

PRAISE FOR FAVEL PARRETT'S WORK

'that rare thing, a finely crafted literary novel that is genuinely moving and full of heart' *The Age*

'Wintonesque' *Herald Sun*

'a wonderful story told with a voice that I wanted to listen to. A voice that will stay with me for a long time.' *Sydney Morning Herald*

'a fresh and vital voice in Australian fiction' *The Australian Women's Weekly*

'moving and masterful' Maxine Beneba Clarke, author of *Foreign Soil* and *The Hate Race*

'Parrett's writing is exquisite in its simplicity and eloquence, and her narrative is heart-rending. This poignant story resonates.' *Kirkus Reviews*

'haunting and beautiful' *InStyle*

'An amazing book by a wonderful writer – Cormac McCarthy meets David Vann meets Favel Parrett. Read this book.' *Sunday Times*

'Parrett's debut [*Past the Shallows*] marks the addition of a strong voice to the chorus of Australian literature.' *Canberra Times*

'So real, so true – this novel sweeps you away in its tide.' Robert Drewe

ALSO BY FAVEL PARRETT

Past the Shallows

When the Night Comes

THERE
WAS
STILL
LOVE

FAVEL
PARRETT



Published in Australia and New Zealand in 2019
by Hachette Australia
(an imprint of Hachette Australia Pty Limited)
Level 17, 207 Kent Street, Sydney NSW 2000
www.hachette.com.au

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Copyright © Favel Parrett 2019

This book is copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purposes of private study, research, criticism or review permitted under the *Copyright Act 1968*, no part may be stored or reproduced by any process without prior written permission. Enquiries should be made to the publisher.



A catalogue record for this book is available from the National Library of Australia

ISBN: 978 0 7336 3068 2 (paperback)

Cover design by Christabella Designs
Cover illustration by Robert Farkas: mail.astronaut@gmail.com
Cover photograph courtesy of Mark Owen/Trevillion
Author photograph by Fern Millen
Text design by Bookhouse, Sydney
Text break illustration by Lee Moir
Typeset in 12.2/17 pt Monotype Garamond Pro by Bookhouse, Sydney
Printed and bound in Australia by McPherson's Printing Group



The paper this book is printed on is certified against the Forest Stewardship Council® Standards. McPherson's Printing Group holds FSC® chain of custody certification SA-COC-005379. FSC® promotes environmentally responsible, socially beneficial and economically viable management of the world's forests.

For DK – my love

And for my grandparents, Mitzi and Bill –
who were the very best of people

The Suitcase

There are suitcases everywhere. They cover the country. Little brown suitcases on trains, and on carts – suitcases strapped to the top of buses. There are suitcases being carried along old country roads by women, by men, dragged by children. There are suitcases abandoned in ditches, suitcases left broken in stairwells.

People carry little brown suitcases.

Inside, all they can hold. A set of warm clothes, a photograph of loved ones, a treasured book. They carry little suitcases to imagined safety and hope to find a place where they can put their suitcase down and unpack.

You must become a little brown suitcase.

You must close up tight, protect your most needed possessions – all you can hold. Your heart, your mind, your soul. You must become a little suitcase and try not to think about home.

Melbourne

1980

Our footsteps echo as we climb the stairs. My grandma holds my hand.

Shhhhh – be quiet! My grandpa is sleeping.

The third floor flat, the heavy wooden door, and, inside, the smell of warm pipe tobacco and homemade cakes. Home.

Take your coat off – hang it on the coat rack. Take your shoes off – put them in the shoe rack. Put on your slippers. Mine are red and my grandma's are blue. My grandpa's are brown, but they are in his room where he is sleeping.

Down the hall, past my grandma's bedroom and past my grandpa's bedroom, past the green-tiled bathroom, and into the small, light kitchen. My grandma puts the cloth shopping bag on the table. It has flowers on it and zips up into a small leather wallet when it's not being used. It is a good bag and it holds a lot. It comes from Czechoslovakia.

I unpack the shopping. Three Kaiser rolls. A wrapped paper parcel with six slices of Swiss cheese inside. A paper parcel with six slices of Pariser sausage inside. A loaf of rye bread with caraway seeds. A jar of Nova gherkins. One round black and green tin – Dr Pat pipe tobacco for my grandpa.

My grandma fills up the kettle over the sink and sets it on the stove. She lights a match and the gas ring explodes blue – *poof*. That sweet smell of gas. My grandma blows out the match, then breaks it in half with her fingers. She drops the broken match into a glass ashtray. It's full of match halves – one half clean; the other blackened and burnt.

I hear the toilet flush. My grandpa is awake.

My grandma scoops loose tea into the shiny teapot. She smiles at me and then begins to sing.

'One-two-three
Grandma caught a flea
Put it in the teapot
Made a cup of tea
The flea jumped out
Grandma gave a shout
Here comes grandpa with his shirt hanging out!'

I join in with the last line, and just like that – my grandpa opens the kitchen door. He's wearing his white singlet and striped pyjama bottoms and his brown slippers – his face still puffy with sleep. I laugh at his crazy sticking-up hair,

at the way he always looks so surprised to be alive. He sits down at the green table next to me. He pats my head.

My grandma makes the tea.

I'm sailing across space – far from Earth – and there is nothing but black and the distant light from stars that shine. But I can see her now, just in view – the little bright-blue planet. Neptune.

A flute plays. The keys of the celesta chime.

I fly faster, I move with speed and the planet gets bigger, brighter, until there is nothing else but blue.

High voices begin to sing, a dream calling me – pulling me in. I reach out my arms, my fingers. Closer, closer – I try so hard to touch the surface, but the celesta chimes again, and Neptune begins to fade. She becomes see-through, translucent, and my hand slips right through.

The singing becomes softer, quieter – softer, until there is no longer any difference between sound and silence.

Dappled light through the lace curtains. The ticking of the Smiths clock.

I'm sitting on the upside-down cream footstool – my spaceship. Three wooden legs stick up in a triangle around me, little metal feet on the end of each like antennae.

The tape in the stereo runs fast to its end and clicks off. Everything is still. The coffee table, the TV with the lace doily on top, the sofa underneath the double windows, the gas heater, the mantelpiece, the framed tapestry of a city

far away – with bridges and a river and a castle and a dark sky. The third storey flat.

My whole world.

My grandpa's heavy breaths. He is asleep in his armchair. I stand up and look at him. So peaceful, his face smoothed down with sleep, his arms crossed on his lap. I don't want to wake him, but he opens his eyes.

'Malá Liška,' he says.

That's me. *Little Fox*.

My grandpa sits up and taps his pipe out in the ashtray – the contents grey and long gone out.

'Did the tape finish?' he asks, and I nod.

Side two – the best side. Saturn, the Bringer of Old Age; Uranus, The Magician; Neptune, The Mystic – my favourite planet, and *our* favourite piece. My grandpa thinks that the celesta is a magical instrument and I always listen out for it in each different track. Holst: *The Planets*.

My grandma calls out from the kitchen. Lunch is ready, and my grandpa stands up, stretches his back. He takes my hand. We walk together to the kitchen for our lunch – a Kaiser roll with a slice of cheese and a slice of Pariser, a whole dill gherkin on the side. One gherkin for me, one for my grandma and one for my grandpa.



Silver coins in a jar. An old Nova gherkin jar.

Nova gherkins were the best ones. After The Curtain came down, we couldn't seem to get them anymore. I never

found a gherkin that was as good as those Czechoslovakian Nova gherkins – not even close. I used to eat one every day with my lunch and I would always save it until last, until I had finished my roll, because then the taste of the gherkin lasted longer. Sometimes when my grandma was asleep in her chair, my grandpa would sneak one out of the jar and crunch it down quickly with the fridge door open. He really loved those gherkins.

But every gherkin was rationed. And every fifty-cent piece counted.

My grandpa would sort through his coins in the late afternoon before he had to get ready for his night shift at the factory where he was a night watchman. He'd take his dinner with him – two tin plates together like a clamshell. My grandma's cooking, rich with butter and salt and fried, golden goodness.

My grandparents saved their fifty-cent coins to buy aeroplane tickets. They managed to do this every four years, sometimes every three years if they were very careful. If they saved hard.

They bought the cheapest tickets.

They took the longest route.

In that small, dark travel agent on Elizabeth Street, near the old market stinking with meat and cheese and fish, a Greek man held out the book of tickets for my grandpa to study. My grandma held my hand.

‘Melbourne – Sing-a-pore-*re*.

‘Sing-a-pore-*re* – Athens.

‘Athens – Frank-a-*furt*.

‘Frank-a-*furt* – Praa-*g*.’

Forty-two hours.

My grandpa hated flying. He got claustrophobic and paced and sweated and tried to calm himself by smoking his pipe. Then smoking was banned. Things were worse for him after smoking was banned. He had to fight the urge to smash the window or open the emergency door and jump out. It was a battle to hold on. Sometimes he thought he might start screaming. But he never did. He made it – every time. He wanted so badly to go home.

Luděk

MAY 1980

Pigeons – there are five hundred million pigeons in this city. They shit on everything. They shit on the sculptures, on the heads of all those stone saints. The famous people from history are covered in shit. Once a pigeon shat on Babi's head, but it never happens to him. He is too quick, he runs too fast and the shit never gets him.

He is invisible. It is his super power.

He can fly through the streets, move past eyes, unnoticed.

He can slip right under the heavy blanket that covers this city – the fear cannot touch him.

Luděk is free.

And he sees everything.

A teenage girl in a tight yellow skirt is blowing bubbles in the square – little rainbow spheres of light. Two girls with

the same long hair are trying to clap the bubbles dead in their hands. They are screeching, laughing – smashing the bubbles between their red, sticky palms. But some of the bubbles get away, rise up high and fly above the city. They fly with the birds that look down. Maybe some even make it all the way across the river. Luděk does not know. He cannot see that far.

The tower clangs – once, twice – Luděk feels each strike of the clock right in his guts. It shakes him into action. Three times, four. *Clang!* It's 5 pm. The day is falling away right in front of him. He is not meant to be over this side – not so far away from home. And there is only one hour left before he has to be flying up those stairs to the flat. One golden hour.

He runs through the tower and onto the bridge. It is already busy with workers – men moving in their dark suits, women in skirts, spring coats, handbags, satchels, shoes, boots. Two old-timers are already drunk, tripping and slipping over their own feet. What jokers. *Go home and get out of my way!*

Luděk weaves his way through the crowd with stealth. He knows the statues on the bridge by heart. He has names for them all and he yells at each one as he runs.

'Hey Fat Guts! Hey Stupid! Hi Dumb-Dumb! Hey Sleepy! Hey Hunchback! Hey Squint Eyes!'

The only statue he likes is the lady with the pointy crown, and he never yells insults at her. He calls her by

her name, Bar-ba-ra. Barbara, my Barbara! He likes the way that name makes his mouth move.

Bar – ba – rah!

A woman stops in front of him and looks around. He must have yelled that last Barbara a bit too loudly. He moves faster. Babi would kill him if she found out he was yelling at saints. He would get the wooden spoon for sure AND no dinner. She would tell him that the statues would get their revenge on him. But he does not believe any of those old stories, the ones about the statues coming to life in the night. He is not a baby. The statues are just old, dead stone. They are not going anywhere in a hurry.

‘Up yours, Pointy!’ he yells at St Augustine, then he cuts a hard left and zips down the zig-zag stairs two steps at a time. He’s on the home side now, and there is time for his favourite place – the Kampa.

A lady in a fur coat is taking up the whole path. Luděk darts around her and nearly trips over a little dog – *Sorry little dog!* He smiles at it.

Dogs. There are lots of dogs out now. Fancy dogs, fluffy dogs, big bruiser dogs. Luděk loves them all. God, he wants a dog. He would be happy with any kind of dog. It *does not* matter to him. Whatever dog came along, he would love it. Even if it was the ugliest, dumbest dog in the world, it would still be better than no dog. He has never seen a dog he did not like. And they like him, too. They see him even when people do not. He is not invisible to dogs. Dogs take notice.

Sometimes he wants a dog so badly he thinks about just stealing one – one that’s mistreated and left out in the cold. He knows he can’t have one, not while he lives with Babi, and he never even asks about it. But maybe if Mama came back they could get a dog. If she came back and did not go away anymore maybe it could happen. A friend, one that could run as fast as he could.

The path is stuffed with prams, and babies are screaming their heads off. One thing Luděk *does not* want is a brother or a sister. He does not want a bloody baby. NO WAY! He’d be stuck with it; like the other kids in the park, stuck pushing a pram around. *Look after your brother. Look after your sister. The baby needs fresh air!*

He gets away from the prams, away from the screaming babies, and he keeps moving. He is almost at the best bit of the park now, where all the lovers are, where all the smoochers meet.

At his favourite tree, he catches his breath. He scans the scene.

The after-work love-fest.

Couples slouching on park benches, leaning against trees in the shadows. Hugging, kissing like they are hungry. All those hands moving under tight dresses, under tight shirts, hands squeezing flesh. So many lovers everywhere like it is the national sport.

He cannot stop watching.

‘Lov . . . vers.’

A loud voice behind him.

Luděk swings around. An old man – his eyes sloppy and drunk, his face crazy.

‘Lov . . . vers,’ the man says again with his open, dribbling mouth.

Luděk takes off, he runs flat out. He hears the man yell out again, but he does not look back. He runs until he can hardly breathe. When he is far enough away, when he is safe, he slows down. There is an empty glass bottle of Kofola on the ground and Luděk kicks it hard. It clatters along the pavement and flips up onto the grass without breaking.

Why did that old madman have to wreck everything? Why did he have to be there? Drunken idiot.

He takes the path towards the exit closest to the flat and he keeps his eyes peeled for squirrels. The trees are full of leaves and the park is looking good. The end of spring. Summer holidays are just around the corner.

A couple walk towards him on the path in the beginning shadows. They are holding hands. They stand out in the open – together. They are not groping in corners or hiding behind bushes. They are not afraid.

They move past him silently, like they are floating, and they are not looking ahead, or at the trees, and they are not looking at Luděk. They just stare into each other’s eyes, and their eyes are soft and they are smiling.

Luděk can feel it. They are in love.

The street lights flick on, the ones that aren’t busted, and despite himself, his hand makes a fist and he pumps it into the air.

There is still love. And there is still cake, sometimes.

The world can do what it likes. The world can go to hell for all he cares because Babi is waiting for him in the warm flat. His whole world.

Luděk holds onto this feeling with everything he has. He packs it tightly down inside himself. Then he turns and runs down the lane towards home as fast as his legs can carry him.