



The Writer

March 2002

In the afternoon, when her words will no longer organise themselves into any sensible order, the writer laces her walking shoes and steps outside. She takes her story with her, of course. This one isn't the kind she can ever leave at home. If she tries, it will only slip out through the crack between the door and jamb, track her down and surprise her with its presence at the least opportune moment. So, as she descends the steps from her apartment into the noise and motion of the city, she tucks her story into the breast pocket of her shirt, where it curls up close against her heart.

The writer walks fast, and the story hums. Sometimes she thinks there are instructions encoded in the humming, pitched slightly beyond the range of her consciousness. But, in truth, it's probably just her own instincts that lead her down this street and into another, around this corner and over that footbridge, across this park, through that tunnel and beneath the branches of this tree. Either way, the path she walks brings her to the museum.

She has been coming here, lately, in the spirit other people go to church. In the foyer, sunshine falls down through the distant glass of the ceiling, warming the top of her head, and the

artworks on the walls are full of ideas and emotions so big they make her feel like she, herself, is expanding. As she crosses the foyer towards the double-doors of the main exhibition gallery at a dawdling pace, her gaze travels from the ceiling to the art and back again. Probably, she looks aimless, and that could be why a gallery guide bounces up to her in bright white sneakers that are a glaring contrast to her black T-shirt and jeans.

‘Are you here for the guided tour?’

The writer glances over at the gallery doors and the loose knot of people beside them. She is not here for the tour. But she could be.

‘I . . . am,’ she says.

The gallery guide’s smile is as impersonal as it is friendly and sincere, and it’s evident she has no idea who the writer is, or how she is connected to the exhibition. The writer doesn’t mind. Anonymity suits her just fine.

‘Excellent!’ the guide says. ‘We start in two minutes.’

As the writer approaches the gallery doors, she finds herself within range of the slightly cooler air that drifts out from the darkened space into the foyer, and that’s when she smells it. Just like she did last time. And the time before.

The past.

Is there an actual smell? If so, what is it? Something oceanic? A trace of Claudie’s subtle, musky perfume? Whatever it is, it winds the writer back to the age of sixteen. She’s on the stairs at the house in Clovelly, walking up to the attic rooms with their dormer windows always needing to be wiped clean of salt-spray. She’s a teenager, awkward in her too-tall body, holding her breath as Claudie wraps a measuring tape lightly around her bust, her waist, her hips.

The writer inhales, trying to catch hold of what she’s smelled. Identify it. Verify it. The story in her pocket stirs. It, too, strains

after the airy wisp of history. But it's gone, nothing more than an olfactory ghost, hurrying past on its way out the museum's front door and into the traffic.

'If you're ready,' the guide says from the shadowy mouth of the gallery, 'we'll go inside and meet Australia's twenty-five most famous dresses.'

The party rounds a dividing wall to arrive in the gallery proper, where a selection of gowns – silk, scarlet, feathered, rainbowed, rubberised, crocheted – emerge from the darkness in individual ovals of light, like so many prima ballerinas on a stage. Resting on the floor in front of each one is an illuminated interpretation panel, placed and angled to minimise the impact of its luminosity on fragile fabrics. Members of the party murmur and sigh, and the guide says, 'This way, please.'

The first stop is a voluminous hand-painted gown with a five-metre train, made for opera singer Makiniti Kikelomo's landmark recital in Watarrka National Park. As the guide explains the significance of the various motifs on the fabric, a photograph of the diva in full voice glows from the lightbox. The second stop is at a Victorian ensemble of black silk brocade in which one of the country's most notorious suffragists attended an historic tussle in 1898. The guide recaps the relevant history of both the dress and its owner, Maude Evans.

'The tears to her skirts,' she says, gesturing, 'were never repaired.'

Next, she leads the party to a corner of the gallery where a room-within-a-room has been constructed to house the delicate silk, lace and organza bridal gown from a soap opera wedding watched by millions around the world. It's not until a motion sensor picks up the party's arrival that the room is gently illuminated. A woman gasps, and points to the lightbox where glows an

image of the once-upon-a-time bride and groom – young, blonde and toothy.

The guide points out the New Romantic features of the frock's bodice and sleeves, and explains some of the finer points of conserving such a delicate garment for posterity.

'After the tour, you can of course come back and spend more time with your favourites, but for now we'll move on to another iconic dress that some among you may remember. One that you might even, if you're the right vintage, have worn yourselves.'

She leads the party across the polished floor to the place where three mannequins have been arranged in an arrowhead formation. A member of the tour party – a woman who's probably a couple of years shy of forty, and therefore exactly the right vintage, which is the same vintage as the writer herself – puts her hands to her cheeks and gazes at the display with fond recognition.

'And this, as I can see some of you already know . . . is the Juliet. Or, should I say, these are the Juliets.'

Three dresses. Cut from the same pattern. Each a different colour. The powder-blue dress is foremost, flanked by examples in sage green and raspberry red. Again, the writer is struck by how – in this light, shaped by the mannequins into human form – the three Juliets seem almost to live and breathe. When she notices how the raspberry red, a little larger than the other two, has clearly had the most wear, her story turns violent somersaults in her pocket. *Yes, she wants to tell it, yes, I know.*

'The Juliet,' the gallery guide continues, 'is the work of versatile designer Claudie Miller. It's often said of Miller that she "dressed the nation's children", because her accessible but highly original sewing patterns appeared in *Australian Woman* magazine four times each year from the late 1960s through to the early 1980s.'

The writer worked at that magazine, writing features, for fifteen years until she left to strike out on her own as a freelancer. In the lightbox at the foot of the central mannequin is a scaled-up cover of *Australian Woman* from September 1980. The focal point is a young woman – her skin brown, her teeth white, her hair a dark shade of gold. She’s shown in a three-quarter view in a Juliet of raw, lilac silk. Across its skirts, in cursive font, runs the exhortation: ‘Sew Claudie Miller’s Juliet: the party season’s must-have for your Sweet Sixteen!’

‘Of course, you’ll all recognise the model as Lisabeth Faye, now better known to us as Princess Lisabeth of Luxembourg. Back in 1980, she was sixteen years old and the undisputed “it girl” of Australian teen culture. Certainly, her star quality was instrumental in making the Juliet the sensation it was. The effect was felt right through to the drapery shops. With young women from every part of the country wanting a Juliet to wear to school dinners and end-of-year parties, sales of raw silk fabric skyrocketed, nationally.’

The cover model holds a lit sparkler – a white-hot tangle of fizzing star-points – and she’s laughing. So, too, is the woman standing beside her.

‘Pictured here with Lisabeth Faye is the designer herself, Claudie Miller. Miller said that the Juliet was intended specifically for a girl in her mid-teens. The sweetheart neckline is low, but not too low; the skirt is full enough to twirl but not so full as to be bulky. The fluttery sleeves were designed to gesture towards an off-the-shoulder style but not to go there entirely, for it was Miller’s firm belief that strapless and truly off-the-shoulder dresses ought to be the preserve of women with a degree of fashion experience.’

The writer smiles to herself. What Claudie would actually have said, what Claudie *did* say, was: *If you already know you’re going*

to spend all night fiddling with the neckline, for heaven's sake, wear something else.

‘Unfortunately, we were unable to locate the lilac silk worn for the cover shot. The princess has no idea what happened to it, although she did say how much she had loved the gown, and how fondly she remembered Claudie Miller.’

An older woman in the party raises her hand, and the guide nods in her direction. ‘Yes?’

‘The three Juliets you do have on display . . . where did they come from?’

‘Various sources.’ The guide’s smile invites no further questions. Perhaps she’s being discreet, or perhaps she knows nothing at all about where these three specific dresses came from, and how they came to be displayed side by side.

‘Can you tell us a little more?’ the woman presses. ‘I heard there’s quite a story behind them.’

The gallery guide gives a tiny shrug. But the woman is right, of course. There is a story. It’s the one in the writer’s pocket.