

Vivian Walker is dying  
This is not on her list of things to do

MEGAN ALBANY

The  
Very Last  
List of  
Vivian  
Walker



'This novel has humour and  
pathos in spades – I laughed and cried'

CINDY MACDONALD, *The Saturday Paper*

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*Dedicated to the many wonderful souls I have been privileged to travel with. Even though you have moved on, I know you didn't go very far as I feel you all every day.*

*To Rebecka Darling-Darren (nee Delforce) for showing me how to look at death differently and being hilarious to the end. To Daz for following Beck to the end of the earth. To Gavin Jones, my brother always, for being the deadliest of all and welcoming me back to Country. To Manfred, my favourite father-in-law, for loving me and giving me Marc. To Uncle Paddy for your dignity and hatred of puns. To Pling for how joyfully you lived and for photographing every house we ever lived in – big job! To Herbie for the love, respect, music and fashion advice. To Steve for everyone you ever stood up for, including your irrepressible Ulrike. To Lisa for being part of our family and travelling the road from Westfield Liverpool to Italy to Byron. To Kerrie for the music and the best answering machine message ever. To Glen for hero-worshipping Marc as much as I do. To Tania for the laugh I still hear to this day. To Poppa for your strength. To Nanna for your gentleness. To Gran for your pikelets!*



# Prologue

At first sight, some people think I look pregnant until they notice my stylish grey skin, then they look away. I am pregnant with death. The tumours are bloating my stomach but there's still so much to get done, and only a couple of months left to do it all. Unfinished business. I need to write a list.

## MY LIST

- Clean the fridge
- Declutter the playroom
- Fill my script
- Get my tax up to date
- Choose songs for my funeral
- Restore Poppa's lowboy
- Clean out my wardrobe
- Sand the French doors into the bedroom

- Amend my will
- Write a letter to my son
- Delete my Tinder profile
- Give my husband a list

My husband, Clinton, is used to my lists. I make lists, prioritise lists, redo lists, fish lists out of pant pockets before washing them, follow up on lists and inspect the work once it has been done. But, out of the blue, Clint has not only written a list for himself, but he has also made me a list. What is he thinking? He must be emboldened by the fact I am dying. He thinks I am too weak to kill him. Men do not write lists for their wives. Surely, he knows this. I tell my girlfriends. Their mouths drop open and, for once, they cannot speak. This is akin to marital suicide. But I guess Clint figures our marriage is dead when I am, so he has nothing to lose.

#### CLINT'S LIST

- Have sex – which he has crossed out to read: Make love
- Go for long walks in the countryside
- Lie in each other's arms

#### CLINT'S LIST FOR ME

- Finish your novel
- Play with your son
- Take a hot bath
- Recuperate

Basically all the things I don't have time for because I am too busy with my everyday list. His utopian version will have to wait.

## *The Very Last List of Vivian Walker*

‘Mum, Mum, can you play with me yet?’ My eight-year-old son, Ethan, interrupts my train of thought, so I stop mid-synapse.

‘Just a moment honey, I am working on my list.’

He rolls his eyes. He knows all about my lists.

Now that I’ve got cancer, I know I should be letting go and being in the moment with him, but seriously, what mother has got time to spend with their kids? I realise if Ethan is going to have a hope in hell of booking into any of my few remaining time-slots in the countdown to D-day, he had better have a list of his own. Turns out his list is simple.

### ETHAN’S LIST

- Play handball with Mum
- Build a robot
- Have a sleepover

I optimistically decide to add to his list, even though my experience to date gives no indication my son will actually do these jobs:

- Tidy his room
- Cook us all dinner



## CHAPTER 1

# *My list: Clean the fridge*

When you open the door of our fridge, you get a history lesson. There are at least five meals my son wanted to 'save for later' that remain untouched and are now inedible. There are six or seven bottles of vitamins and herbal cures one of us started to take but never finished. The unspoken rule with these concoctions is if they are too expensive to throw away we just leave them in situ until they accidentally reach their expiry date. Only then can we justify binning the evidence of our failure to achieve yet another new year's health resolution. These days, I no longer feel guilty when I look at them. Four weeks ago, the doctors told me I was in an advanced stage of melanoma and gave me a three-month prognosis. I'm incurable.

Being incurable is quite a relief. I don't even have to pretend I am trying to get better. I can eat whatever I like, use toxic skin-care products, breathe polluted air – after all, what's it going to

do, give me cancer? If I were to add up all the time and money I have spent on what I now realise are totally useless organic products over the years, I reckon I could have finished two university degrees and bought a sports car. From here on in, I am putting myself on a liver-clogging diet.

I am staring aimlessly at the inside of the fridge, wondering where on earth to start, when Ethan comes in. Despite being eight, he recently rediscovered the joys and mess-making potential of playing in the sandpit. The fine sand is stuck between his toes, but it will only stay stuck until he reaches the house, then somehow, magically, it will unstick itself all over the floor. It generally waits until he reaches the lounge room before it dislodges on the rug. It's not what I would call a rug anymore: it's more of a rug-pit. When Ethan's friends visit, I should really just tell them to stay inside and play on the rug as I am sure there is more sand in here than in the actual sandpit.

I find my list and add – 'Clean the rug', then cross it out and write, 'Throw the rug out'.

I like the rug. I used to love the rug, but now it's one more thing I look at that makes me feel bad. There are still so many jobs to do. Aren't I meant to just be contemplating life, its meaning and everything? Mums don't die in peace apparently.

Of course, Clint and Ethan were amazing when they first heard about the cancer. I wasn't allowed to lift a finger for at least a week. But now, it's dragging on and, even though I do look like I'm dying, none of us really believe it. It's kind of surreal. We're all dying anyway, but, like the vitamins, I have a use-by date that we're trying to pretend is not there. We're also trying to pretend

*The Very Last List of Vivian Walker*

I have lived some sort of incredible life, like I was supposed to, so we can make sense of why I was on the planet in the first place.

For Ethan, having a dying mother is the new normal. At first he let me milk my cancer for all I could get; now I'm lucky if he makes me a cup of tea.

I look at my gorgeous boy standing there caked in sand, stomping his sandy feet all over the rug, and can't believe I am going to leave him behind.

'For god's sake, Ethan, look at all the sand you've brought in,' I blurt out, defaulting to nagging mother mode. 'How many times do I have to tell you to wash your feet before you drag the whole of the outside in?'

He looks up at me, smiles, grabs some grapes, dropping a few on the floor, says, 'Sorry, Mum,' then skips out the door, scattering sand and grapes as he goes.

He seems unaffected by it all. Except at night. When it's dark, we both want to hold on to each other. He sleeps with me a lot these days, but last night I was so exhausted I banished him to his room. In the middle of the night, I heard him crying.

'Mama, Mama.'

It takes me longer these days to get out of bed and Clint, as usual, slept through the whole thing. When I reached Ethan's bed, he was still crying but by then it was in his sleep. I stroked his forehead and kissed his cheeks and finally he took a shuddering post-sob breath in, then seemed to settle. I put my forehead against his. His breath still smells like it did when he was a baby. I breathed it in; there is nothing more precious than this. When morning came, we went back to yelling at each other while I tried

to hold back the king tide of mess that seems to be taking over our lives as I get sicker and less capable of being a supermum.

Now back to the fridge. When Clint and I were first married, it was always clean. We ate out a lot. The fridge contained the barest of essentials. Coffee, wine, chocolate, milk, expensive fruit that families can't afford like mangoes and raspberries, and leftovers from restaurant meals. Back then, nothing stuck to the shelves and nothing grew in the back in a bowl. There were no hardened, inexplicable objects that had gone beyond rotting to petrified. Nine years ago, cleaning the fridge just involved eating the chocolate.

Last week Clint did the shopping and 'helpfully' unpacked everything into the fridge, dumping new fruit and veg on top of last week's unused produce. He seems unaware that the compost bin and the fridge's vegetable tray are not one and the same. He thinks we bought the as yet uninvented new model with the in-fridge composting system.

When you are dying this shouldn't matter. You should savour every moment and not care about the trivial things in life. You should be able to focus on all the wonderful eccentricities of the people you love, stop being a control freak and be in awe and gratitude for every precious second you have together. But dying happens moment by moment, so there is still plenty of time to be irritated, provoked, frustrated, angry, resentful and really, really annoyed by the people who will miss you most when you are dead and gone.

The fridge door beeps at me. I have been holding it open and staring at it for too long. I am making it uncomfortable. I shut the door. Where are the gloves? I had a brand-new packet of them.

*The Very Last List of Vivian Walker*

I check in the cupboard under the sink but rummaging makes my back sore, so I stand up and look out the window. My son and his friend Tyson are pretending to be roosters scratching in the sand with beautiful rooster combs on their heads. My gloves. I notice they have also destroyed the pile of neatly raked together clippings from the fresh-cut grass. Clint promised to put that in the green bin last night, just like he promised to bring in the washing that's been on the line for three days.

He's lucky he's at work today as I have already started fantasising about a food fight. Not a fun romantic one like when we were young, but one which involves me screaming like a banshee while holding up every piece of slimy vegetable for Clint to inspect before slapping them onto his bare scalp.

He used to have such beautiful hair. It was longer than mine and took hours to groom. It did look incredibly handsome, but I have to admit part of me was happy when it all fell out. I thought when he went bald he would lose the obsession with his own head, but he only got worse. He could see every blemish and freckle. Every time he went out in the sun, he put way too much effort into making sure his head tanned evenly. He even found products for his scalp. I'm not sure if they were supposed to make his head reflective or somehow make it water repellent. Either way he was determined to do whatever it took to make sure his bald scalp looked its best.

I am no closer to having a sparkling fridge so I grab a garbage bag and Clint's *Star Wars* cap he left lying on the kitchen bench, and open the fridge door. I use his new cap like a snowplough to push the contents of each shelf holus-bolus into the garbage bag. Tupperware, good fruit, dissolved vegetables, new leftovers,

fossilised dinners, the lot. It feels amazingly satisfying not to care. I empty the entire contents of the fridge and freezer into the extra-strength bag and take it straight outside to the bin. I come back inside and open the fridge and freezer door. I take a deep breath in. The cold air opens my lungs like I am standing on a mountain in Austria. As I stare lovingly at the achingly beautiful sight of an empty cooler I want to sing about the hills being alive as if I am Maria in *The Sound of Music*. I have exceeded myself. I can tick 'Clean the fridge' off the list and give myself bonus points for also having cleaned the freezer.

Only then do I hear the key turn in the front door. Clint must be home early from his job buying toilet paper. He assures me the motel allows him to procure far more impressive items, which is apparently why his official title is Purchasing Officer as opposed to the less flattering moniker I prefer. He walks into the kitchen with his *I did something right* smile and a bunch of flowers.

'Let's go out for dinner,' he says, pulling me close.

'Great idea,' I answer enthusiastically, reaching behind me with one arm to push his now putrid *Star Wars* cap out of sight.

I know he's trying to work on the first thing on his list, but I am happy to steer him away from the kitchen for now.

'Look out the window,' I say, pointing my head in the direction of the little roosters. They have just finished covering themselves in grass clippings. I can see the beginning of a rash starting on Tyson's back.

'Oh, no.'

Before I have time to think I am running out the back via the medicine cupboard. Tyson, it appears, is allergic to grass.

*The Very Last List of Vivian Walker*

I grab the antihistamines from the first-aid kit and race towards the sandpit. Luckily it is next to the pool, and despite my diminishing strength, I manage to pick Tyson up under one arm and dump him straight into the pool.

‘Duck your head under,’ I yell. I should have more accurately said, ‘Rooster your head under,’ but the undercurrent of humour is lost as I watch him start to welt.

I grab a pill from the packet and administer it to Tyson using pool water I have scooped up with a snorkel. By this time, Clint has finally clued on to the fact something is wrong and has strolled out to us. He is so relaxed. I used to love that about him. But now it drives me crazy. How on earth is he going to cope in an emergency without me?

I have netball reflexes. When Ethan was young, I could catch him a split second before his head hit the cement, or at least put a foot out to buffer his fall. Years of playing goal defence as a teenager had given me the ability to see things not only happening but about to happen. The nettie had also given me shocking knees, which hadn’t been helped any by the Catholic Church’s unpadded kneelers I’d used religiously every Sunday.

Tyson is now splashing about in the pool as if nothing happened. The pool is full of grass clippings, and the rubber glove is about to make its way into our filter system, so my arm automatically ricochets out to get it before it clogs up the newly repaired valve.

Clint seems to be moving in slow motion despite my rapid-fire instructions, ‘Can you grab a towel and the calamine and my phone, so I can call Tyson’s mum to let her know what’s going on?’

I can talk faster than speed typists can type. Clint responds slower than a three-toed sloth. Luckily the antihistamine appears to be working, and Tyson's welts are visibly reducing. I feel myself breathe for the first time in about ten minutes. Killing your own child is one thing, but killing someone else's, well, that's just rude.

•

After Tyson's mum arrives, rescues her child, thanks me for the first aid and apologises for not letting me know about his grass sensitivity, I collapse exhausted onto the lawn. I have forgotten how quickly I get tired these days. I look down at my chest; it is rising and falling in quick little pants like a puppy on a hot day. There is no room in my belly for long, relaxing inhaled, it is otherwise occupied – my metastasised tumours are not good at sharing their space. Sometimes I imagine a baby in my womb. I rub my hand proudly over my swollen belly, longing for it to kick, so I know there is life inside. The illusion doesn't last for more than a second as my fingers discover new random lumps disrupting the terrain. My skin isn't smooth and tight, and I don't exactly have that pregnant glow about me, but for a few seconds it takes me back to how soft and womanly I'd felt when Ethan was inside me, safe and secure.

Before I was pregnant, I always felt more masculine than feminine. Not that I looked in any way masculine, I was just, let's face it, a bit bossy. Clint was the first person who didn't want to squash the bossiness out of me, but even he didn't *really* love me until I was carrying his child. While I was expecting he looked

*The Very Last List of Vivian Walker*

at me differently and took on a kind of protective air. I'd missed that after Ethan was born.

But now, here's that look, back again. Every so often, I catch him out of the corner of my eye staring at me mistily. When I was pregnant, my hormones helped me reciprocate his mushiness; now they just bring out the lunatic in me. I should be feeling loving towards him but my intolerance for his failings is growing with my tumours, which only serves to make me feel guilty and angry.

Lying out in our back garden behind our house on the hill, I look across to the little portable building that was supposed to be my meditation room. It faces the town in the valley below. I call it my little red caboosie. It was meant to be the place I would go to each morning to journey into gratitude before spreading peace and love throughout my home upon my return. At least that's what I convinced myself I would use it for when I bought it on impulse from eBay. Instead, it has become yet another guilt-inducing purchase, having only ever been used once, when I was desperate for two minutes to myself. Even then, I failed to meditate, preferring to read trashy magazines about people living lives I was never destined for. But now, when I know I should be making the most of every moment I have left to spend with my family, I want to run into my caboosie and close the door tightly on my husband, my child and my list. Nothingness is calling me. I should be scared. Instead, I am almost looking forward to the freedom of having nothing left to do and knowing 'the answer' before anyone else does.

I don't want to leave my family, but sitting in my caboosie, I feel myself rest in peace.