Cairns railway station, far north Queensland, summer, 1950. A girl with fugitive eyes and an infant on her hip. She is thin, gaunt even, but still it is easy to see these two are a pair, dark-haired and dark-eyed. She hurries down the platform towards the second-class cars, slowed by the weight of her son and her cardboard suitcase. It holds everything they own, everything she dared to take.

She finds a seat in one of the last cars – perhaps it feels safe, perhaps she is already getting as far from this place as she can – and settles herself. She has some food wrapped in paper, a dry sandwich, arrowroot biscuits – there was nothing else in the flat. Peter – that is the boy’s name – is tired, fractious, out of routine. Somewhere in her own weary brain she knows he is echoing her, responding to her own fear, her own curdled mix of terror and sorrow and the adrenalin it has taken to get her here. She talks to him quietly, she hopes he won’t cry. She doesn’t want anyone to hear him.

This is the scene as I see it, sixty years later. It is sepia-toned, like the photographs I have of her then. Nineteen years old,
with a face people compared to the young Elizabeth Taylor, and fine-boned limbs. But the fineness apparent through her thin shift that day had nothing to do with her natural build. She was malnourished, starving. Later, when she stumbles off the train in Brisbane she will be taken away to hospital. No one will know until then – no one could tell – that the new pregnancy she’d protected and kept secret was now well advanced.

But that is days later. Whole days and a lifetime from the minutes she waited on the train, willing it to move, to take them to safety. A lifetime because surely that is how long the journey seemed, how long she’ll have, later, to recall over and over a single moment. The man appears at the door of the carriage, walks towards her – a twisted smile – and roughly pulls Peter from her arms. Later, in memory and dream and conversation, she will wonder what else he said to her, apart from those few chilling words. *Don’t move* – the Greek accent was heavy and cruel; the baby whimpered, reached for his mother, a biscuit in his fist – *Don’t move, you bitch. Stay on the train or you’re dead. Him too.* She knew from the brutality of the past months that he meant it.

He waited then, his bulk blocking the doorway, until a whistle blew and the train shuddered. Did she plead with him in those minutes, beg, tell him she’d stay? Did she try to strike a bargain, some pathetic deal? I doubt it. In the parlance of the poker games he was addicted to, she had nothing to bargain with, no cards to play. She had only herself, her own bruised and flimsy body, her poor bullied heart. He didn’t want *her.*

This is the story my mother never told, not to us, the children who would grow up around it in the way that skin grows over a scratch. So we conjured it, guessed it from glances, from
echoes, from phrases that snap in the air like a bird’s wing, and are gone. Fragments of a legend, that’s how it seemed, and it twisted through our childhood like a fiction we had read and half-forgotten; a story that belonged to others, not to us, and to another, long-ago time. As if the woman at its centre was not really our mother but a stranger, an unknowable version of her, not the woman who made our school lunches, plastered our cuts, grimaced daily over the washing tub and wringer. Smiled as we came in the door.

We knew questions were off-limits. The story had its own force-field, our mother’s sadness as effective as any electric fence. So we learned to live alongside it, or rather, beneath it, conceding to its terms as we conceded to anaesthetic for our various childhood maladies – tonsils, ears, teeth. Learned not to notice – not consciously – the fierceness of her compensations: the pull and push of need, the nearness and distance of love. We learned, as children do, to behave in ways that might make her, if not happy, then less unhappy. We were still doing this when she died, too young, twelve years ago, and in some ways we haven’t stopped.

In the years before we’d learned some of the facts – the earlier marriage, the cruel husband, the stolen baby – but the flesh and bones of her life were buried with her in autumn-damp soil. What she left was a fine, opaque pattern like the ones she pinned over fabric to make our clothes, a movable outline that refused to be fixed. We began to ask questions then, wanting the answers she’d never have given. But our knowledge was partial so our questions were too; with every answer the lines shifted, and with them the shape of her.

This is what we didn’t understand, not then: that the past had gripped and confounded her, stalked her dreams. That every day of her life after her son was taken, she would sift through
the memory of it, every terrible second. Turning each in her hand, looking for ways she might have changed them. But always she would be stuck at the image of the man, her husband, the terrible smile as he entered the train carriage, walked towards her, pulled Peter from her arms. When she dreamed of her lost son she would dream of his father. He would always be walking towards her, wearing that smile.
In my head, it happens like this: she is standing behind the high glass counter of The Palms Café in Queen Street. It is lunchtime and busy, but she is momentarily still, flicking at a drift of flour on her apron – or perhaps she is tucking back a lick of wayward hair and checking her lipstick – quickly, covertly – in the mirrored panel behind her. At sixteen she has the celebrated curves of a movie star, 36-24-36, and is told she is just as beautiful. Of course, she doesn’t believe it – though she’d like to. She doesn’t want people to think she is vain. Her father, especially. He’d be disappointed, she knows, at any sign of vanity, any sign of conceit.

As she leans into the mirror she touches a forefinger to her lips – they are full, crimson-tinted – and sees suddenly she is being watched. It is the same man, the same eyes she had felt on her earlier that week as she carried trays with cups and teapots and scones between tables. He is darkly good-looking, and well dressed – pressed trousers, a starched white shirt. He is not a boy. A smile lurks at the corners of his mouth and it is the smile of a worldly man. A smile of intent. Her stomach flips like a fish on a hook.
Her hands move once more to her apron, she smooths imaginary creases, then turns to the serving bay. She has to remind herself to breathe. But there is safety in the plates of piled food; she risks a glance from lowered eyes. This is what she sees: his dark beauty. That it has made him dangerous. His eyes. Charisma and the possibility not just of vanity but of toughness. Of passion. She sees all this now, but seeing is not knowing. Otherwise, why would she risk that glance, a faint movement of her eyes and lips, a telltale dip of long lashes? She slides plates onto a nearby table and as she spins away he appraises her legs, her fine ankles.

This is what she doesn’t know: she is an ingénue, an innocent. From this perspective, sixty years on, and even then. Even then, though she has lived through depression and the effects of a war that didn’t quite come to her. It has been her luck to be born and to live in this half-forgotten town in a country on the edge of the world’s consciousness. Everything is far from here – the shattered cities of Europe, her father’s beloved English fields, the queues of the hungry and the homeless. Until now. The world of adults, of ravaged cultures and displacement, of sex and power, has just walked into her life in the shape of Minas Panayotis Preneas. Michael, or Mick, to his friends. He has come from the war-weary Greek island of Kythera to make his fortune and his life. At thirty-four he is literally twice her age, experienced, hardened, hungry. She is a naively beautiful girl from the poor and unformed outer suburbs of Brisbane. She doesn’t stand a chance.
There are pockets of modern Brisbane that still retain a sense of the older town, the subtropical British outpost it was in the beginning and the ‘big country town’ it was when my mother grew up here. That phrase – *big country town* – was how her generation described it, and until about ten years ago there was still enough of that quality for me to understand why. Weather, geography, history, circumstance: they all contribute to a certain attitude – Brisbane’s was a bit brash, a bit slow, a bit defensive. Hothouse too: everyone had links to everyone else through school, work, family. Up until ten years ago, we could joke that reading the social pages of *The Courier-Mail* was like going through the family album.

My mother’s Brisbane, in my mind, is the Brisbane of her youth – roughly, I suppose, between 1944 and 1960 – and though she grew up on its dusty outskirts, I can see it and feel it most in its inner-city streets. No matter that the town has been cavalier with the wrecking ball and careless of the fragility of tongue-and-groove and iron lacework. If a street boasts even a semblance of aged sandstone or an arched façade or a
verandah more than fifty years old, then it retains for me the air my mother breathed.

It’s there around the Treasury building and the Lands building facing each other across the park and its soaring statue of Queen Victoria; it’s in the arcades – Rowes and Brisbane, with their marble and mosaic tiling and wood-panelled shopfronts; it swirls around the Story Bridge and the old streets of New Farm, where jacaranda and hibiscus and palm fronds still stray across iron lacework verandahs. It has a sound, that air: a tram and its metallic lurch, a bell on a pulled cord, paperboys on corners. And a smell: buttery slabs of soap, malt in a milkshake, hops boiling in the brewery at the northern end of the bridge.

I follow her figure through all these places now; a brush of full skirt past the bank at the top of Queen Street; a tap of high heels near the shops in the Valley where the tram stops. A flash of dark eyes, the turn of wrist or ankle as she boards a bus, lifts a cup, steps into the dim cave of a cinema. Tantalising glimpses of the woman she was before she was my mother; the shape of the life she had planned before Michael appeared with his version of it.

These flashes of her from a shadowy Brisbane have always been the easy ones to construct. It is early in 1947; I know how the town was shaped, the line of it, the way girls and women dressed. My mother looks like so many other girls hurrying to work or pausing at Bayard’s window, checking the line of her stockings or hem. She might have stepped from the tram fully formed, without background or history or family. Her olive skin and her eyes, her shapely limbs, her bearing, utterly her own and not inherited from others. She is just her singular self.

But of course there is a father and a mother in the life she has outside these streets, and a home loud with siblings and money stretched too tight. She is the eldest and already there
are five more – soon there will be six – in this thin-skinned wooden house at Cannon Hill. It crouches among other wooden homes near cow paddocks recently occupied by the US Army; she and her closest sister, Evelyn, have been warned by their father to stay away from the camp, from the servicemen with their easy smiles. Now that the soldiers have gone, the sisters miss the frisson of danger – even though, fearing their father’s wrath, they’d rarely ventured close.

My mother’s younger self lives here, or that is how it seems: after work she steps through the door and becomes a girl compliant and almost undifferentiated from her siblings and their scramble for space and air and enough to eat. She is part of them. Perhaps this is why I can’t see her here, in the clamour and crush of her family. She blends with them immediately, helping her mother in the kitchen, seeing to the other children. The younger ones adore her. She shares the chores of bathing and feeding and entertaining them; from her they get the gentle attention they crave from their mother, and they cherish her. As adults they will talk about it endlessly: how she mothered them. Their voices yielding, soft.

But despite all this I can’t see her childhood face, or the shape of her among them, I can’t see the clothes she changes into after work or what she does with her hair. It is true there is not one photograph of her as a child in this house or the others the family lived in – no baby or school photo, no carefully arranged family picture, no informal snap. Nothing. In this family there was no money for such things, they would have been an extravagance, unthinkable.

Still, some families found pennies for photographs. I think of my father’s Swedish childhood, provincial and far from rich – he too wore cast-off clothing and ate what was grown in the yard – but it is all recorded in black and white and carefully
preserved. There they are in the album: random images of boys at play, posed pictures of his mother with her sons. I can look at these photographs and animate them, see the burst of action or laughter that follows – my father breaking free of his mother’s arm or chasing the dog across the cobbled yard or elbowed his brother off the front step where they’ve been made to stand and smile.

Not so my mother. I can’t animate her here in her home, so for me, she does spring fully formed from that tram in the city, as though she was born sixteen. From the outset I’ve known certain things about her childhood – the poverty, the truncated education, her love of books and learning – but this knowledge alone gave me no hint of her spirit, of the child she had been. Was it because of the absence of photographic evidence? Or because she was born in 1930, a decade in which childhood might have been arbitrary, especially among the poor?

Just twelve years after the Armistice, Australia was a place uneasy and staggering between two world wars: loss was still thick in the air, and the absence of young men in houses and streets still a shock, to the eye and the heart. So perhaps there was no inclination, when she was a small child, to commemorate anything other than terrible loss, and survival that was nearly as terrible. I don’t know. I sit at my desk and I’m surrounded by images of family and friends that remind me I am tied not just to others but to other times, that remind me of who I am. So to me, the lack of childhood pictures of my mother suggests an equation: no pictures = no childhood. In a life that would come to be defined by absence, this is an absence too.

There is only one photograph of my mother that she let my father hang in the house. Apart from their wedding portrait, which stood on the duchess in their bedroom; or the occasional
snap someone would frame from a birthday or a picnic, Mum with her sisters or holding a grandchild, that she’d frown and prop on the sideboard for a few weeks before tucking it away. She hated being photographed, hated the results. *I look terrible in that,* she’d say, dismissing the latest print with barely a look and walking off towards the kitchen. Now I can see the camera might have perpetuated the suffering, the residue of pain she could scrub from her real face every morning, disguise with Oil of Ulan every night. As for us, we saw in those pictures only what we wanted to see then, projecting our own need for her happiness into the frame.

The one photograph was different. It was taken, we were told, for her twenty-first birthday – two years after Peter disappeared, a year after Sharon was born – in one of the studios you could find in every city in the fifties and sixties, their windows testament to the power of colour tinting, of vanity, of the desire to construct and edit our memories and our lives. To our need to commemorate youth or happiness or beauty. The one photograph of our mother encapsulates all of this; it would be no surprise if, as she told us, the photographer had displayed it for weeks in his own window in Queen Street.

A casual observer might be drawn in simply by her face. Soft brown eyes beneath dark brows and hair, red rosebud lips that promise nothing or something, depending on your angle. She is wearing a white gypsy blouse embroidered with tiny red roses around a smocked neckline, and pearl drop earrings. She might be sixteen and she might be twenty-six.

But for me the photo’s real impact is in its composition. She is not facing the camera squarely; her body is turned sideways and she’s looking over her shoulder at us, her head tilted a little. Another subject might have made the pose coquettish, or played the imp or the siren. But this young woman turns that
notion upside-down, because, of course, she’s not looking fo-
ward to something but back, her eyes filled with longing rather
than anticipation. No one could argue about her beauty in this
photograph – that’s probably why she liked it – but to me it
speaks of sorrow, of all she’d endured in her life and all that is
at stake. She is at once the girl Michael wanted, the woman my
father loved, the grieving, wistful mother we adored. Still vul-
nerable, still innocent despite everything, a woman of infinite
tenderness and quiet fury.

We all have copies of this photograph; Dad had them framed
for us. For the past year I’ve kept mine on this old table, and it’s
become the focus of all the questions I have and all the answers
I don’t. I’ve taken to talking to it, to her. I whisper: *all the things
you didn’t say, all the things we didn’t know.* I look into the eyes
that hide her secrets and hold them. They glint like glass, like
water. Is it the photographer’s artificial shine, like the deft blush
of pink on cheeks and the moist rubied lips? Or were her
eyes brim full that day of everything she’d buried, all the pain
dammed up behind them, the shame we confused with indif-
ference all our lives?
Michael is back at The Palms two days later, then again the following week. In a town clothed by ration cards, he must have been hard to miss. His shirts and trousers are clean and pressed, as if he’s just plucked them from the diminished rack at Barry and Roberts, further up Queen Street. She sees that he drinks coffee, thick and black, like the other men he meets here. They all drink and talk.

This day, a Monday, she looks up from cleaning the milkshake machine to find him staring at her from a booth towards the front of the café. She averts her eyes, works the cloth fiercely around the base of the machine. His smile: there is mischief in it, he might be just a flirty boy. When he smiles at her again as she passes two days later – his third visit in three days – it seems churlish or even rude not to smile back. He’s a customer, after all. A regular.

He already knows her name, the one she’s given herself. She is not Mimi here but Yvonne. He says it one day – Y-vonne – the weight on the vonne, and something wakes inside her. It is as if she is being called, her real self summoned. Not EE-vonne, the
Y hardened in the Australian way. In Michael’s pronunciation, in the play of syllables, he has brought a new woman into being. Different. This happens in an instant, but she knows immediately she is changed. She doesn’t know who Yvonne is yet but she knows who she isn’t: a creature trapped beneath the humid hand of this town. Beneath turgid domestic jobs, waitressing, penury. The life her mother lives, beige-toned, the days grinding away to sameness. So when Michael offers Yvonne a lift home on his motorbike one afternoon in spring, she accepts, and with her hands on his waist – small for a man – and watching houses, trees, trams roar past, she can see the possibilities.

Her mother and her father, then. An odd union she has never understood: they are chalk and cheese, night and day. She loves them but is slightly repelled by them, certain her life will be different from theirs.

Veronica, after whom she is named, is called Ronnie and it suits her: she is tough and irascible, her harsh vowels as tireless as her hands in the wash tub or the kitchen. Her forebears are solidly working class – shopkeepers, hoteliers, carpenters, coal-lumpers, and she has inherited their clamorous voices, their lusty laughs. Everything about Veronica is loud. My mother – she is called Mimi, or Minnie, to differentiate her – shrinks from her shrillness in shops or in the street, hoping no one she knows is in earshot. She is terrified it may be genetic.

But Mimi’s view of her father is very different. He is, she decides early, a gentleman, with a respect for knowledge, for the proper and the good. He loves to read and to paint, he loves music, and with these he tries to make up for early poverty, a curtailed education, the potential that has been lost. This, she decides, is what has survived in her father: honesty and honour.
She sees the efforts he makes to uphold them. Her father, she decides, has been well named.

She understands too that her father’s life and outlook had been shaped not just by disappointment but by pain – a boyhood accident on a bad-tempered horse. A steel brace now strapped and gripped his spine: a stiff and unyielding contraption, controlling and grim. And this is how he might appear to others – it’s how he appeared to me as a child – but Mimi has a different understanding of her father and his disappointments. He is not stiff, but upright. Not controlling, but strong. If he is often dour and unsmiling, if he frowns over the watercolours he paints in all the greens of England, or over the vegetables he tends or the opera he turns his ear to on the wireless, and if his demeanour sometimes crumples and he shouts and smacks them, she reminds herself of his heroism: in enduring his pain, in missing England, in facing the incorrigible Ronnie over the porridge pot at breakfast every morning.

Like my mother, I was often embarrassed by Ronnie as well, this too-loud, too-plain, too-coarse grandmother who bore no resemblance to the benevolent, grey-haired versions in school readers or The Famous Five. They were wise and loving creatures who plied their grandchildren with fruit cake and kisses and let them rummage in dusty boxes in the attic. Pulled them onto their generous laps and told them marvellous stories, pressed a pound into their palms as they went reluctantly home. Ronnie was never that kind of grandmother. So it was easy to accept my mother’s take on her, almost all my life: Ronnie was selfish, she was rough, she was too much. And poor Ernest, on the other hand – all that pain and Ronnie into the bargain.

But in truth I didn’t notice my grandparents much at all.
And neither did I know the origins of the resentments that coloured the relationship between them and my mother. An undercurrent of anger ran beneath the determined and regular attention she paid them, the sedulous devotion as they grew old and more withdrawn and sullen. Every week in their later years, my mother and her sisters cooked, cleaned and shopped for them; tried to coax Veronica into a bath or to change her clothes, to persuade Ernest to open a window in the stifling summer kitchen. To take a gentle turn around the garden, to page through the books or magazines they’d brought, to try the casserole. They would be rewarded, at times, with a quick lash from Veronica’s sharp fingernails at their arms or hands; more often with blank refusals from both. At home later my mother would mutter darkly: her parents’ dourness, their stubborn descent into gloom, their eternal complaints. And mostly: Veronica’s heartlessness, her lack of interest and gratitude and grace.

I watched and listened and absorbed this odd mix of filial love and duty and anger. Somewhere I must have registered the edge in my mother’s emotions that her sisters didn’t have. Like her they were mystified and frustrated by their parents, their seeming complicity with the ravages of age, their deep suspicion of happiness. But my mother was both more wounded and more embittered by these encounters. *They won’t help themselves,* she’d say in the car on the way home, pursing her lips and turning her face to the window. And over cappuccino with her sisters: *They won’t go out, they won’t have any noise, they shut themselves off.* The girls would nod and butter their scones. Then: *Not like Old Gran,* Evelyn would say with a grin. *Remember how she loved the girls dancing the cancan in your kitchen, Mimi? They’d flip up their skirts and she’d pretend to be outraged. Then she’d say, do it again!*
They’d all laugh and nod and someone would ask for the jam. Then my mother would grimace. *The girls wouldn’t be dancing,* she’d say, *if Mum was in the house.*

Every few months over recent years, I’ve driven down from the city to talk to two of my mother’s sisters, Evelyn and Ann, in the bayside suburb where they both still live. We’d sit in Evelyn’s kitchen and, over egg and lettuce sandwiches and strong tea, I’ve asked some of the questions I had wanted to ask my mother. I suppose I was prepared for reluctance, for wavering, and phrased my questions carefully, unsure at first of what was trespass and what was not. Unsure if they too had locked their memories and opinions into an unbreachable vault, for their sister’s sake or for their own. So I was surprised by their willingness, not just to remember but to consider and analyse, and to return to the same conversations again and again as I tried to come to grips with what I heard.

Their thoughts emerged slowly, as they might from people long inured to keeping secrets, people convinced it was the right thing to do. It wasn’t that they hesitated, or didn’t want to speak; more that the information, so long buried, took a while to process and to surface. They’d speak quietly, in a kind of hush, as if the words themselves could still be hurtful, or loaded, or as if their sister might still hear them, years after her death. In that atmosphere I received each sentence as a gift, gratefully, struck not just by their candour but by the fact I was hearing the stories at all.

In the end their knowledge of my mother’s first marriage was limited, fragmented by their youth at the time and their sister’s determined silence. But it was their version of my mother’s youth and childhood that unsettled me. At first I tried
to ignore the growing disparities between their stories and those my mother told, the impressions I’d absorbed of my grandparents’ role in her early life. It took me a long time to concede my mother’s stories were not immovable truths; it felt disloyal, treacherous even, to question her version, to disassemble my own acceptance of it. To do so meant admitting not just the fallibility of that version but my complicity in believing it, my need to believe it. Gradually, after a lifetime of dealing in certainties – the plain facts of journalism, my own black and white views – I began to feel the nausea of uncertainty. Not just about my mother’s version of her childhood but my version of my own, and with it my sense of myself. It was the first of many concessions I had to make, truths I had to acknowledge, before this story revealed itself, gave itself up, settled into its shape.