boss.

'Probably best if you let them know – we'll be as quick as we can, but you're definitely going to be late.'

I made the call quickly from the next room and arrived back in time to hear Mary regaling them, in her special-occasion American twang, with the story about the time she was arrested in New York after a weekend of debauchery at the Chelsea Hotel in the company of Lou Reed, among others.

'You're probably too young to know who I'm talking about, aren't you?' She sighed at their failure to look impressed. 'And too square. I guess you listen to—'

'Mary, that's enough.'

She pursed her lips primly. 'Well, no one ever accused me of talking when I shouldn't. Not to the pigs, anyway. And I know you're not going to take any notice of anything I have to say, Ms Goody Two-shoes, but if I were you, I'd be getting a lawyer.'

'I'm sure a lawyer won't be necessary, Mrs …'

'Oh, *I'm* a Miss. Mary Squires. You may have heard of me.'

'I – er, no, I'm afraid I haven't, ma'am. But you won't need a solicitor, Ms Wells. This really *is* just routine.'

'Of course I don't need a lawyer.' I gave the officer a conciliatory smile, glared at Mary, pulled out a chair and sat down at the table with them. Senior Constable Moorhouse looked as if she was trying hard not to laugh; her boss frowned at her.

'So how can I help?'

Stratford cleared his throat. 'I assume you've heard about the Ellie Canning case?'

My mother let out an excited squawk, and I answered quickly, hoping to forestall any further response.

'The girl who was abducted? Of course.'

'So you'll know that she was found not far from here?'

I nodded.

'We're currently following up some leads, trying to work out where exactly she was held. We're taking a look at some of the properties around here that fit with some of her, ah … some of her recollections.'

'I thought she couldn't remember much? Wasn't it dark when she escaped?'

'Actually,' his face relaxed into a not-quite smile, 'it seems she's remembered a few details now. They're coming back, slowly but surely.'

'And what is it she's remembered?'

'I'm not at liberty to tell you that, I'm afraid. But I can say that from our initial view of the exterior of your property, it does appear to have some surface similarities to what Miss Canning recalls about the property where she was held.'

'Oh.' That was not what I expected. 'What sort of similarities?'

'Again, I'm not at liberty to give you that information. Let's just say … the exterior has certain features consistent with Ellie's evidence.'

'You mean you think she may have been held here? In this house? But that's absurd.' I could control the pitch of my voice, but not the sudden roiling of my stomach.

'No, we're not saying anything like that at this stage, Ms Wells.' His voice was gentle. 'We're just trying to gauge her movements on the night she escaped – seeing if we can work backwards to find out where she was held. It may be that she walked past or through your property at some point. We were wondering whether you'd mind us having a bit of a look around your place.'

This time Mary's squawk was triumphant. 'You wanna do a search? You're going to need a – what's the word? A … a …' She went blank for a moment, then, increasingly agitated, 'You know what I mean, Mr Detective – *a whatchamacallit*.'

'We don't need a warrant, ma'am. As I said, this is just an—'

Mary interrupted. 'I think maybe you should give ol' Chips Rafferty a call, Suzannah. Isn't that fat brother of his a lawyer?'

'Mary.'

She rolled her eyes theatrically, clamped her lips together.

The detective sighed. 'You're welcome to get a solicitor, of course. But in my opinion it'll just be an unnecessary expense. And it'll certainly slow things down. As I've said, this really isn't an official search.'

'Don't listen to him, Suzie. It's always official – even when they're screwing you. Actually, especially when they're screw—'

'For God's sake, Mary. Just stop.'

Constable Moorhouse coughed in an attempt to smother her laughter. Her superior gave her another quelling look before turning to Mary. 'I understand your concerns, Miss Squires, but yours isn't the only place we're looking at this morning. We've got a list of, what – around half a dozen other properties to view, Senior Constable?'

She looked down at her notebook. 'I think it's actually nine, sir.' Her voice was glum.

I made a decision. 'There's no reason for us to get a solicitor. Feel free to look wherever you like. It's not like we've got anything to hide.'

He gave a relieved smile. 'Thank you. We won't take up too much of your time.' The two officers got to their feet. 'If we could have a quick look around the house first, and then we'll check

the home paddocks, the sheds and so forth. We'll probably take some photographs as we go, if you don't mind – we'll get you to sign some paperwork for that before we leave. We're happy to just wander about if you've got other things to do.'

'There's not going to be any wandering, Mr Detective.' Mary's voice was fierce. 'We'll be sticking to you like shit on your shoe. Isn't that right, Suzannah?'

I gave a resigned shrug. I had already missed the morning's classes, so there was no point in hurrying now. Mary slid down from her perch, her expression smug.

'So how about I take you straight down to the cellar, officers, and show you where we kept that little bitch hidden.'

ABDUCTED: THE ELLIE CANNING STORY

A documentary by HeldHostage Productions © 2019

ELLIE CANNING: TRANSCRIPT №1

I've spent a lot of my life in foster homes. I lived with my mum until I was about eight, but since then I've been in care. Most of the time that's been okay; I've been in some really good places, but they haven't always been … well, I won't go into details, but sometimes it wasn't all that great. My mum … yeah, she's got some issues with drugs and alcohol, and right now I think she's back in rehab. I haven't actually seen her for a while. Not since all this happened. We get on all right when we do see each other. I mean, she loves me and all that, but she can't really be responsible for anyone else at the moment.

We moved to Manning when I was six, and I've been there ever since. I went to Manning High until I went to boarding school in Year Ten.

My life was a bit different from a lot of kids' lives, I guess, being a foster kid, but I wouldn't say I was massively deprived or anything. Most of the time I was able to do the usual things – I played netball for a few years, and had guitar lessons for a while.

I've been pretty much independent since I went to boarding school. I was still legally in care until I turned eighteen and I always went back to my foster parents in the holidays, but I've changed carers twice in the last three years, so, you know, I didn't really know them all that well. I know there's been a lot about this in the media, about the way I fell through the gaps in the system, and the fact that nobody really had a clue where I was. But I dunno, I do tend to do my own thing, so that was probably my fault as much as anyone's.

SUZANNAH: AUGUST 2018

Of course I'd seen the news reports, had been as amazed as anyone else by the girl's story and by the little we could make out about Ellie Canning herself. It would have been a sensation even if she hadn't been picked up practically on our doorstep – only twenty or so kilometres to the south of town, and five from our place, on the Wash road. In fact, I drove past John O'Brien's shepherd's hut every time I made the trip to town.

The story was incredible – the brazen abduction, the month spent in captivity, the girl's fortunate and brave escape. From the few details that had been released about her life it was clear Ellie Canning was someone very special: a smart girl from a difficult background, a foster child who'd won a scholarship to a prestigious boarding school. At eighteen she was still astonishingly young-looking – I would have guessed fifteen, max – and she had a winsome blonde loveliness that was apparent even in the unflattering school photo the press had been using. That such a child could be lost for almost a month with no one knowing or caring was heartbreaking.

At school the story was an endless source of conversation, of sometimes laughter-filled conjecture. There'd been no information released about the kidnappers' motives – and with

no mention of either physical or sexual abuse, and apparently only women involved, speculations ranged from the sinister (slavery, the occult) to the slightly more benign (custody issues). Having been discovered locally, we'd wondered too about who her abductor could possibly have been and where they'd kept her. Even the native Washers agreed that there were so many new people in the area – tree-changers, weekenders, Airbnbs run on local properties – it was impossible to know. Even Tania Jones, who ran the school office and whose family had lived in the Wash for generations, and could usually be relied upon for an opinion on any local matter, wouldn't hazard a guess.

Rachel Mott, the head of the maths department, told us her son had delivered groceries to a clearly drugged-out older couple out near the Woolpack Bridge a few months back. The woman had been wearing very little, just a G-string and a sheer blouse, and the couple had tried to entice him in, offering booze, a joint, dirty movies. They were both really old, her son had said, at least in their forties, and the woman seemed to fit the girl's description of one of her captors – dark hair, shortish, middle-aged. The couple hadn't been threatening at all, according to the boy. If anything, they were over-the-top friendly. Even so, Rachel had made him go to the police with his story, and he had given them the address. But it was a dead end: the place was a holiday rental, and had been leased out to three or four different couples over the period of Canning's abduction.

'You know,' Phil Burke, the head of phys ed, said one morning, 'that description of the woman could be you, Suzannah – didn't the girl say the woman was dark-haired and short? And then there's the crazy old lady. Doesn't your mother live with you?'

'Oh, come on. There'd have to be at least a dozen women living out of town who could be described exactly the same way, surely? So many people here do live with their elderly parents.' Anna Brady, our resident peacemaker, spoke before I could respond, no doubt worrying that Phil had offended me.

'My mother's definitely crazy, but she had me at sixteen, so she's not exactly old.' I gave Anna a reassuring smile.

'Hmmm. But you know teenagers. They think twenty is over the hill.' As usual, Phil was impervious to Anna's diplomatic efforts. 'Is there anything you haven't told us, Suze? You haven't been keeping a teenage girl in your closet, have you?'

The room erupted.

'OMG. What *teacher* would do that?' Julia, the newest and youngest member of the English staff, looked appalled.

'And you do have that connection to Manning.' Phil was like a dog with a bone. 'Didn't you teach at some private school there?'

'Manning College. It was a few years back now. I'm surprised you remember.'

'I always like to know where people taught before they washed up here, in paradise.' His voice had an edge of bitterness. 'People don't come out here for no reason, do they? There's always something they're running from.'

I'd applied for the position at Enfield Wash on spec, after a couple of years of highly unsatisfying casual teaching in Sydney. I'd been shocked when I'd got it, but had said yes, even before visiting. Enfield Wash was a small inland town a couple of hours north of Sydney – too far from the city to be attractive to those who wanted to live close to the centre, but not isolated

enough to be counted as additional rungs for those climbing the education department ladder. Enfield Wash High needed a teacher who had had enough experience teaching drama to run junior classes, direct a school play every few years, and take the occasional small class of students through to their final exams. Rather like mine, the school's expectations weren't terribly high.

From what I could glean on the net, Enfield Wash seemed a reasonable place to settle. The town, unlike others in the region, had somehow survived despite its small population. Perhaps because of its relative isolation it still had a reasonably thriving commercial centre, and the economic migration, youth unemployment, drugs, crime and general disaffection that had destroyed so many other once-prosperous inland towns hadn't been quite as pronounced. It wasn't exactly a buzzing metropolis, but there were enough flourishing businesses and families to make it a viable place to live. As well as the wheat and sheep and dairy farms that had once been the town's backbone, there were wineries that attracted tourism, and a growing number of tree-changers buying up acreages. There were a respectable number of cafes, a library and a bookshop. The town had eight hotels, a twenty-four-hour manned police station, and a sense of community. It also had The Franchise, a large and very well maintained nursing home with a waiting list that was significantly shorter than any I could find in Sydney.

Leaving Mary in the care of a respite nurse, I drove out in early Spring to scope out the town and find somewhere for us to live. I'd decided to bite the bullet and put my Bondi apartment, which I'd owned since the early 90s and had well and truly paid

off, on the market. Sydney prices being what they were, I looked like coming out of the exchange pretty well.

The local real estate agent, whose thirteen-year-old daughter I was likely to teach ('Total drama queen, that girl. Just like her mother.') couldn't hide his excitement when I told him what I was after – space, privacy, a garden, something old that didn't need renovating – and how much I was prepared to spend.

'Well,' he'd said, after the initial thrill had subsided, 'you've got two options with that sort of money.' He'd driven me to the town's premier street – a wide, tree-lined avenue in an area known as Parliament Hill.

The houses were grand: late-Victorian brick mansions with manicured gardens behind high iron and sandstone fences. Most had swimming pools and a few had tennis courts. They were elegant, welcoming, well looked after, homes where generations of children were born and raised, homes that weren't really appropriate for a single woman and her mad mother.

The agent had stopped out the front of one imposing pile. 'This one's been on the market for three years – takes a while to sell this sort of place. They're asking six hundred and fifty thousand, but as I said I reckon they'd take six hundred. Maybe even five-eighty. You'd still have quite a bit of change. It could do with a bit of updating, but it doesn't need too much. You could maybe refresh the bathrooms, the kitchen. Knock out a few walls and open it out.'

I'd given the house no more than the briefest glance before shaking my head. 'It's so beautiful, but not really what I'm after. It needs a family. Kids,' I managed to say it without self-consciousness.

'Yeah. True.' He'd given a regretful sigh, then almost immediately brightened up. 'How about out of town?'

I hadn't really considered living out of town, but why not?

'I don't want anything too big; I don't want too much to maintain. And I don't want animals or … *crops* or anything.'

'No. I s'pose …' He paused, and looked at me closely. 'Hey, I know you. You were that girl. What was her name? Queenie? From that show, oh, what was it? Surf something?'

I laughed. 'Gypsy. And it was *Beachlife*.'

'*Beachlife*. That's it. Gypsy. Wow.'

'I'm surprised you recognise me. I'd have thought you were a bit too young.'

'Oh, yeah, maybe. But I've got four older sisters, and they made me watch it. They had it all on video.' His grin was sheepish, his cheeks slightly pink. 'And you're coming here to teach? The school must be stoked to have someone like you teaching drama. An actual celebrity.'

'It was such a long time ago. I'd be surprised if anyone else even remembers the show. Anyway,' I changed the subject gently, 'you were going to tell me about some places out of town.'

'Yeah. Right.' He cleared his throat, assumed a more businesslike demeanour. 'I've got just the thing. It's not quite an acre – so there's not too much to look after. There's a fair bit of lawn, I guess, but you can always get someone to come and mow it if it's too much.'

He'd driven out of the town then, headed west up one hill and then down another, around what looked like a small lake, but was actually the town's old reservoir, the Lock, and then out into less hilly farming country. It had been a cold dry winter, and

the paddocks were grey and not particularly appealing, but the surrounding countryside was beautiful: gently undulating land as far as the eye could see, with the peak of a heavily wooded mountain – Mount Waltham, apparently – in the distance.

'The place I'm taking you, the old Gascoyne place,' the agent said, 'has been subdivided. It's an old farmhouse; parts of it are more than a hundred years old, but the owner built himself a new place and is selling off a bit of land with the old homestead on it. Actually, it's a bit of a sad story.'

He was clearly eager to tell me, and curious to hear the local stories, I was happy to oblige.

'Oh?'

Yeah. Poor bastard. He started building it when he got married. His parents were in the old place. But then his wife got cancer and the house was put on hold … She died, oh, a while back now. She was a lovely woman – another teacher, actually. By the time he got back to work on the new house his parents had died, too. He probably should've stayed in the old place and sold the new one for a motza, but I guess he wanted a fresh start.'

'Sounds like it.'

'Yeah. He's a typical grazier, tough as old boots, maybe a bit arrogant – but I think it really stuffed him.

'The old place has been a bit of a nightmare to sell, to be honest. Most people who want to live out of town are after at least a couple of acres. And they don't want these old places.'

'No. I like the idea of its age, but I don't know that I really need a homestead. There's only the two of us.'

'Well, it's not a mansion or anything. Not like those places in town. The Gascoynes had plenty of money once, but it all went

back into the land, so the house is nothing fancy. It's pretty small. And it could probably do with some renovating down the track. The garden's something special though. And the views.'

The agent was right – it wasn't anything fancy. The original house had been built in the mid-nineteenth century, but there'd been various additions and alterations since. The house was tin-roofed weatherboard, in need of a lick of paint, with a wide verandah out the front. The three small bedrooms, dining room and dim lounge looked desperately in need of an update, but the north-facing kitchen and family room – added sometime in the 1970s – was warm and comfortable looking. An old breezeway with a corrugated-iron roof ran from the current kitchen to the original kitchen, which was now a laundry.

A door in the hallway that I'd mistaken for a linen closet opened onto a stairway leading down to a basement. The basement had been divided into two thin-walled rooms, one with an ensuite toilet. Another set of steep wooden stairs connected the basement to the laundry. The basement rooms were cool and dank, and faintly whiffy.

'I think they used these for guest bedrooms at one stage, or maybe storage,' the agent said. 'You could make a great wine cellar down here,' he added wistfully. 'The temperature is perfect. But the Gascoynes weren't really a wine cellar sort of family, I guess.'

The front garden, old Mrs Gascoyne's garden, was beautiful. It was all a little wild and unkempt now, but its good bones were still in evidence. There were the remains of old flowerbeds, climbing roses and jasmine, camellias, an assortment of natives. An early blooming jacaranda scattered its blossom across the lawn. The agent walked me from fence line to fence line, and

then around the perimeter of the original home paddock, which housed an enormous tin shed – a three-car garage, apparently. All up, the property was just over half an acre. The surrounding land all belonged to Chip Gascoyne – the original homestead just a small sliver in the middle.

'Chip?'

'It's Charles, I think, but he looked a lot like his old man as a kid, apparently – you know, a chip off the old block.'

'So where's his new place?'

'It's across that paddock, just behind that windbreak.' He pointed to a row of tall trees behind the garage. 'It's actually less than half a K away as the crow flies, but you'd never know it. There's a gate in the dividing fence just behind the shed. And there's a rough kind of path between the two properties. Your only other close neighbour is Honor Fielding. She's a bit further up on the Wash Road. She's that celebrity PR agent, media person? I guess you'd have heard of her, being in showbiz and all that?'

'Of course.' I was slightly surprised. 'What's she doing living out here?'

'She actually grew up in Enfield Wash, and she and her husband bought a weekender a couple of years back – five acres. They're not here that often. They come up for a few days, maybe once a month, a bit more in winter. Her dad's at The Franchise, so she comes up a bit to see him.'

I looked back at the house. It was certainly no architectural marvel, but it was solid and cosy. There were views out to the mountain and across the plains, but the property was sheltered, relatively secluded. It was peaceful, a long way from the rat race, but not too far away from the comforts of civilisation. It was just what we needed. I paid a deposit that day.

*

My students, too, were obsessed with the Canning case. When the story first broke it was almost impossible to keep them focused on any other subject. I had come to my Year Eleven drama class prepared for a tedious but necessary discussion about their woefully inadequate practice journals. Instead, when I walked in a few minutes late, the class – only fifteen students, but with enough enthusiastic extroverts to make it feel like fifty – was agog with the recent news: the girl found semi-conscious in the shepherd's hut, her story of abduction, imprisonment, and escape. They were full of theories, too – why the woman had taken her, who they might be, was the girl making it all up – but then why would she? Why would anyone make up such a crazy story? The conversation was impossible to close down. Every time I tried there was a chorus of *Oh, Miss*, and someone added another unlikely fact. In the end I gave up.

'Okay,' I said, 'I get it. I'm fascinated too. Honestly. But I can't just let you sit here gossiping all day.'

Yes, you can, came the chorus. *We won't tell. Come on, Miss.*

'But what we can do is use it,' I told them, in my best inspirational-teacher voice. And I meant it. At first glance it might have looked like the tackiest of tabloid stories, but wasn't that what drama, what all art, was primarily about? To explore the full range of what it means to be human, the extraordinary moments as well as the ordinary, the extravagant and the necessary.

So instead of the dull double period I'd planned, the class worked on three-minute improvisations in groups of two, exploring whatever elements of the story interested them.

First though (there's always a *quid pro quo* for classroom fun) we discussed the story's meaning. What was the significance of this tale of abduction, imprisonment and escape? Could they locate any universal resonances, thematic implications, mythological connections? What might it tell us about the times we lived in, contemporary culture?

As always, the class came up with more than I expected, surprising me with their insights. It was a story about moving from childhood to adulthood; a story about the perversion of adult power; a story about abuse, but without real physical harm; it was a story about courage, about heroism, about oppression and freedom.

'Does it remind you of any other stories? What about fairy tales?'

'Cinderella?'

'It's sorta like a modern Hansel and Gretel, isn't it? Only there's no Hansel.'

'And no gingerbread. Or lollies.'

'The basement would be, like, the cage.'

'But she didn't get to push the witch into the fire before she left.'

'They haven't actually found her yet. Maybe she did.'

We discussed characterisation. I asked them how they imagined the girl. They'd seen snippets on the news, but what sort of a girl was she really? What sort of a girl was she before she got into this situation? Was there anything that made her particularly vulnerable? They knew bits and pieces about her: that she was a foster child, a scholarship girl at a posh boarding school, that she was probably a bit of an outsider, not a rich kid. Bright, hardworking, ambitious most likely. And they could see

from the pictures that she was pretty. But networked beings that they were, they knew other things too, things that hadn't been reported in the media. These days there was always someone who knew someone who knew someone.

'I have a friend,' one girl said, 'who went to her old high school. She was a bit of a skank, apparently.' Another girl said she'd heard Ellie Canning had been in trouble for drugs, that she was about to be expelled anyway. Someone else had been told she was a Jesus freak.

'And what about the two women,' I asked. 'Who were they?'

So far, very little information had been released about the women who abducted the girl. All we knew was that there were two: one middle-aged, the other elderly. And then there was the intriguing question of motivation. What on earth was the rationale behind the kidnap? Why did they take her? Why did they keep her?

'I really don't get it, what would two old women want with a girl our age?' asked one. 'What would be the point?'

What indeed?

'Hey,' said one of the boys, 'you live with your mother, don't you, Miss? Somewhere out of town? How do we know it wasn't you?'

'But Miss lives miles from where she was found,' someone else chipped in. 'As if Miss would kidnap a girl.'

'What would I want another teenage girl for,' I sighed, 'when I've got all of you?'

They had no trouble imagining the scenario and the characters, but a truly plausible motive eluded them.

Inevitably the subject of sex reared its head. There had been no mention of the girl having suffered any sort of sexual trauma,

but what else could it be, they wondered. They knew all about the most recent high-profile abduction cases; they'd read the news, seen the movies – the ones where the girls had been held for years, given birth even, and they all knew that on some level these cases always involved sex. But in those cases the perpetrators were always men. Our scenario was quite different: this time the villain wasn't male, and the idea perplexed as much as it intrigued.

'It's totally weird though, isn't it, Miss? I mean, women don't really do that sort of thing?'

'Don't they?'

'Maybe they're lesbians,' one girl offered tentatively.

'But they're both old, aren't they? *Erg*.'

'That doesn't stop them being perverts.'

'Are you saying lesbians are perverts? OMG. That's like totally homophobic.'

'I didn't mean—'

'Maybe she wasn't there for the women. Perhaps they'd just sort of caught her, and were getting her ready for a man? Maybe she escaped before he got there?'

'Maybe they'd captured her for the white slave trade?'

'Maybe it was a brothel?'

'Okay,' I said, 'these are all good ideas. But I want you to try a bit harder, think a bit more deeply. What else could it possibly be? Aren't people ever abducted for other reasons?'

'Maybe they'd taken her there to do the cleaning?'

'Maybe,' said Jess Mallory, one of my more promising students – a quiet, diffident girl who had a surprising intensity onstage, and who had been given the main part in the school play. 'Maybe the younger woman wanted a friend. Maybe she was lonely. Or maybe she wanted a daughter?'

When it came to the crunch they all avoided making motive explicit in their improvs. Most of them portrayed the girl thrashing about, terrified, desperate to escape, and her captor either vicious and abusive, or stern, cold, impervious.

Only Jess Mallory's vision departed from this. Jess's kidnapper sat by the girl's bedside, held her hand and crooned nursery rhymes – 'Three blind mice, see how they run', her voice high and wispy and slightly off-key. She smoothed back her captive's hair, murmured words of love, told her stories, echoes of familiar fairy tales, *Snow White*, *Hansel and Gretel*, talking to her as if she were her long-lost daughter, or the ghost of the woman's own past. The captive, played by Katie Miller, one of my least enthusiastic students, lay as if catatonic, eyes open, but displaying no emotion at all. And it was this particular tableau, the entire class agreed, that was the most terrifying, the most sinister of all.

'Why?' I asked them. 'What's so scary about it?'

Only Jess had an answer. 'It's because the woman thinks she's doing the right thing by the girl. She actually thinks she loves her …'

Even Mary had been briefly intrigued by the story. Despite the fact that she spent half her day in front of the television, any real-world events generally seemed to wash over her. Occasionally she would surprise me by mentioning some random item of news – that the renovations to the local council chambers were going to cost almost a million dollars, for instance, or that a local farmer sold a bull for a record sum. This sort of detail generally disappeared from her memory almost immediately, but she was wide-eyed about the abduction.

'She reminds me,' Mary said, 'of a girl I knew when I lived in Paris.'

'I didn't even know you lived in Paris.'

'That's because it's none of your business.'

Paris was clearly a conversational red flag. I changed tack. 'Who does she remind you of?'

'Who?'

'The girl who was kidnapped.'

'I already told you. This slut I knew in Paris.'

'Oh.'

'Don't look so shocked.'

'I'm not—'

'Yes, you are. I can tell. You're making that face – like someone farted.'

'I'm not—'

'Anyway, we were all into it. We were *all* sluts. That was our job.'

'Okay.'

'That's what the back-up singers were there for really, to service the boys. And don't tell me it was any different in TV land, Miss Sanctimony.'

'You were telling me about the girl? Your friend.'

'Who?'

'The girl in Paris.'

'Oh, her. She went by the name Colette de la, de la – some bullshit French name – but her real name was Betty Kane. She had tickets on herself, told everyone she was related to royalty, but that was just rubbish. She had no class. And she'd sleep with anyone, given the chance. It didn't matter if it was her best friend's boyfriend, everyone was fair game. Didn't matter if

they were old or young, if they were fat or had no teeth. They just had to have a cock. Although, there was a rumour that that wasn't important either, but I think she probably spread—'

'But why does she remind you of Ellie Canning?'

'What?' Mary's interest in the present had flagged, she was wandering in the labyrinth of her past.

'You said she reminded you of the girl who was abducted. Ellie Canning. The one that's been in the news. The schoolgirl.'

'Oh, *that* girl. She likes sex. You can tell by the way she runs her tongue over her lips when she talks. Betty did that too.'

'Oh.'

'And she's a liar.'

'So, how do you know that? The way she touches the side of her nose with her little finger?'

Mary rolled her eyes. 'Don't be sarcastic, sweetie. It doesn't suit you. It's just that it's a bloody stupid story. It's an *unbelievable* story. Why would two women abduct a young girl? What were they going to do with her? It's so fucking ridiculous, it has to be a lie.'

I called Mary Mum until I was ten, even though I rarely saw her. My grandparents insisted on it, even though Nan was, to all intents and purposes, my mother, Pop my father. Although Mary's visits to my grandparents' home were ostensibly to see me, they weren't really, and by the time I was seven or eight I understood this. Her visits were for money, or for somewhere to stay, briefly; or sometimes, I think now, maybe as a reminder that there were people who loved her, and that she had a past that was nothing like her present. None of these reminders changed the way she lived her life, though.

And the fact that her present included me, her daughter, seemed to have very little meaning for her. I wasn't a part of that benign past she wanted to recall. Her mother and her father, and their gentle uncomplicated love for her – that was what she came back for. I wasn't a real part of her endless present either – whatever sad mess that was – the present that she couldn't seem to escape, and it seemed to me then, didn't really want to either.

She would arrive unannounced, and stay just long enough to enjoy the prodigal's return: the nutritious meals, the clean sheets, the early nights, the hot showers. The desperate aching love of her parents. And then she'd go.

There was never any warning, never any preparation. Sometimes I'd wake up in the morning and there she'd be, sprawled on my grandparents' good lounge, Nan's crocheted arm covers all awry, cushions tossed aside. To my sleepy eyes she seemed almost fairy-like – ethereal and not quite earthbound, which was true, I guess. She certainly wasn't any part of our routine domestic realm.

Or I'd arrive home from school, and Mary would be perched up on the kitchen bench, grimy backpack at her feet, a cigarette in one hand, a glass of something in the other, watching Nan prepare dinner. She'd look down at me, distant, but offhandedly kind, and tweak my hair, give me a wink, a lopsided not-quite smile, sing a few bars of the old song, always getting it slightly wrong. *Oh, Suzannah, oh don't you know it's me.* And I'd smile back shyly, desperate for her attention. Always knowing that just as I began to feel the shyness dissolve, the bonds of wanting and need beginning to strengthen, she would disappear.

When she was there, we all knew to keep our distance – any sign of our wanting more would be enough to make her restless, encourage her to leave early. My grandparents had learned the hard way that Mary would only put up with their love if it was disguised. Love could be practical – my grandmother could feed her, fill the bath for her, wash and fold her clothes; she would happily take the cash my grandfather offered, the lifts here and there, but any questions, any demonstrations of affection were rejected; if they persisted, she'd go. There was never any place for me in this equation – what can a child offer their mother that isn't about love, about wanting to show as well as receive it?

The last time I saw her, until the more recent call from the hospital, I was ten. Mary had turned up, even more wrecked than usual. She was thin, her skin was bad, her mood even more erratic than usual. There seemed to be marks – dark smudges that might have been bruises, fading scars, faint welts – all over her: on her face, her arms, her thighs. Nan's eyes had widened when she first saw them, and she'd drawn a deep breath, a question formed and then evaporated.

After dinner, Mary showered and changed into a pair of Pop's old flannelette pyjamas and then stretched out on the lounge, TV blaring, the oil heater cranked up, although it was only early April and we were still swimming at the beach on the weekends. I sat beside her, not too close, silent, my eyes glued to the screen, but every part of me quiveringly aware of her: the way she threw herself on the seat, completely relaxed, limbs deliberately spread-eagled; not the way I'd been taught to sit – primly upright, knees together and feet firmly on the ground. The way she cleared her throat unselfconsciously, the

soft whistle of her breath, her restlessness; the way some part of her was always moving, a leg jiggling, her hands tapping out a rhythm. Despite the fact that she was using our everyday soap and shampoo, she smelled like no one else in the world – a mixture of cigarettes and something else, something sweet and slightly musky. Her presence made everything brighter, sharper, more alive.

She tugged her fingers through her still-damp hair, which was at least clean now, but horribly tangled.

'Do you want me to get you a brush?' I asked eventually, making it sound as offhand, as casual as I could, still not looking at her directly. Her 'sure' had been equally indifferent, but I remember running to the bathroom and returning with Nan's brush – a well-loved Mason Pearson.

My mother had taken it and looked at it for a long moment, and then handed it back, a strange smile on her lips. 'How about you do it for me, Oh, Suzannah?'

Mary had shifted, lying with her head hanging over the arm of the lounge as I brushed. It was a difficult job; her bleached hair was coarse and split, and the tangles were ferocious – the sort of knots that I'd ruthlessly cut out of my Barbie's head. But I persisted, kept going long after I'd brushed out every snarl, even though by then Mary was fast asleep. Sleeping, she looked as young and as pretty as she was in the photographs Nan kept in a tin, photos from when she was in high school, from before she had me. I sat on the chair opposite, the brush forgotten in my lap, and just watched the rise and fall of her chest, the flickering of her eyelids, the twitches of her lips, the small sighs and gasps that people make when they're sleeping. I wished so hard that she could stay like that, that she would

stay there, forever. But by the next morning she'd gone, without warning. This time there were no hastily confected excuses, no pretending not to notice her mother's distress, her father's shining eyes.

And this time she'd never come back. There'd been the odd postcard, from London, Perth, Bali, Chicago, New York – *Having a ball! Living the life! Wish you were here x* – but there was never a return address, never any phone calls, not even the promise of a visit. There were no requests, as far as I knew, for cash either. By the time I was a teenager my grandparents barely mentioned her in front of me; it was as if they'd stopped wondering, stopped hoping, aloud at any rate – it was all too painful for everyone. They knew she was alive, which I suppose was better than not knowing.

Whether or not Mary knew – or cared – whether *they* were alive was another thing. She didn't come home for either of their funerals. When Pop died, friends of the family did their best to locate her, to send word, and I saw the desperate hope on Nan's face at the crematorium, and then at the wake. But there was no one left to hope when it was Nan's own funeral a few years later. I'd wondered if perhaps Mary herself was dead, and had been surprised by my own indifference.

Oh, Suzannah,
Oh don't you cry for me.

I'd been back in Bondi for a little over a year and had just begun looking for full-time work, when I got the call from social services, informing me that a Mary Squires was seriously ill at St Vincent's: I had been listed as her next of kin, and could I come in to discuss a care plan. I went to see her, more curious

than anything else. If I'd known that by the following month my mother and I would be living together for the first time since my birth, it's possible I'd have denied the connection, and exited, stage left.