



'Punchy, gutsy writing. I couldn't put it down.'

FAVEL PARRETT

PRAISE FOR *OTHER HOUSES*

‘O’Reilly’s power over voice and language just leaps out of the gates and takes charge of your heart in this striking and compelling work. Nuanced and powerful, this is a story in which her uncanny ability to render flawed, fractured and fallible characters with dignity and pathos shines from every page.’ *Cate Kennedy*

‘I’ve always loved O’Reilly’s acute, compassionate prose and sharp wit, and this novel reminds me why. With the tension of a thriller but the freshness and acuity of art, *Other Houses* is an authentic and surprising portrayal of a family under strain.’ *Charlotte Wood*

‘Punchy, gutsy writing. I couldn’t put it down.’ *Favel Parrett*

‘Compelling, gritty and shot through with empathy. O’Reilly writes with such heart about the people who fall between the cracks.’ *Toni Jordan*

‘A wonder of a novel – subtle, funny and wise. *Other Houses* is gloriously written: brimful of life and the dreams that give us hope.’ *Lucy Treloar*

‘A rich, sad and tender story about work, friendship and standing up for the people you love. Wise, funny and truthful – a gem of a novel. O’Reilly writes of ordinary people with rare grace.’ *Carrie Tiffany*

‘Paddy O’Reilly cracks windows onto lives too rarely written in this bracing story of a woman tending to the households of strangers while her own runs towards catastrophe. *Other Houses* recalls the best of Lucia Berlin in its wry compassion and frank illumination of deeply ingrained class inequality.’ *Josephine Rowe*



 **Affirm**
press

Does the precious thing hum, it does.
Does the precarious thing hum, it does.

Sarah Vap, *Viability*

LILY

To the left is a bent house, all punched in by the wind and sun and the cheap materials folding it from the inside. I know what the rooms look like. Unstuffed furniture busted from slumping bodies. Bongs and needles and spoons the only shiny decorations. A handbag with its guts spilled out. Cups green and furred, their hairs topped with white spores ready to fly at a breath. Somewhere in a deeper room lies a body, alive, but only a body. Not enough breath from it to release the spores. The body will rise in a few hours and resume its life.

To my right, through the driver's-side window, a dog in shitting position on a dry nature strip, staring at me, daring me to laugh. A pit bull. Ferocious fighting dog caught in that ridiculous hunched shape, the one moment of its vulnerability.

Don't worry, doggo, didn't see a thing. And, by the way, have you seen my husband?

A car behind me flashes its lights, then the driver leans on the horn. I pull over. Angry red mouth blabbing as the car accelerates past, exhaust smoke, a finger from the window.

The phone map says I'm in Dallas. It doesn't look that

different from Jacana or Campbellfield or any of the other suburbs I've cruised these last few days. Good people live here. They try. Their lawns are edged, porcelain cats pose silhouetted in windows, jaunty letterboxes await news from the local rag. Then some junkie comes and smashes up their house or breaks into their car or shits in the driveway. That's why we moved.

Jewelee said to me last night, What the fuck are you doing, Mum, you think he's out there waiting for you to drive past? You think he's at the bus stop expecting a ride?

Two more streets. The darkness is gathering around the trees and the traffic lights are starting to glow with the supernatural colour they have at dusk. The night people are stirring, beginning to twitch, opening their yellow eyes.

Jewelee says I should face the fact that my man has probably reverted to his old ways and he's shacked up with a skank in leggings and tatt sleeves trying to score. You know what he was, she says, as if it was a month ago instead of years and years. Like she even knew him then. Like she wasn't once on the way to turning into that kind of skank herself. Janks has churned vats of cheesy dip in a factory for four years to pay for her school fees and uniforms and 'enrichment activities'. He was the one who saved us when she got caught train surfing, the stupid girl. We've got to get her under control, he said. So we changed everything. We rented in a suburb we could barely afford, got her into a good school, made her eat properly. We left our old life behind and faked our new life until we were absorbed into it.

Now she's too good for both of us.

A shadow of me roams these streets. The me whose world was a few suburbs clinging to a strip of the Western Ring Road. It's like I left the shadow behind when we moved, and now, driving past the haunted houses and the cracking, weedy footpaths, I can feel the edges of it touching my toes, as if it's going to join up to me again and I'll be whole but different. All those memories. A man on his knees. The dark burn of Coke washing down a yellow. The night someone strung dead bats along the school fence, their black leather wings shredded into streamers. I never want to revisit that life.

Home now, before the shadow swallows me. This used to be the only road to Sydney. Sydney Road, the Hume Highway, trucks swaying past my upturned thumb, hiss of the brakes, half-climbing, half-vaulting into the stinking cab with a bloke who hadn't washed for days. Need some company to keep me awake, they'd say. Sometimes it was true. Twice I took the road to Sydney. I should never have gone that second time but at least I learned one lesson. Stop taking risks. Learn to live.

A man with the same gammy walk as Janks's emerges from a doorway in the shopping strip. I'm concentrating on his hitched gait so hard the car drifts to the left. Centimetres from knocking the mirror off a parked car, I swing into the traffic and crawl behind him. I know it isn't Janks – he'd never wear a hoodie – but I have to make sure. Or maybe he would wear a hoodie. Maybe he got a knock on the head and he doesn't know who he is, what he wears. Maybe he's hiding from someone.

Maybe he's hiding from me.

Anything? Shannon texts.

Nup

She's at my front door when I arrive, presenting a bottle of wine along her forearm like a waiter in a five-star restaurant. It doesn't quite match her trackie daks and non-slip PVC work clogs.

May I tempt you, ma'am?

How fast can you open it, *garçon*?

The lounge room is littered with treacherous objects snagging my line of sight as I fall onto the couch and take the glass from Shannon's rough grip, calloused and flaky because she won't wear gloves when we're cleaning. I've seen her scoop bubbling oven cleaner into her bare hands.

Can I tidy up for you, Lil? she asks. She can see my gaze flickering from Janks's jumper, tossed over the ladder of the chair, to the footy fixture crammed with his tiny notes in blue biro on the cushion beside me, to the photo of us on the Anglesea back beach, hair tangled in wind and togs spangled with sand. I place my glass on his *Popular Science* magazine. My library book sits beside it, unopened since he disappeared.

Tidying is Jewelee's chore this week, I say. Don't let her off.

We watch the news, then *Home and Away*, then Shannon yawns and pops her knee joints as she hauls herself out of the chair.

See you tomorrow, then, hon. We're doing Fitzroy, yeah? The terraces?

Yep. Take the bottle.

You finish it. I'll get breathalysed for sure if I have another glass. I'll let myself out.

This normal talk, the wine, the tomatoey whiff of last night's congealed bolognese on the stove, the telly, my back ping-pong from the Horror House this morning – it's all ghosted with my tiredness and absence as if the exhaustion owns me now. Either I'm not here or the house is draining away.

Jewelee appears at the kitchen doorway, spooning her favourite mango yoghurt from the half-litre tub. I try to summon some motherly indignation.

Have you been home all this time? Why didn't you say hello to Shannon?

Jewelee shrugs and licks the spoon. She's fifteen and so perfect she looks like someone airbrushed her.

Next question should be, Have you done your homework? or When are you going to do your chores? or Do you have a clean uniform for tomorrow? But my tongue lies fat and dumb in my mouth.

You should go to bed, Mum.

Mmm.

At this point she would usually melt away to her bedroom, where she spends half the night at the computer until I unplug the modem, but she stays, stirring the yoghurt, lifting the spoon and watching the creamy orange globs drip into the tub.

Luca said he thought he saw Janks on Lygon Street last week.

Lygon Street? Where? Why didn't you tell me before?

When she shrugs again I can imagine myself slapping her, bending her over the kitchen table and whacking her bottom with a wooden spoon, taking her shoulders and shaking until she vomits. Instead, as usual, my eyes start to sting and I have to clench my teeth and gulp hard to hold in the weepies, as Jewelee calls them.

Don't, Mum, she says. I'm sorry. He only told me today. And he wasn't sure.

She lands beside me on the couch and offers me a spoonful of yoghurt.

Don't forget to brush your teeth. That stuff's full of sugar, I whisper, no energy to speak any louder.

A message alert sounds from the phone in her tracksuit pocket.

Yep. Night, Mum.

Jewelee springs off the couch, phone alight as she goes.

At two in the morning I wake with my mouth crusty and my trapped arm a firework of pins and needles. The television tells me I'd look better in a pair of Slim Panties. I stagger to bed to be up at seven for work.

Number 12 doesn't like us to have a key, so he penguin-walks from his law office five doors down. We've been cleaning his house for three years. Sometimes I wonder what we have to do to get these people to trust us. We wait by the red front door, watching that waddling walk we used to find hilarious.

I'll be down the road if there's a problem, the lawyer says like he says every time.

After we've hoicked the supplies inside we shrug ourselves into our green pinnies with the MagiKleen logo on the pocket. Originally the logo's wand was golden with a spray of silver sparkles but the sparkles have faded into a pale net and the wand looks like a yellow stick now, as if we clean with twigs and cobwebs like fairytale goblins. Great lumpen goblins with bad knees and aching backs.

Our first job is to close off the spare room. The lawyer owns three cats, giant silky creatures that go floppy and drip over your arms as you carry them to the lockup. Once they're safely away, we open every window. The cats shed enough fur each week to knit a warm cardigan, and they produce a penetrating mildewy reek that adds a premium

to his cleaning fee.

Except today only two cats are waiting in their usual spot in the hallway. This has never happened. The cats are a tight team. They pad around together, rub faces together, stretch out their front paws and open their toes together.

Maybe it died, I say.

We walk down the long hallway. The two cats sway along behind us, through the kitchen to the laundry. The third bowl and the third bed are still there.

Maybe he can't get rid of the stuff because he's grieving, I say.

Shannon looks sideways at me.

Well, we can't open the windows in case it's hiding, she says. And we can't waste any more time.

I'm humping the two melting moggies to the lockup when Shannon shouts from the lounge.

Yep, cat's dead. You've gotta see this.

Beside a portrait of the cat, placed funeral-style on the mantelpiece, is a pinboard with photos of her. I know it's a her because a scrap of paper on the pinboard says *Maude RIP*. Fat yellow candles, scented ones that are usually in the bathroom, their wicks white and clean until today, sit each side of the portrait.

Creepy, Shannon says. She crosses her arms, tucks her hands into her armpits.

No, it's sad, I protest. He loved the cat. What's wrong with that?

I have to turn my head away because of the prickle in my eyes.

It's not about Janks, hon.

I know.

He's out there somewhere. He'll come home.

A dustcloth is wrapped around my knuckles. I feel like punching my own face with it.

He's a fucking bastard who ran away, I say.

No, Lil, you know he's not a bastard.

He should have told me if there was something wrong.

Yeah, probably. But men, you know, they're dumb like that. What about trying the police again?

They weren't interested. Told me people usually turn up and to wait.

I clench my teeth and say we should get on with it.

I fetch the ultraviolet torch and the enzyme spray from our cleaning swag. Today the cat pee under the black light glows yellow in two spots on the skirting board in the hall, on a shirt in the laundry basket and in a small spray on the leg of the couch. There's very little around this week compared with the usual sweep, when the house lights up like New Year's Eve under the torch. Even the air seems clearer. Maybe the cat that died was old and incontinent. As I shove the massive vacuum cleaner wand, with its special brush head for picking up animal hair, across the thick carpet, I can't stop imagining the lawyer with the big floppy cat in his lap, watching telly or reading a brief or doing whatever lawyers do at night. Maude was the cat with the dark brown points on her face and the squinty eyes. We called her Mrs Magoo. When you lifted her from the middle of her body, she wouldn't curl up or flex any muscles at all. She was the most malleable of the three. At

first I'd felt like I was carrying a warm corpse, but eventually I grew envious of the cat's certainty that nothing bad would happen to it. The cats would give faint mewls as I shut the door of the spare room as if to say, Don't be long. Sometimes I'd imagine having a child that pliable. And then I'd laugh.

We're moving fast today, either because Shannon thinks the house is creepy or because the lack of urine has cut our workload. When we finish earlier than usual, we have time for a coffee in Brunswick Street before the next job.

I'm going to leave a note, I tell Shannon.

Huh?

A condolence note. He's obviously really cut up.

All right, but don't take all day writing it.

There's a shopping-list pad and pencil on the fridge so I tear off a sheet.

Dear ... hey, Shann, what's his name? I've forgotten.

I dunno.

Weird that we don't know his name.

Why? He doesn't know ours. Unless your name is 'Ladies'.

Dear Sir? Sounds like a job application. Dear Client? What will I say?

Don't say anything. Write the friggin' note. I'm desperate for a cappuccino.

*We're so sorry about Maude. Please accept our condolences.
Your cleaners.*

For a cat, Shann says. He might think we're having a lend.

I picture the pinboard, the burnt candles, the shrunken emptiness of his face as he let us in this morning. He'll know I'm serious. Grief is grief.

This city seems small sometimes, but I discovered it wasn't when we moved from Broadie to Northcote and we never ran into our old friends. Relocating six kilometres away was like crash landing on Jupiter. And when I think about the parts of the city I've never seen, which is most of it, I realise how my own life, even now, is spent like a slot car travelling the same track over and over. There's safety in it. I know the person I'm supposed to be. But we've finished the job in Fitzroy, and Lygon Street, Carlton, is just up the road, and I can go that extra distance off the track to a place I visited a long time ago.

I was fifteen when my next-door neighbour Dino decided to cruise his remodelled, hotted-up classic Monaro down Carlton's Lygon Street. Six of us kids jack-in-the-boxing from the windows and sunroof of the car on a Saturday night, my gut pulsing to the dirty guitar of AC/DC, passengers of other cars checking us out and mooning from the other side of the strip. We ordered two capricciosa pizzas from Toto's, shouting from the car window, and picked them up on the next circuit, the boys in the car

squabbling about who would pay until the kid standing on the kerb with the two boxes threatened to empty the pizzas into the gutter. Tina gripping my arm and grinning like a loon. Horns playing 'La Cucaracha', arty types sneering from the footpath, the smell of garlic in the air, and beer, which I'd spilled all over my front. Dino shrieked like a baby and threatened to leave me on the street till the others checked that not a drop had touched his precious upholstery. We woke the dead on our way out past the cemetery, beefy engine bucking and us screaming in unison with the stereo, arching our spines as we sang the final line about a bullet in the back.

I start at the corner with the pub and the service station and the greasy hamburger shop. They're all intact and a little smarter than the old days, better than me right now. It's lunchtime. The traffic is crawling at a perfect pace for me to keep my eyes on the footpath.

There's no reason I can imagine why Janks would come here.

They say this place used to have a heroin problem although I never saw it. Those few times we kids came down we didn't get out of the car. No way you'd find a dealer here today. Or maybe a dealer in cocaine, or those pills that make you think faster. There's a bookshop, clothes with hems that dip on one side, on purpose, a river of latte, and women striding across the road, bouncing their three-wheeled super-prams over the median strip. Shannon says half our clients have IVF babies because they can't wait. Six months of trying and they think what the fuck and

hand over the ten grand. What I could do with ten grand, Shannon says, I sure wouldn't buy a baby.

Further down are the Italian restaurants all in a row with girls out the front touting for customers. White shirts and long black aprons wrapped twice around. I slow right down when I see a head in the window of La Spaghetтата that has something of Janks about it. I can't even say what the familiarity is, but it's gone the moment the man steps out the door. A U-turn through the gap in the median strip and past more cafes and shops, a deli, a clothes place with its window decked out in pastels and beach umbrellas, as if it's January and not July. What if he's out at night in this cold?

JANKS

So they snatch me off the street on my way home from work, shovel me into their big-shouldered black Kluger.

What the fuck? I shout. It's due tomorrow, I always pay on time.

They say, You work in a factory, it's going to take you years, mate. Seen it before. You'll fall behind, you'll fall behind again, there'll be some other thing you have to borrow money for. You're going down the fucking dunny, mate. We're offering you a chance to pay it off in one go.

Let me talk to Bludger.

Not our crew.

Only then do I really look at the guy in the passenger seat, through the shadows that make up his face, the rigid creases and rust-coloured skin of years on a bike and drinking in the sun.

Hassan? I say, barely believing.

Fuck you, Janks, I thought you'd never realise.

Jesus, you look so different.

The Hassan at high school was a weedy little schemer. This Hassan in the front is a grossly fat, poor imitation of a

bikie. He has some bullshit symbols tattooed on his forehead. They probably translate as *I am a dick*.

One job, not only is your debt paid, you're set with some to spare, Hassan says.

But how'd you find out? You're not with the Rhinos?

Nah, they're fucking losers. Their accounts department is a leaky boat and we are the lucky beneficiaries. Look, this'll be all over in a flash and you're done.

Come off it. No fucking way. Why me?

Because you're a squeaky and shiny resident of a nice neighbourhood, Mr Solid Citizen, years away from dope, no record, and gotta be honest, Janks, mate, we don't have a lot of clean associates, especially ones that look the part. But there's a load coming in, and all you have to do is drive it from Eden to Melbourne. Deliver the goods and you're a wealthy man.

I wasn't going to say yes. You can fuck up six years that fast and lose everything. Lily and Jewelee, our house, my shitty job. Shitty job that won't get me nicked. I've made friends there, most of them from the Philippines or Cambodia. A few Lebo ladies.

But Hassan is right. The car rego's overdue and I already know I'm going to be light on with the next repayment. I've seen what happens to people who don't pay. Stevo lost three teeth and gained a rod and screws in his leg. Two weeks in hospital plus a limp for life.

We need you to drive up there tomorrow. You'll be home by Monday. Easy money, mate. Easy money.