Grace hooked her nail under the sticky tape and pulled back the gift paper. Inside was a boxed polished-steel knife block holding six different knives.

‘Knives,’ Grace declared.

‘Do you like them?’ Susan sounded young again, eager for approval.

‘They’re very … modern.’ Grace looked kindly at her daughter, then gripped the handle of one and slid it from its slot. The new steel glinted from tip to haft and made Grace think of surgeons and torturers, and the cold impersonal touch of both. The knives’ obvious sharpness also made her think of her father, but in a kinder way.

Grace’s Pa had been a man with penchants for bitter mints, tool care and wheezing. Asthma had saved him from enlistment, though he cussed it for doing so long after the troops had returned home. Mother rolled her eyes at his cussing and muttered, Ignorant fool or
Tell that to Widow Parkes, like she knew something he didn’t. He never challenged her. Instead, he’d take another bitter mint from the jar on the small round table beside his chair and suck on it in quiet contemplation of what he might have missed.

He was a tall, barrel-chested man. And despite his rickety breath, Grace remembered the firmness of his muscles when she’d swing, like a pendulum, from his strongman arms as a child. To her, they felt like rocks beneath his skin and she believed him to be as hardy as anybody’s father. As a young girl she put his laboured breathing down to nothing more than difference, not ill health, though towards the end of his life she was less naïve and knew the two to be inseparable.

At the end of a day he’d come into the house in his dusty home-sewn shirt and trousers, at odds with the clean regime of their home. He’d position his boots compliantly side by side at the back door, tongues lolled to one side like a dog’s, shoelaces undone and at the ready, as though a quick escape might be required at any moment. What he looked to escape from, or to, Grace could only guess, but she figured it related to territory. Where the house smelt of Sunlight soap and wax polish, the kitchen of vanilla essence, stewed fruit or simmering stews, Pa smelt of farm and sweat. The scent of one was always in conflict with the other.

‘Go clean yourself up, Frank,’ Mother would admonish.
Even after coming back in from the cement tub in the washhouse with his hair damped down and his skin smelling of soap, he’d stand around like a visitor who’d inconveniently dropped by at meal time. His lounge and kitchen chairs were his only sanctuaries. Mother eventually left them dusty and flat-cushioned, either despairing of keeping them clean and plump, or as an indictment of his failure to fit in with her meticulous hygiene.

The sheds and barn were where Pa felt at home. Grace, often seeking escape too from her demanding mother, would hunt him out at one building or another. She’d scrape mud from the deep tread of the Ferguson tractor tyres with a stick while he lubricated parts that moved with thick brown grease, or sharpened the blades of things that cut – cut grass, cut cows’ horns, cut wood. He was a man who took great care with his tools and machinery, showing them a loving touch Mother lacked.

‘Look after your things well, Gracie, and they’ll last you forever,’ he said once, as he ran a chisel across a whetstone in careful circular motions, periodically spitting onto the stone’s surface.

‘But the wooden handle’s already broken so it hasn’t lasted forever.’ Grace felt smug in catching out the usually uncatchable.

‘It’s not the handle that does the cutting,’ Pa said. ‘And besides, that’s easy fixed.’

‘But the cutting part will wear away one day too and you can’t fix that.’
'Won’t happen in my lifetime, so it will have lasted me forever.’
‘That’s not a real forever.’
‘Real enough to my thinking.’ Pa spat with perfect aim onto the grey stone and worked the chisel blade through the white froth.
Grace had never used a whetstone on her own knives. She preferred the sharpening steel Des had brought home from the shop. She’d swipe her knives along the cylinder, switching the blade from one side to the other in a criss-cross fashion. It was a satisfying motion, efficient and controlled. Her favourite knife, a butcher’s knife, which had also come from Des’s work, wasn’t unlike her father’s old chisel. It too had a wooden handle and blackened steel blade. She’d recall Pa’s story about things lasting forever whenever she sharpened it. Pa would be proud of this knife of hers. The blade, once wide, had worn down to be narrow and concave in the middle from years of being run up and down the sharpening steel. It fitted nicely over the curve of a tomato or the hard skin of a Queensland Blue and could still cut through either as if they were butter. She expected the blade to see her out, just as Pa’s chisel had indeed seen him out. Grace often wondered where those tools were now. Joe took care of them after Pa died but with Joe gone as well, Grace supposed they’d reached the end of anybody’s measure of forever.
‘And here, this goes with them.’ Now Susan passed Grace a second, smaller gift.
Grace opened it, revealing a flat object with two wheels sitting side by side. The modern knife sharpener.

‘I hope you like them. They were expensive.’

Grace ran a knife through the sharpener. It dragged loudly across the coarse wheels, grinding metal on stone in a way that made her teeth hurt. She was inclined to spit on the thing just as Pa had spat on his whetstone. She tested the knife’s edge with her finger.

‘Very nice,’ she said inadequately.

‘They’re all the go. Watch any of the cooking channels and you’ll see this brand of knife on the bench in the background.’

‘Is that right? Looks like I’m set to be quite the celebrity chef.’

‘You’ll be able to get rid of that other old thing now. It looks about ready to snap in half as it is.’

Pa would be disappointed with the measure of forever these days.

Grace slid the knife back into its slot. ‘At least we’ll be well-fixed for slicing and dicing today,’ she said. ‘We’ll have to be careful when the little ones arrive though. Don’t want any mishaps.’

Where Pa kept all things sharp at a safe height from inquisitive hands, her husband Des had considered small nicks here and there to be all part of a learned life.
One long ago Saturday, Grace had come in from the clothes line to find Des giving each of their three children a lesson in handling the largest of his butchering knives. It was a weighty thing with a long blade and timber haft worn smooth through use. He’d brought it home from the shop to sharpen. Peter was having first go – as the eldest, he usually did. Grace watched as he worked the knife backward and forward through the thick fatty layer of a large piece of beef rump. Susan, standing on the opposite side of Des to Peter, looked on. Claire, little more than three at the time, stood beside Susan on a chair that had been pushed up to the bench.

‘That’s it, son,’ Des said, ‘sure and steady. Show her who’s boss.’

‘My turn,’ Susan said to Peter, as his slice fell away flat onto the chopping board. She held out her palm like a surgeon to Des, to receive the knife.

Claire jiggled up and down on her chubby legs and said, ‘My turn, Daddy.’

‘You can have a go after Susie, Claire.’

‘Claire,’ Grace said, ‘you come with Mummy. You can learn to use the knife when you’re a bit bigger.’

‘Stop molly-coddling the kid,’ Des said. ‘How’s she supposed to learn?’

Claire looked at Grace, triumphant, before turning back on excited, jiggling legs, to watch Susan make her incision.
The knife looked enormous in Susan’s hands so Grace couldn’t imagine how Claire would handle it.

‘That’s it. Keep it the same thickness as best you can. That’s lookin’ good, love.’

As Susan got close to completing her slice, Claire, sensing her turn was near, jiggled about more and more.

‘Stop bumping,’ Susan snapped at her.

What had been a small bump quickly became a large one as Claire’s foot slipped off the side of the chair with her jiggling and she toppled onto Susan’s shoulder. The movement pushed the knife off at an angle and into the hand Susan was using to hold the meat steady. The cut wasn’t serious, Grace could see at once, but Susan howled, ‘Stupid girl!’ at Claire and gripped her hand to her chest as though the finger had been severed.

‘You’re a careless one,’ Des said, lifting Claire roughly from the chair and plonking her on the ground. ‘No turn for you.’

Claire burst into tears and ran to Grace, putting both arms around her legs.

Susan took a hanky from her pocket and wrapped it around her finger.

Des picked up the knife and handed it to Susan again. ‘C’mon, love, back on your bike. Your sister’s out of the way now. She needs to grow up a bit before she can have a go.’

‘And you’ve only just realised that?’ Grace asked him, feeling two small arms tighten around her legs.
Des, knife still in hand, reeled round to face Grace. He pointed it at her, said, ‘Not another word outta you, d’you hear?’

‘Hate you, Daddy,’ Claire cried, then buried her face in Grace’s thigh.

Now Grace looked at Susan’s grown-up finger where the knife had made its mark all those years before but she knew there was no defining line left there. The cut had healed without trace. In fact, she doubted her daughter would even recall the incident.

But Grace did, and other incidents, equally careless, equally threatening.

Abruptly, Grace slid the new knife block to the back of the bench.

Just as brusquely, Susan opened a drawer and took an apron from inside, keeping her back turned while she neatly tied the strings in a bow behind her. When she faced her mother again, businesslike, she was ready for work.

Grace said, ‘Why don’t you start with the sauces.’

The ground between Grace and her daughter could be uneven. Grace supposed it was no different from the terrain she’d traversed with her own mother, sometimes steep and treacherous, at others flat, easy plains. Bev had tried to make sense of it for her once; old
friends often brought logic to otherwise illogical situations. At the time she hadn’t succeeded.

‘Maybe it’s not so much the difficulty of the climb you should be thinking about,’ Bev said, ‘as how you catch your breath along the way.’

Grace had just made some reference to how scaling Everest would be easier than understanding the workings of an adolescent mind, Susan’s mind.

She must have looked confused, because Bev added, ‘Do you pause now and then till you can breathe easy again? Or do you push on refusing to admit you’re not as fit or able for the climb as you’d hoped, or asking yourself, even, if it’s a climb you should be making in the first place?’

Grace, in no mood for wise counsel at the time – Bev’s or anybody’s – said, ‘But that doesn’t answer why she cut it up like that.’

Susan had taken a photograph of Claire from her album – one that captured her sister drawing, her brow typically folded in concentration – and got to it with a pair of scissors. She left the circle of Claire’s face intact and a thin halo of her long hair. Reduced in this way it was an unflattering image. With all context cut away – the hand holding a pencil, the pencil pressed to paper – Claire looked defiant and sullen, not earnest. Grace had been livid, as much by Susan’s destruction of the photograph as its inaccurate portrayal of her youngest child.

‘It’s mine. I’ll do what I want with it,’ Susan snapped, when Grace challenged her about it.
Some time later, Grace had found the circle of Claire’s face stuck to a page in an exercise book. The book fell out from under Susan’s pillow when Grace was changing her linen. Beneath it in thick, black print, were the words, NOT MY FAULT! written five or six times like a chant. Claire’s look of defiance seemed enhanced by those words.

Grace didn’t tell Bev she’d found the photograph of Claire in Susan’s book. But seeing it helped her understand what Bev had meant. And she decided her friend was right: there were some climbs she had been neither fit nor able to make.
'Where’s the flour?’ Susan asked, rummaging through the shelves of Grace’s pantry cupboard.

‘Second shelf down. The container on the left.’ Grace looked over her shoulder. ‘Not that one. The one with the blue lid. The red’s self-raising flour.’

‘You’ve always had this colour system for anything in a packet – which is most of it!’

Susan came over to where Grace was preparing the lamb, looked over her shoulder.

‘Should be big enough,’ she said. ‘Are you going to do anything special with it?’

‘Yes. I thought I’d flavour it with some herbs.’

In small doses her daughter was good company, but for longer stretches Grace felt she was like a bird of prey, a secretary bird perhaps, all long legs and imperious plumage.

Susan watched Grace cook in a way that unnerved her. It wasn’t just the presentation of Grace’s food she
eyed – beans cut on the diagonal when Susan preferred them left whole – but there were her low-fat long-life quips too. A raised eyebrow from her daughter had the power to make Grace shake fewer grains of sugar into the cream she might be whipping. Perched on a kitchen stool observing, Susan reminded Grace of how Matron had watched her do some nursing task years before. Sometimes her hands had trembled from the close scrutiny and she’d struggle to guide a needle into an ampoule to draw up a drug or to grip the tail of a suture. But where Matron’s scrutiny had been to prevent mistakes, Susan’s was to let Grace know that she was being observed.

‘Isn’t he meant to have one of the little pink pills in the morning as well?’ Susan had asked, only fifteen or sixteen years old at the time.

By then Grace had taken to administering Des’s medications for him – and there were many. She’d put them into an old ceramic pin dish and leave them and a glass of water on the table beside his cutlery, ready for him to have with his meals. He’d often lift the small bowl to his mouth and take them, unchecked, all in one.

Des poked through the coloured tablets with his index finger, looked from Susan to Grace.

Grace stopped filling the milk jug and studied her daughter’s face. Those miss-nothing eyes looked back at her.

‘The pink one can be varied,’ she said finally, and returned her attention to filling the jug.
‘You reckon she’s tryin’ to diddle me, Susie?’
‘Just checking,’ Susan said, ‘in case she’d forgotten it.’
‘I think I should know what I’m doing,’ Grace said, putting the milk jug on the table.
Susan took it up, started pouring milk over her cereal. ‘I suppose you should.’
But what did Susan, or any observer, see really, when they studied the actions of another? Grace wondered. Did she think she was witnessing the truth of her mother’s life when she watched her, or was it her own version of it?
Grace inspected the leg of lamb she’d bought two days earlier. It was paler than the ones Mother had prepared. And though she hoped this one would be tender, she doubted the flavour would stack up as well. Mother had a deft hand for making the ordinary sublime.
It was through food that Mother’s love was given voice, and just as well because in other ways it was mute. Grace marvelled at how something warm or sweet could speak like this. How a mouth stuffed with soft, freshly-baked scone, sweet jam and cream could take hurt into the stomach and lose it there. It proved to her that food, so taken for granted by some, was a powerful thing.
But Grace had learnt a trick or two over the years to bring out the best flavours. Susan might raise an eyebrow at the salt she used to achieve it, although it was a lot less now Des wasn’t around.
Grace cut slits in the roasting joint until the knife’s tip hit against bone; miniature pockets she planned to fill with garlic and fresh rosemary. Mother wouldn’t have made such a fuss. She’d have grabbed it by the knuckle without ceremony, dropped it in her old blackened baking dish and slid it into the oven of the wood stove on the way out the door to church. It was the pinch of nutmeg and pat of butter she added to the julienned carrots later, the tiny thyme leaves she scattered across the roasted potatoes before serving, that showed Grace her mother cared.

Nowadays, Grace catered for a crowd who liked modern twists. She sealed each rosemary-filled slit in the lamb with a clove of garlic. Grace thought whether anybody would notice the pockets had been filled once the meat was cooked. Would her guests believe what they tasted when they ate the meat or would they need their eyes to see something of the garlic and rosemary, for them to trust their tongues? She doubted it. Such was the truth of cooking.

She poked the last of the garlic into the slits, grabbed it by the knuckle, just as Mother would have, and placed it in the baking dish. With her back to Susan, Grace sprinkled the leg generously with salt and rubbed it into the meat with her hands.

Grace studied her hands as they moved across the meat. They looked much like any others the same age – veined, lined, the backs stained with tea-coloured spots. But they’d felt their way through the
past seventy years in unique ways. Much of their work had been to the benefit of others, some not. She’d known them as still, listening hands, but also as hands that moved with urgency and madness. For a while they’d been careful nurse’s hands. Then hands that cradled three babies and clapped, tickled and taught in turn. She’d bruised, burnt and cut them; some scars suggested badly. They’d dismissed, beckoned, pleaded over the years, and not always successfully. Their goodbyes were too many to recall.

She held out her arms and studied the flat platter of her palms, red now from salt and friction. She turned them over, looked at the backs again. Her fingers were long and slender as her legs still were; the nails neater at seventy than they had been in her fifties – back when she’d had to scrub beds and bodies in the nursing home. She was fond of them, she decided, attached, beyond the obvious. She’d rather lose an eye or a foot than either of these two old friends. She’d miss the feel of one against the other as they rested in her lap, cupped comfortably like a successful marriage. Not that Grace could give anybody tips on that.

Her relationships, even now, were as problematic as they were when she was younger. She hadn’t thought it unreasonable to expect she’d have them down pat by now. And she probably would have if it wasn’t for her children. Unfortunately, they were determined to stand like a nagging conscience between her and Jack, forcing them to conduct their romance like sly adolescents.
‘They’ll all be coming?’ Jack had asked her last week of the day’s celebration.

‘Yes. Along with Ada and Kath.’

He nodded, face impassive, typically hiding what he really felt.

‘One day,’ Grace said, and rested her hand on his arm.

He’d laughed then, a rich, generous sound despite his exclusion. ‘Let’s hope it happens sooner than later. It’d be nice if one of us could put in an appearance at the funeral of whoever goes first.’

‘I’d show up anyway if I were you,’ Grace said. ‘You’ve earnt a seat on a pew.’

She put her hands back to work on the lamb, cold after the warm thought of resting them on Jack’s arm.

The lamb was slow-cooking in the oven, the timer set for two hours.

‘I’ll make a start on the mint sauce,’ Grace said and moved to the sink, half-filled it with water.

Earlier, she’d picked a large bunch of mint from the old cement tub by the tap at the back of the house. She dropped the mint into the water now and swept it about, separating the sprigs. A money spider made its way to the surface from the submerged greenery and tried to scramble up the sink. Grace gave it a helping hand and it scuttled off across the bench. Behind her, she could hear Susan moving a pebble of fresh nutmeg across the grater.
'I've never put nutmeg in a béchamel sauce.' Grace worked the mint leaves up and down in the water, picking off webs and browned leaves as she spotted them.

'I've never made mint sauce,' Susan said.

Grace had never bought it. Just as Mother had never bought tinned peaches.

Peaches had been one of Mother’s favourite bottling fruits. The seasons at Harvest could be measured each year by the number of Fowlers Vacola preserving bottles that filled Mother’s pantry shelves. If they were lined up three and four deep, then it had been a good year. The years there were few were the years Grace recalled wearing shoes too tight and jumpers too thin.

She’d looked upon those tall glass jars with their metal lids clamped down tightly on red rubber seals, and marvelled at the colourful patterns her mother had the patience to create. Deep maroon plum orbs pressed against the glass like eager faces and golden peaches, layered in symmetrical convex halves, forming hilly landscapes all the way to the top. There were sauces, chutneys and pickles too, made during times of plenty, plus pears, quinces, cumquats and stubby pieces of fibrous rhubarb. The change of seasons could be mapped in that pantry from summer blackberry jam through to winter pickled onions.

There had been a peach tree in Grace’s city back-yard once, but it was a tree she came to despise. The people who sold them the house had praised the
tree’s fruitfulness. Grace was thrilled. Back then she still believed a well-stocked pantry said much about a woman. Each August the tree teased her with its weighty display of pink flowers. But by late October, when all the blossoms were gone and the fruit should have been plump with promise, they were still hard and ill-formed little nuts of bitterness. No amount of fertiliser or mulch helped; the tree continued to mock her optimism.

One year, in a state of frustration, or madness perhaps, she harvested the pathetic crop anyway, determined they’d be eaten. She spent some time rubbing the fuzz from each, tossed out the ones with grubs and blemishes, and kidded herself that what was left looked better than usual. She pricked each fruit to its stone with a skewer then stewed them whole in sugar and water.

The failure of the exercise was revealed early when they refused even to give up their skins. And the one she cut to try was tasteless. Feeling she’d be doubly damned by the tree if she wasted the two pounds of sugar in the syrup as well, she went to the greengrocer and bought peaches. She stewed those sunny fruits in the syrup but the pleasure in eating them was spoilt by the ones she’d thrown out. When the tree toppled over one windy January night, she was glad.

Grace reflected later that the real reason she’d hated that peach tree in her backyard was because in producing inedible fruit year in, year out, it had reneged on its
purpose. But then Grace had not always done what was expected of her either, so who was she to question?

Grace pulled the plug from the sink, scooped up the mint and shook the excess water from it. She set the mint on the draining board and wondered, as she started to pinch the leaves from the branches between thumb and index finger, if Susan’s years of watching her had taught her much that was useful.

Grace had learnt a good deal at her mother’s elbow, especially about the art of cooking. Even as a small child she’d watched enthralled by the mystery and cleverness of it, as her mother scooped and poured and shook ingredients into pots and bowls and moulds. A slab of butter could be rubbed into a generous shake of flour and the two mixed into pliable dough by a good splash of milk and beaten egg before it was cut into scones. Some days they’d have mixed peel or sultanas added, on others, grated cheese and parsley.

As a child Grace believed the act of making something sweet or savoury, spicy or sour, was down to nothing more than whimsy. Later, she came to realise that her mother had put much thought and effort into concocting variety, as much to prevent her own boredom, Grace suspected, as theirs. Unintentionally, Grace was being taught to live inventively.

There was rarely a cookbook open on Mother’s kitchen table, only an assortment of bags and packets
and tins. When there was a recipe, it was in a tattered and torn exercise book she had filled with handwritten slips of paper gathered from friends and neighbours. There was little in the way of explanation on those pages, just a list of the main ingredients, their quantity described in words like generous or dash or sprinkle. Flours weren’t identified, techniques not explained; it was assumed the cook would know when to fold or cream or beat. The heading to the dish might read Mavis’s Chocolate Dessert or Freda’s Pork Dish. The ingredients to these recipes could metamorphose into something new like a Chinese whisper. But a little of the original person was always left behind in the recipe’s name despite Mother’s small, neat notations altering many of the pages, try cinnamon, better with four eggs or cook longer.

Grace’s experimentation started with those butter-stained pages. As a girl, she set up her own mixing bowl and wooden spoon beside her mother’s on baking days and she scrutinised the recipes encoded in that exercise book. She soon realised there was no code to break: ‘Is this enough sugar?’ she would ask.

Her mother would look across, thoughtful. ‘A little more.’

Simply those extra granules, Grace learnt, made a pavlova’s peaks more pert and creamed butter whiter. Mother shook flour or cocoa or arrowroot into a sifter and Grace cranked the handle until a soft peak
formed in a bowl. The height of those peaks started to make sense once knocked down to form a well, filled with beaten eggs and mixed to a smooth batter.

‘How much salt?’ she asked.

‘A pinch.’ These measurements were a secret language just for girls. ‘Here, I’ll show you.’ Mother dipped her thumb and index finger into the salt pig and brought out a triangle of white grains.

A pinch seemed a funny measure. Grace held up her own fingers, caught the thumb and index finger together and looked at them. They made her think of shadow puppets and birds’ beaks. She dipped that beak into the salt pig as her mother had done, and pinched. ‘My pinch looks smaller than your pinch,’ she said, looking at her own collection of salt grains, paltry compared to her mother’s.

Mother looked up. ‘Add another pinch, then.’

As Grace’s young hands grew, so did the size of her salt pinches.

‘What have you learnt from me about cooking over the years?’ Grace dared to ask Susan.

‘To use less salt.’

Grace knew that one was coming. ‘But … you’ve learnt nothing good?’ Grace asked.

‘Of course I have.’

‘What?’

Susan stopped stirring the béchamel sauce. ‘Let’s see. You’ve taught me how to cook old-fashioned stuff, I guess, like Anzac biscuits, scones, Christmas
puddings. That sort of thing. Most of my recipes come off the internet now though. You type in the key ingredient and it brings up dozens of suggestions.’

Sometimes Grace still pulled her mother’s old recipe book from the back of a drawer and scanned the torn and spattered pages. She’d try to make the steamed puddings or pastries written there, not weighing or measuring a single ingredient but sticking instead to the dashes and sprinkles her mother suggested. Sometimes they failed. Other times they turned out perfectly. Grace wondered what would become of such a book. She imagined it at the back of a cupboard in Susan’s meticulous home and paraded around friends from time to time as a quaint but ridiculous relic from the past, like sanitary belts.

‘How long have these been on?’ Susan stuck the tine of a fork into the hole where the saucepan lid’s knob was once attached and lifted it to look at the potatoes inside. ‘They’ve nearly boiled dry.’

‘Long enough, then.’

Grace took one of the new knives from the block – a broad-bladed one that tapered to a severe point – and started chopping the mint leaves. The fragrance released from the herb made her salivate. She knew when she steeped it in vinegar that the acerbic taste of it would catch at the back of her throat, but in a tantalising way.

‘Makes my toes open and shut,’ she recalled telling Mother of her homemade mint sauce as a child.
There was a clatter behind Grace – she knew the sound. The saucepan lid had slipped from the fork and hit the floor. She’d done it often enough herself.

‘I don’t know how you put up with these old pots.’ Susan had bent down to pick it up but it kept moving across the tiles as she struggled to catch it on the fork again.

‘Here, use this one – it’s easier.’ Grace passed her a carving fork from the drawer.

‘I should have bought you pots, not knives!’

Upright once more, Susan stuck the fork in the potatoes. ‘These are too soft to roast now. I’ll have to bin them. And the pot may as well follow.’

‘I’m fond of both pot and lid, so don’t throw either out.’ Grace took the pot from the stove and tipped the overcooked potatoes into a colander to drain. She’d mash them later and use them to top a cottage pie.

She opened the cupboard under the sink and took a bag of potatoes from the basket inside. ‘I’ll do more.’

Guilt obviously had some advantages, as Susan took the knife that Grace was about to use and said in a softer voice, ‘I’ll do them. You go and get dressed or you’ll be caught in your gardening clothes when everybody arrives,’ and kissed Grace on the cheek.

In her bedroom, Grace swung back the doors to her wardrobe and sat on the edge of the bed. She cast her
eyes across the clothes from left to right. Then back again. Nothing appealed.

Des had always liked to see her in fitted blouses with tightly belted skirts or trousers. Sometimes she’d felt he wore her on his arm like some people wear a Rolex watch. Mother had never allowed Grace bare shoulders or too much knee. And now Susan, Grace knew, would like to see her in the lavender floral frock with dainty pearl buttons she’d given her last Mother’s Day. She’d expect it trimmed with pearls at throat and ears, the jewellery a gift too. Grace never felt her real self when she wore such an outfit. Jack wouldn’t care what she wore; he praised her in a slip and bra as much as he did when she was dressed up for the theatre.

Grace stood again at the wardrobe. She ran a finger along the fabrics, stopping at a pair of lightweight cotton cropped trousers, relaxed at the waist. She took them from their hanger and laid them on the bed. Next she trailed through the tops; passed over cream, floral, pastel, bold fabrics, then lingered over a cotton blouse. Short-sleeved, button-through, loose. It was white like the cropped trousers. She took this from the hanger and laid it on the bed as well. She wouldn’t look brazen, decorous, dressed up or striking. Instead, she’d look cool, clinical, efficient—just what the day needed.