PART ONE:
ROMANCE

For without hearts there is no home.

– 'Don Juan', Lord Byron

1.

TYWYAH

'WHERE THE HELL ARE WE?' I said to my game-for-anything buddy. I'd counted four pubs and three butchers as we drove along the main street of the small country town.

'Casino,' she said. 'The beef capital.'

'Where even the radio station's named for cattle?' I said as I read out a billboard: COW FM.

I flicked through the CDs in the console. I couldn't remember any more songs from *Grease*, *The Sound of Music* or *Jesus Christ Superstar*. My friend launched into 'Don't Cry for Me Argentina'.

I joined in for the chorus, replacing Argentina with South Africa. Six and a half years earlier in January 1989, as an impatient and determinedly independent 22-year-old, I'd migrated to Australia. My stepfather, whose oldest sons had already migrated, had facilitated the golden opportunity: a permanent residency visa. My father's sudden death had catapulted my decision to emigrate immediately, ahead of my mother and stepfather: I needed a safe home. I was no Eva Peron but leaving South Africa, mired then in a draconian state of emergency, had felt like a betrayal of the national democratic struggle and of the courageous and moral self I aspired to be. At the same time, I was deeply grateful for migration's privileges: to study and live in a safe and peaceful country, free of the fears and insecurities,

the alienation and guilt that came with being white and Jewish in apartheid South Africa.

Lismore, where I taught law at the university, was thirty kilometres behind us. Byron Bay, with its ropey fig trees and camphor laurels, sugarcane and white beaches, an hour and a half behind us. A year ago, hoping to find somewhere I might belong, I'd taken sick leave from my paid and unpaid legal jobs in Sydney, loaded my white hatchback and, together with my housemate, headed north.

As my friend belted out another verse, I examined the mud map on the back of the invitation to Jen's fortieth birthday party. We still had another ninety kilometres to go before we got to Tywyah – and this had all been my idea.

I'd met Jen two days earlier, watched as she'd roped a load of mattresses and bags of horse feed to her blue truck. I was intrigued. I'd never met a woman who talked of 'loads' and 'truckies' knots'.

But on that spring evening, I was more interested in a woman with deep brown eyes and a shaved head. We'd circled each other a fortnight before at a Tropical Fruits dance, and I'd finally found an excuse to drop by the converted stables where she lived. I tried not to look at the bed I longed to lie on. I rolled and smoked cigarette after cigarette. My blood, my breath, my heart all moved too fast. My words tumbled and tripped. I wanted to be there, and I wanted to run away. The arrival of the woman's friends, Jen and her carpenter girlfriend, was a salve. The invitation to Jen's birthday party on her farm was gold: a chance to see my crush again, and a chance to get to know more women in this new community.

'Why would you want to live out here?' I wondered aloud as we drove on, past endless barbed-wire fences, past skinny cows and horses floating in paddocks bleached of colour, and then up and over a mountain range for more barbed wire and lonely houses. As the sun was setting, we clattered over a wooden bridge signposted Hamilton's Crossing and pulled up at the mud map's X: a red mailbox with the sign *Tywyah*.

'Weird name. How do you even say it? Tiwieh?'

'Maybe tie-why-ah,' my friend said.

I got out to open the gate. 'Gross. Can you smell that?'

What a tough, hot, dry, ugly place. I climbed back into the car and notched up the volume on Jane Siberry's 'Calling All Angels'.

We followed the arrows across a mustard-brown paddock; past a cow's body, her ribs a scaffolding without the skin; through a dry gully and up a rocky and rutted driveway. Just when the car demanded another gear, an oasis appeared amid the spotty gum trees: a crowd of women, some standing around a bonfire, some lounging on sofas beneath a passionfruit vine on the wide verandah of a mudbrick house.

I fluffed my short hair in the side mirror, for a fraction of a second not recognising myself. A couple of years earlier I'd cut my wild mane short in the hope I'd look more 'dykey' and find my place in Sydney's lesbian community.

As we hesitantly walked through the open gate, Jen welcomed us.

'Thanks for the invitation,' I said. 'We've been trying to work out how to say the name of this place. Is it Ti … Tiwi … ah?'

She laughed. 'Tie-wire. As in tying the wire. You know that wire used in bush building?'

'No,' I said, looking completely blank.

'Everything here was built with poles and wire. So that's what we called the place. We were taking the piss out of everyone buying bush blocks or hobby farms and calling them exotic names like Bella Vista.'

We joined the gathering and, not long after, a friend from town, dressed in red leather chaps, said, 'Hey, you girls, we need some performances. Can you whip something up?'

Someone suggested a song, someone had a guitar, and before I knew it I was led over to the stables into what was called a 'tack room'. There were saddles and helmets, reins and bridles, whips and chains. Why the hell not? I thought, as I stripped down to black bra and denim shorts.

An hour later, in front of a crowd of women, most of whom I didn't know, I mock-kissed a bare-breasted woman in a harness and helmet. I wore elasticised workboots and sported a whip. Bridles, reins and chains trellised my pale freckled nakedness. We were the dancers, the girls behind us the guitarists and singers for a spontaneous performance of 'Wild Thing'.

After our performance, while the leather girls with handcuffs dangling from studded belts gave me approving looks, I searched out the safety of my game-for-anything buddy. Instead I found the woman I had a crush on and, still skating on this bold me, I said, 'How about a night of uncomplicated sex?'

I can't believe I actually came out with that line. Something tipped my usual seesaw from anxiety to adventurous. Maybe it was the costume, the performance amid the safety of a women-only event, maybe it was the unknown crowd and far-away farm, maybe it was another case of fake it till you make it, something I'd become more proficient at since migration. That night I found a bold self – the bravado of the outsider who so wants to belong.

Like many a romantic comedy, Jen and I collided after that weekend. My lover – the first night at Tywyah had led to a second and then a third – had invited me to dinner. Jen was a guest too, and I parked behind her blue truck. The night ended with a bang – between Jen's blue truck and my little white hatchback.

My lover and I discovered the collision as we were leaving. In the moonlight I stared at the damage while she went inside to tell the others. How was I to handle this? It wasn't the dented white duco that worried me. It was the politics of economic inequality – of difference.

On Jen's farm I'd seen the sagging mismatched couches, and heard how she and her girlfriends had built every structure on the block. I assumed that Jen, like some of my other friends, might be on the

dole and have no access to extra cash or credit – 'skint', as the girls used to say. What if Jen wasn't insured? What if she couldn't afford the repairs?

If economic privilege is relative, in the class-conscious lesbian feminist community of the nineties, to have a well-paying job, own a home or have savings meant you were labelled as 'rich', and your ethics around money were up for discussion – particularly if you'd inherited money, as I'd done when my father had died, suddenly, tragically, when I was twenty-one, six months before I'd emigrated.

Where my South African political education had focused on Steve Biko and Franz Fanon's writings about black consciousness, in smoky Sydney pubs, around kitchen tables and from Audre Lorde's *Sister Outsider* I'd discovered feminism and 'the personal is political'. I learned about the complexities of power and choice and the words that described experiences I'd known of but had no language for, like incest and domestic violence. I learned too that feminists had overlooked the blacks and gays, the elderly, the poor and the disabled – what is these days known as intersectionality. And I'd learned about hierarchies of otherness: to be black or poor was 'worthy'. I, on the other hand, was suspect: middle class, Jewish, heterosexual until recently – all privileges some associate with power. Worse still, I was a white South African who'd benefited from the privilege of whiteness.

So staring at Jen's truck up against my dented duco, I wondered whether I should just say, 'I'm happy to pay.' Or would that offend Jen? And if I didn't offer, would the privilege police accuse me of being a typical ungenerous rich white Jewish South African?

When everyone came out to look at the smash, there was laughter and disbelief.

Jen looked at the two vehicles, opened the passenger door of her blue truck and said, 'The handbrake must've slipped; the truck's rolled back. I'll call the insurance people on Monday.'

My shoulders dropped. This wasn't ethically complicated. Jen saw this as her responsibility. I wasn't expected to pay simply because I

could afford it. Perhaps, despite differences, I could still fit in here, still make this place home.

'The pool's completely private,' the elderly woman told my housemate and me as we stood outside the blond-brick house on the hill. I nodded and smiled. What a view. To the west were rolling paddocks, south and north were ocean glimpses, and the house was only ten minutes from the quaint village of Bangalow, where you couldn't do the grocery shopping but you could post a letter and buy Persian carpets. It was also only a half-hour drive to the university where I worked.

'We're active in Rotary and the Country Women's Association so we built the house for entertaining,' the woman said as she gestured through the glass screen doors to the large paved area.

I pictured ladies in linen lunching at white-clothed tables and men in open-necked shirts leaning over the built-in-bar.

'Do you entertain much?' the woman asked.

My housemate and I avoided each other's eyes.

'A little,' I said, as I imagined the parties I might host. I pictured groups of lesbians lazing naked beside the private pool, smoking, drinking, dancing, perhaps even performing – surely that raised dining room with the wooden bannister could become a stage.

I wanted to do cartwheels across the acre of lush green lawn. I saw security, and a happier, more balanced life. How fortunate I was. If a migrant, rather than an expat, is defined by some 'need', my need for physical safety had surely been met. I sang a few lines from *The Jungle Book's* 'The Bare Necessities' out loud.

Ten years earlier, as a university student in Cape Town, I'd stood amid the wreckage of homes that had been bulldozed by the South African government, handing formula and nappies to women who had nothing to feed their babies and nowhere to shelter them. Later, as we'd driven home to hot showers and warm beds, someone had

started singing ‘The Bare Necessities’. I’d joined in, but as we sang I’d looked back at the hundreds of homeless people camped in Red Cross tents.

How very grateful I was then – and now. Unlike the residents of that township of Crossroads, unlike so many South Africans and Australians, I had the necessities in peaceful, safe Australia. Here, I’d be able to send down roots. Under the tutelage of my gardener–writer housemate and her girlfriend, I’d take up gardening, which they said would help me manage the stress of my academic job, perhaps teach me what I needed to learn: patience, and the natural order and cycle of life. What really mattered. This would be a place to belong.

‘Can you convert this into two offices?’ I asked Jen’s girlfriend the carpenter as we stood beside the carport’s brick pillars. Apart from the countless sliding glass doors, which made me wonder if I’d ever feel safe on my own, the house had one major drawback: there were only two bedrooms, both too small to accommodate a bed and desk, and I now needed to work harder than ever. An inheritance might’ve helped buy the place but I’d pay the mortgage and maintenance from my university salary. I had to show everyone I worked for it all – how else would I gain my community’s approval? Buying the place had felt like another coming out: I could afford a place that my closest friend described as ‘over the top’ – again, a relative term. Only a handful of the women I knew owned houses.

The carpenter walked around, measuring, tapping, suggesting, jotting down figures with the pencil she pulled from behind her ear. Each office would have doors to the outside and she could cut through the brick wall to create an entry from the house via my wardrobe. Like the magical portal of C.S Lewis’s *Narnia*, I imagined sliding the mirrored wardrobe door, pushing aside my buttoned shirts and waistcoats and stepping into the world of my legal work.

Afternoons I came home from my job at the university to find

the carpenter, cap on backwards, listing what she needed for the next day while Jen, her girlfriend and assistant, wound cords, put away tools and swept up wood shavings. In her builder's apron and cut-off denim shorts, Jen was friendly, tidy, reliable, personable. With her slim hips, muscled shoulders and arms and playful brown eyes, she was spunky too, but as someone else's girlfriend, she was beyond my mental bounds. Sure, I was always happy to see her, but with lectures to deliver and the legal publisher breathing down my neck for the administrative law textbook I'd been contracted to write, I wished they'd hurry up and finish.

After the job was finished, I arranged to buy wood and hay from Jen. She'd deliver eggs with sunshine yolks, firewood she'd chopped and hay she'd baled. As I handed over payment, she'd say, 'Thanks, that'll pay for my trip to town.'

One day, as we drank tea in the shade of the pool's pergola, Jen explained that the farm was too far from town for a regular job and local farmers wouldn't hire a woman for cattle work, even though they'd all seen her ride and work cattle at the area's campdraft events. Making a living from the land wasn't really possible either: her two hundred acres could only run thirty head of cattle, and distance combined with poor soil meant it wasn't viable to sell vegetables. She'd tried, once growing seven hundred lineal metres of snow peas.

'So,' Jen said, 'I'm a self-made peasant.'

'Would you ever leave the farm?' I asked.

'And do what? Go back to teaching home science?'

I laughed. Jen was nothing like my home-economics teacher, Mrs Maggs, with the high bouffant and large bust, who'd patiently tried to teach teenagers who'd grown up with domestic workers how to separate eggs and bake scones.

'I'd have preferred to become a mechanic but that wasn't an option for girls in the seventies,' Jen explained. She told me how, growing up in the country, she'd liked taking things apart and putting them together. She'd spent only five years living in the city – she'd had fun

at the lesbian bars but not teaching home science – and then she and her girlfriend Ash, who also wanted to 'live simply and simply live', had left Sydney and taken a motorbike trip north.

'Tywyah is rocky, tough country,' she said. 'But it was what we could afford.' First they lived in a large tent, cooked on an open fire and bathed in the creek. They ate dried beans and tinned food because they had no refrigeration, and once a fortnight drove to town for a steak at the pub. By the time Ash's children, a ten- and eight-year-old, had joined them, they'd laid poly pipe to pump water from the creek, built a shack from bush poles and scantling, bought a milking cow and chickens and started breeding horses.

They seemed the epitome of hands-on feminism and pioneering self-reliance. 'I'm amazed you can do all this stuff,' I said. 'All I can do is convert a power plug and hammer in a picture hook. Who taught you?'

'Not our fathers. I had country common-sense but apart from horseriding, girls weren't taught traditional boys' jobs,' Jen said. 'Luckily Ash and I were both pretty practical so at Tywyah we learned on the job and from some neighbours.'

Unlike Jen, I'd not lived in one place longer than a year since I'd left my childhood home. I'd never been financially insecure and my longest relationship had lasted about two years. I knew of lesbian communities like Amazon Acres where women lived cooperatively and without the crutches of worldliness, but I was not such a woman. I knew myself to be hopelessly urban and middle class. The closest I'd come to pioneering life was admiring Laura, the compassionate and feisty hero of *Little House on the Prairie*, the television series I'd watched as a child.

But as Jen talked, I nodded. Ostensibly, the words she used were familiar: home, poor country, drought, the price of cattle, the financial complexities of relationship endings, even the form required for the fortnightly dole. After all, my businessman father had gone from insurance broking to chicken farming, my mother's family

had farmed sheep in South Africa's Little Karoo and I'd worked in social security law and researched the legal recognition of lesbian and gay relationships. Naively, I thought I understood what Jen's words meant.

I prodded her with questions. After five years another girlfriend had followed Ash and she too had matched Jen physically. Together they'd built a bigger house – mudbrick and recycled timber with sand, cement and sawdust walls. But since that relationship had ended, Jen's girlfriends had all been women who'd lived in town.

'Not sure what sort of woman would stick with life out on the farm,' Jen said.