

Whispers and Closed Doors

The sun beats down. Grass gradually dries out, shrivels, turns brown and spiky and dead. A slight breeze makes little effort to dispel the stifling heat, swirls it around and around, until the FIRE DANGER signs read catastrophic. Cicadas shriek.

Weather like this suppresses the laughter of the children, the gossip of the women, the activities and sport of the men. The ones with sense or money flee for the beaches, the promise of a cooler climate. The ones with no choice but to stay do so, not leaving the relative coolness of the dark inside a house in the brightness of summer, unless they have to. Or if some other unfortunate had the good luck or money to afford a stronger fan. In that case, they make lemonade as payment, as a bribe, and hurry themselves and their various dependants to their neighbours' and their better fan.

Next to the bumbling, ineffectual whirring of the fan, lemonade is poured, cool, oversweet, ice clinking in tall glasses. Syrupy sweetness slides down throats, momentarily relieves heat from sweaty, sticky bodies. Elvis croons scratchily in the background from the radio. Children glare petulantly at each other. They're asked to go play, told to leave the room, eventually ignored. The heat is too much even for the hardest, toughest mothers.

The mothers make feeble attempts at polite conversation, enquire about that daughter who went off to school, that son who left to play sport; cricket, football. They grumble about that rock and roll that the youngsters seem to like, how it's influencing their behaviour, children these days! On the hottest days, lots of men make themselves mysteriously absent. The women grumble about this but make no real effort to prevent it from happening again. They're just happy for some peace.

Under the cover of the smothering heat, two teenagers escape to the shade of the riverbank, unnoticed, unmissed. They perch on an overhanging rock, together. Below their bare, swinging legs, the river, shrunk in the summer heat, rushes past, making waterholes and falls. Here, concealed by the whispering trees, positioned so as to get the most out of the rarity that is plentiful water, they thrive. And here, concealed by those trees, the teenagers thrive as well. Away from the watchful

eyes, so quick to judge, to gossip, they are unrestrained, untethered by the expectations of their family and wider community. They are free of the prejudice that stifles love like theirs like the summer heat stifles children's games. They are free to talk and act as they wish.

Do this they did; all summer, while the rest of the town was shut inside with their fans and overly sweetened lemonade, complaining about each other and the heat, the two youths shared secrets and made new ones, under the shade of the trees whose leaves whispered in the slightest breeze.

It starts one hot day in the middle of January. Everyone is cautious of bushfire; there is a slight breeze and everything is tinder-dry. A whiff of smoke can be detected if I tilt my head a little and look east, inhale deeply through my nose. This threat looms over the heads of everyone in town, is the subject of much conversation. Down at the river it is quiet, no threat of bushfire. It is silent apart from the chirrup of grasshoppers and the rushing of the water. Secluded. There we sit, in the shade of a huge eucalypt, our feet dangling, near the waterhole in a deep part of the river that flows past. We talk about nothing for hours, read newly published books to each other; *Charlotte's Web* and *The Catcher in the Rye*. We discuss the similarities and differences between the two, the innocence of *Charlotte's Web* and the brutal coming-of-age of Holden, which set trepidation in the hearts of ourselves. The characters, Charlotte the spider and Mr Spencer, Wilbur and Holden, parallels in such different stories.

The proximity of my bare leg to hers scares me, thrills me, awakens the senses I had hidden for so long. Here, anything seems possible. There seems hope that my feelings for her may be requited, and away from the watchful eyes and judgement of society, maybe, just maybe, something can happen between us.

She swats at a mosquito, shifts ever so slightly nearer to me. I suddenly become aware of the space between us, of every centimetre of bare rock. So close, yet so infinitely far away. A mosquito lands on my thigh, begins to insert its proboscis into my skin as I am looking away, staring

at a dragonfly that is buzzing around on the surface of a rock pool. A drop of water from a nearby rapid splashes near the dragonfly, startles it. It zooms off. As I stare after the dragonfly and its freedom, I feel her hand brush my thigh, brush off the mosquito. I turn my head quickly, surprised, catch her eye. She smiles. Flirtatiously? Does she feel the fire I feel spreading from where she touched me? Does she know what I'm thinking? Does she feel it too?

-Let's go for a swim! she says suddenly, breaking the tension. She pulls her shirt over her head, slips out of her shorts, shakes her long, wavy hair out of its sky blue scarf, for which the weather is really too hot. Dives into a deep part of the river in just her underwear. Her hair fans out behind her as she swims, a dolphin, far upriver, diving to the depths as if to find its pod. I hesitate, but she beckons too me, and her smile is infectious, irresistible and I am stripping off my clothes as well and diving in after her, a grin spreading on my face as I splash her.

We frolic around, just two girls cooling down on a hot summer day. But we are more than that, too. The way she catches my eye, smiles when she sees me looking at her, the way she so confidently holds her wet, beautiful body, all builds together to suggest something more. I know I feel something for her, no matter much society frowns upon it. She seems to feel it too, but I cannot be sure. I do not want to fracture the close friendship we have, so for now, I keep quiet. At least this way I can be with her.

She pulls herself out of the water to dive back in from the overhanging rock. The backs of her legs are taut, muscly from years of playing tennis and riding bikes around the town. The water on them glistens in the sun. Her underpants ride up slightly as she pulls herself up, the base of her buttocks smooth and rounded.

She dives back into the waterhole, making barely a splash after so much practice. Bubbles rise to the surface. Magpies carol. Still she doesn't reappear. I feel my mouth go dry and a gnawing sensation begin in the pit of my stomach. She still doesn't resurface. I dive under myself, search for her beneath the water. Finally, I feel my foot brush the softness of skin. My heart jumps, startled, before

I inhale a lungful of fresh, fresh air. I duck under the water. All sound fades from the world as the cool water swallows me up. Placing my hands under her arms, I heave her up, onto the rocks by the side of the waterhole. I lay her on her back, brush the wet hair from her face and cradle her head in my hands. As I stare at her still, lifeless face, at last her long, dark eyelashes flutter and her eyes slowly open. When she sees my face hovering over hers, she smiles that heart melting smile.

-Thank God, I say. I thought I'd lost you.

-I'm still here, she whispers, still smiling.

I am so relieved she's okay that I just have to tell her, in case it happens again, only she's not so lucky that time. In case maybe she loves me back.

-I have something to tell you, Zoe. It's important.

-Sure, tell me anything.

-Well... the thing is... I think I'm in love with you.

-Really? she asks. You really feel that way?

I nod, unable to deny my feelings any longer.

Her face lights up.

-I thought I was the only one. I never dreamed you might feel the same way.

-You mean...?

-Yes, Lou. I love you too.

She lifts her face to mine, and I feel the soft, soft lips I had fantasized about for so long, finally touch my own.

With the sun leaves much of the heat, but also much of the happy atmosphere surrounding us. As the day wore on, the unspoken threat loomed ever closer, right under the surface of a peaceful day. All day, we made up for years lost, wasted under the guise of friendship, in the shade of the trees that whisper on the riverbank. But as the end of such a wondrous day comes closer, as the sun dips lower and lower in the sky, we know we must leave our safe haven and venture back to town, back

to our families and friends, where there is no place for love such as ours. We kiss one last time before beginning on our way back, back to expectations needing fulfilment, to the unwavering, uncaring prejudice that covers our lives like a blanket.

We part at her front gate with a longing stare after each other, disguised as a shared nostalgia between friends. A remembrance of simpler times.

With their days spent in passion by the riverbank, with a growing love for each other and a heightened awareness of themselves and their own bodies, and nights spent with the detachment of friends, the remaining several weeks of summer passed swiftly for the two girls.

On the last day of the holidays, they stayed out from sunrise to sunset. They reached a decision before leaving their sanctuary for the last time. They could see that hiding their blossoming love for each other would be impossible, so they decided they would not do so. Both remembered the boys, who, three summers ago, had revealed their relationship to the community, but neither voiced their fears. Neither mentioned them. No-one did anymore. The boys' families had quickly moved away, to separate parts of the country. Neither one had been seen or heard from again, although the boys had been known and liked by everyone. They were liked before, at least.

That last day, we walk back into town arm in arm, at dusk. A few people are around, but think nothing of us. We are teenage girls, after all. Teenage girls are affectionate. At her front gate, we kiss. For the first time away from the privacy of the riverbank, we kiss. From the kitchen window that overlooks the dried out grass of the yard, I see her mother's startled face. I hear her shout, and the door slams open. Her father, who I have always been slightly afraid of, stands on the veranda stairs, hands on hips, stares menacingly at the back of his daughter's head as she kisses me. I draw away, and turn her gently to face her father.

-What is going on here? he yells, in his deep, demanding voice.

-We... you know Lou, don't you? Zoe says, her voice timid, small, next to his booming one.

I take her trembling hand and continue for her.

-What does it look like is going on, Mr Hollaway?

-It appears that you were just kissing my daughter in my front yard, but I'm sure my eyes were playing tricks. Explain, please.

His wife, Zoe's mother, is still at the window, watching this exchange with an anxious face.

Zoe squeezes my hand, to give us both strength.

-That is exactly what is happening, Father. And I love her.

-No, you're just confused. The heat must have got to you, he says, trying to convince himself more than her. Come inside, right now. We'll sort this out in private, thank you, young lady, he says to me, signalling the end of the conversation.

-No, I say. I'm staying.

-Lou, just leave it. I'll be fine.

Zoe kisses me gently on my cheek before allowing her father to pull her away, inside, to privacy and his belt. Zoe has told me that his belt is often the answer to his anger, to his and his family's troubles.

I walk slowly home, not ready to face my own parents so soon after Zoe's. But I arrive home quickly, and I immediately see something is wrong, when Mother opens the door as I approach.

-What's going on, Mother?

-You tell me, Louisa. I know I'm in trouble when she uses my full name. Mr Hollaway just called. You have some explaining to do, she continues.

She motions me inside, to the secrecy behind a closed door, to my father, to the questions and the anger of the biased.

They are two girls, with separate lives and separate families, yet so similar. One house is quiet as Lou tell her mother everything and as her father reprimands her. Zoe's house quivers with tension as her

father attempts to beat her ways, her love, out of her, her mother looking on, silent. She too is afraid of the man who says he loves her. Who says he's doing this for Zoe's own good.

People will not know of our love for each other, the wonderful happenings that others call scandalous, by the river this summer. Our families cannot afford for it to get out, cannot afford the disgrace. The next day, Father bundles us up, moves us away, to an unfamiliar place with new people and a fresh start, where I have no history. Never to see Zoe again. Never to say goodbye. I sob the whole way in the old Morris Minor, staring out the wood-panelled window of the back, and imagine her doing the same back at home. So soon after the start of our love, we are torn apart by our parents' cruel lack of understanding, their need to be the same as everyone else, and their fear of difference.

We left behind no evidence of our lives, of my love. Zoe's family stays so as not to arouse suspicion. Us being gone is enough. A week after our separation, I send a letter, written painstakingly in block letters so as not to be recognised by anyone at Zoe's end. Another week later, I receive one in return, scrawled in her loopy, messy handwriting. She describes her anguish when she found that I had left her, her unbearable grief, her father's anger. "The beatings have become more aggressive, more regular, and my sadness deeper. The sadness buried inside me is becoming too much, and rising up, unable to be stifled any longer. I feel sometimes that I cannot go on. Goodbye, Lou. Thankyou for the good times, however brief they were."

The wider community never found out what happened, why Lou's family moved away. Why Zoe had to say goodbye as well, why she felt she had to leave them behind. What happens behind closed doors stays behind closed doors.