THE HOUSE OF FICTION

Leonard, Susan
and
Elizabeth Jolley

WITH AN AFTERWORD BY ANDREW RIEMER

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

> *… to the outside world the unhappiness and the problems may not show at all …*
>
> – Elizabeth Jolley, 'The Changing Family – Who Cares?'

When Susan Swingler submitted her manuscript to Fremantle Press early in the summer of 2011, I received it with some wariness. *The House of Fiction*, I understood, was the memoir of a daughter's quest for her absent father. Moreover, it constituted a revelation of the extraordinary actions of one of Australia's finest writers.

In 1976, Elizabeth Jolley's collection of stories *Five Acre Virgin* was one of the first five titles published by the newly established Fremantle Arts Centre Press. The Press went on to support and take great pride in the burgeoning career of Elizabeth Jolley and to publish seven of her titles, the last being *Diary of a Weekend Farmer* in 1993. Elizabeth Jolley's writing is rightly revered for its black humour, its portrayals of characters on the edge of society, and its delicate consideration of the question of love in many forms. Above all I did not want Fremantle Press to be associated with a book that in any way denigrated Elizabeth Jolley or her work – and in reading Susan's memoir I did not find it.

Instead, I found a story written with acuity and empathy. From each of the women – one in the immediacy of this memoir, and one across a lifetime of writing fiction – it is possible to see how the practice of writing might be a way of giving shape to, and garnering strength for, those difficult aspects of life that require survival or resolution.

The circumstances of this story evolved in an epoch when distance was untroubled by affordable phone calls or air travel, by email or Skype. It came about in an era before text, Twitter and Facebook, a time when there was a significant distinction between public and private selves.

In these pages we see two women living in the tension caused on the one hand by the longing of the daughter, and on the other by the insistence of the stepmother on the fiction of happy families – even as her husband resists a story he would prefer to have abandoned.

Here for the reader to discover is the way that each writer has written in very different ways about their shared, and singular, experiences. Here is a story that allows the reader to consider the relationship between life and fiction, and to make connections – or perhaps even apply literal truths – to what formerly might have been perceived as fiction.

Susan Swingler is by profession a researcher and curator. This memoir has been compiled with sensitivity and a remarkable emotional balance. I hope you will find, as I did, that Susan Swingler's revelations add intriguing layers of complexity to the oeuvre of Elizabeth Jolley and its reception to date.

– Georgia Richter, Fremantle Press

CHAPTER 1

Everything should not be told, it is better to keep some things to yourself.
– Elizabeth Jolley

A beginning for this story might be in 1940 when my father, Leonard Jolley, fell ill and was nursed by a young woman called Monica Knight; this meeting changed their lives, and ultimately mine, although I wasn't yet born. But that was the start of their story, not mine. I've decided to start in 1967 when I was twenty-one and two people stepped into my life to present me with a version of my past I didn't recognise. This was when I began my quest to unpick the strands of an elaborate and long-lasting deception: too much had been kept from me.

It was the summer of love. I wore a flower in my hair and we danced to *Sgt Pepper*. But far from dropping out and turning on, following the hippie trail or even merely moving in with my boyfriend, I was planning to get married, just as soon as my university finals were over. At that time the age of consent was twenty-one, and as my twenty-first birthday would fall in the middle of the exams, my mother signed the consent form for my marriage and I concentrated on revising.

A week later the form was returned to me. My mother's

consent wouldn't do as she was not my legal guardian.

Armed with a pocket full of coins I hurried to the nearest phone box to call the register office in Exeter. The registrar had someone with him, and I was put on hold. Every few seconds the peeps went and I dropped another coin into the box; they were running out fast. At last I was put through.

The registrar explained, not unkindly: 'You're a minor. Your father is your legal guardian and I'm afraid your mother does not have the right to consent to your marriage.'

'But why? I haven't seen my father for years and he gave up sending my mum any money for my maintenance ages ago.'

'That's beside the point. The law's the law. Unless your parents had made specific arrangements for your guardianship when they divorced, your father remains your legal guardian. And as far as I can see, there was no such arrangement made. You'll just have to get his signature on the consent form or wait until after you're twenty-one.'

'Please ... listen. My father lives in Australia. I haven't heard from him for – I can't remember the last time he wrote. Two years ago? There isn't time to get the papers to him. He might not even be at the address I have for him.'

'You could always try the telephone – check if he's there.'

I looked at the diminishing pile of coins in despair. Telephone? It would cost a fortune. I didn't have his number. His wife would answer. He'd refuse to speak to me. We hadn't exchanged a single spoken word since I was four. Didn't the man whose fingers I could sense tapping on his desk realise how impossible a telephone conversation would be? I tried another tack: 'The passport office let me have a new passport without his signature.'

The registrar didn't seem to believe me and I had to admit that they'd only given me a three-month extension so I could try to track him down.

'Which you presumably did.'

'Yes, he was in America, on some kind of sabbatical or a lecture tour or something. He's probably back in Australia now, but I don't know for certain and I haven't got three months. I want to get married in July, and the invitations have gone out and I've got my finals, and … Please. I don't see why my mother's signature won't do. She's signed consent forms for operations. My father has had nothing to do with me for years.' I was almost crying in frustration.

'I'm sorry, my dear. But that's the law. Once you're an adult – once you have celebrated your twenty-first birthday – you can sign the banns yourself.'

'But I'll be in the middle of my exams.'

A pause, an almost audible shrug from the other end of the line.

I had an idea. 'How about my stepfather? If it has to be a man, won't he do?'

'Your father, or yourself once you've reached your majority.'

I slammed the phone down and trudged back to the flat. Men. I didn't know why I was even bothering to marry one of them in the first place.

But I was. We'd planned it and were looking forward to it – not a church wedding, just the register office and a party at my parents' home afterwards. My mother Joyce and stepfather Mick would organise the food and drink and the boy next door would take the photographs. I would wear an ivory silk dress (made by Joyce) with red flowers in my hair and strappy red patent leather shoes on my feet.

On the morning of my twenty-first birthday I sat in the main hall of the Wills Memorial Building at Bristol University and tried to focus on the exam paper in front of me. As soon as we were let out, rather than slope over to the Berkeley Café

with my friends for the exam post-mortem, I leapt on a bus to the train station and got to the register office in Exeter in time to sign my own consent form, then straight back to Bristol to prepare for the next day's exams. It wasn't such a big deal in the end, but nevertheless I was still angry at the ridiculousness of a situation where a man who happened to be my father, but who had taken no interest in me or responsibility for me, had such power over me whereas my mother, who had taken total responsibility for my upbringing, wasn't even allowed to say whether I could get married.

Gordon and Susan on their wedding day, July 1967

The wedding went ahead on the day we'd planned. The sun shone, the guests crowded the rooms of my parents' cottage and spilled into the garden. There were lots of friends, a good smattering of Gordon's family, but only one relation from mine: my mother's cousin, Gwen, the only one who had not followed the rest of the extended Exclusive Brethren family when they severed all contact with us long ago.

We went on our honeymoon and then we were back to being students again (I had begun a post-grad course and Gordon was still an undergraduate) and it was the first week of term. I stood on the bus coming home from college, my left hand casually resting on the back of a seat, and admired my wedding ring, bright gold against my sun-tanned skin. I wiggled my fingers so that it flashed in the light and I smiled to myself. I was thrilled with my new status as a grown-up married woman. Our home was a tiny cottage, romantically called Thyme Cottage, with a big garden. I picked white asters and bronze chrysanthemums from the garden and stuffed them in jam jars on the window sills. We'd even got a tabby kitten.

I threw my bags on the floor and picked up the post – two envelopes to Mrs Susan Swingler. I didn't recognise the handwriting. I tore them open to find cards congratulating me on my marriage, accompanied by cheques from people I had never heard of before: Laura and Stanley Welton, and Harry Jolley. Each cheque was for £50, a lot of money then. A note accompanied Laura's card – she was delighted to discover where I was living and she asked for news of my mother Joyce, whom she appeared to know. Harry Jolley had merely signed his name. He was obviously something to do with my father. A brother? A cousin? My grandfather? I knew Grandpa's name was Henry, but surely he'd be dead by now – although the handwriting did look like that of an old man ...

Later that evening I phoned my mother. She seemed both pleased and astonished that they'd written. 'Laura's your father's sister and Harry his elder brother.' But why had I never heard of them before? She didn't say anything for a moment and then she said, 'It was a promise I made. You see ...' She hesitated. 'When Daddy ... Leonard ... and I separated he asked me not to contact his father or any of his family.'

'But why? What difference would it make to them?'

My mother sighed. 'I promised. He was in a terrible state, so I promised. And I've kept my word. But I'm so glad they've found you. I've no idea how.'

I wrote to thank my new-found relations for their generous wedding presents, and told Laura how pleased Joyce was that she could now write to her, which she'd be doing soon. Laura wrote back immediately inviting me to go up to London and visit. I couldn't wait.

The Weltons' house was a 1930s semi on a wide tree-lined street. The front garden was a mass of brightly coloured flowers and the front step and doorknocker gleamed. The person who answered the door was much smaller than I'd imagined. I had never seen a photograph of Laura and had assumed she'd look like my father, whom I remembered as tall and imposing. But then I had been only four years old when I last saw him, and all grown-ups seemed like giants. Apart from my memories, the only other image I had of Leonard was a photograph that showed him propped up on his elbows, bare-chested, playing chess. But rather than sitting at a table, he was lying down, his legs encased in a kind of plaster cast and resting on an steeply sloping plank or bed. My mother told me that this was when he was in hospital, before I was born, and that he was suffering from rheumatoid arthritis. This immobilisation was the way they

Leonard in hospital, 1940

treated his condition at that time. I had never asked my mother if there were any other pictures of him, or why she'd chosen to keep this one.

My husband Gordon and I sat on the sofa, with Laura in an armchair opposite. Her husband Stanley came in to meet us and then retreated to the garden. Laura made tea and we drank it from fine bone china.

'This was your grandmother's best china – I think she'd be pleased if you were to have it, now you're setting up a home.' I glanced down at the cup, rimmed with a thin band of gold and decorated with a pattern of pale blue clematis and ivy, and twisted my legs around one another at the knees and ankles. I couldn't think of anything to say. The more I felt Laura scrutinising my face, the tighter I twisted my legs and the harder I studied the pattern on the cup. Bone china tea sets weren't really our style. Thick muddy green and brown hand-thrown mugs hung from the hooks on our kitchen shelves. But it would be rude to refuse her offer; she obviously cared very much about the best china. I smiled and mumbled a thank you.

'You won't remember your grandmother, of course,' Laura said.

But I did. I remembered both the woman and her house: the steep flight of steps that led to a front door, its brown blistering paint, and behind that a gloomy hall, an umbrella stand holding knobbly sticks; one that impressed me had a bird's head handle. Grandma Jolley looked like a bird with her long nose and small bright eyes.

'I remember going there once,' I told Laura.

Laura raised her eyebrows. 'You must have been very young.'

'But I remember it clearly. Grandma was in bed – a high bed with a carved wooden bedhead.' I remembered how dark it was in the bedroom, the curtains shut against the bright sunlight; green curtains, possibly, or black. I looked around Laura's sun-filled room, a jug of late roses on the pale wood coffee table between us. 'She was propped up with pillows and bolsters and looked very frail. She wore a knitted bed jacket – dove grey, lacy.' I remembered her fingers, long and bent; they reminded me of an illustration of the witch in the story of Hansel and Gretel. In truth I had been frightened of this old lady, but I couldn't possibly say so to her daughter.

'Go on,' Laura urged.

'I think she must have told me to get into the bed with her, under the eiderdown.' The eiderdown was pink and slippery and she pulled it up over my legs with her twisted hands. I suppose I was still wearing my shoes. 'That's all I remember. Just her propped up in her bed, and the room.' Except, no, I remembered more – an unpleasant, throat-catching smell hung in the room, which I now realised was probably a mixture of stale urine from a pot under the bed and lavender water sprinkled on a handkerchief or sheets. That thought reminded me of the outside lavatory with a high wooden seat

and next to it a shelf with squares of newspaper, and beyond that, a garden. I caught at the memory of a garden. ‘There was a lovely garden out at the back. It was walled, full of tall spikes of flowers, peppery smelling – they must have been lupins.’

Laura was delighted that I’d remembered the lupins. ‘That garden was your grandfather’s pride and joy. Oh how he looked after those lupins! As if they were his own children. He patrolled the garden at night with a torch to collect slugs and snails. And delphiniums, he grew enormous delphiniums.’

I was warming to this memory of a garden. ‘Didn’t he have snapdragons too?’

‘Probably. He liked all the old-fashioned cottage garden plants. He was determined to bring the countryside to Hackney. Your great-grandfather was a gardener, too. It was his job. We’re all gardeners, we Jolleys. I am, and my brother Harry, too. We’ve all won prizes – Harry’s are for orchids. And your father loved gardening. Well, you know that, don’t you.’

I had no idea if Leonard was a keen gardener. I was still scanning my memory for pictures of a London garden of the late 1940s. ‘There was a birdbath, too. I remember that.’

Laura smiled. ‘There was, and we have it now, it’s in the back garden. You must have a look later. I’m surprised you remember so much. You couldn’t have been more than three, because Mother died soon afterwards and your grandfather never saw you again. It saddened him that you moved so far away and he wasn’t able to see you grow up. But we had letters, of course, and pictures.’ She turned to Gordon. ‘Do you like gardening?’ At the time Gordon had absolutely no interest in gardening but he said something polite, like he was looking forward to growing some vegetables in the garden of the cottage we were renting.

Laura was inspecting me again, that penetrating analytical look which I later got used to, but on this first meeting found

unnerving. 'You look so like him. Not your features so much as the way you hold your head and the way you use your hands.' I looked at my hands. I hadn't been aware that I was using them in any particular way. 'And your voice. There's something about your voice.' She frowned. 'I have to say I was expecting you to have an accent.'

An accent? Why would I have an accent? Did she mean a Devonshire burr?

Gordon was clearly getting fed up with our wanderings down memory lane. What he wanted to know was why this aunt and her brother had suddenly appeared out of the blue. So he asked her. She explained that Harry's wife had died earlier in the year, in June; lonely and bereaved, Harry decided to go to Australia to visit his daughter and her family in Canberra and as he would be unlikely to travel so far again, he arranged to see his brother and his family in Perth.

Laura leaned forward. 'You can imagine his surprise when instead of Joyce, a total stranger greeted him at the airport and introduced herself as Leonard's wife. He'd known Joyce well when we were young – she was a bridesmaid at his wedding – and none of us had even heard of this woman before. Her name was Elizabeth, and she was perfectly nice, but as he told me when he came home, he was totally unprepared. He called her "the wrong wife" and the epithet has stuck. He didn't ask all the questions I would have asked, but at least he got your address from Leonard, who also told us you were getting married.'

She turned to me. 'When did you and Joyce come back to England?'

'What do you mean? Come back from where?'

'From Australia, of course.'

I stared at her. I was beginning to feel lost in Laura's account of what had led to our being here, in her house, sipping tea

from my grandmother's china. 'I've never been to Australia.'

'But … we have pictures of you … photos … There's one over here, I put it in a frame.' She took down a photo from the top of a bureau in the corner of the room and handed it to me. Gordon leaned to look over my shoulder.

The picture was slightly out of focus. A girl of about fifteen stood by a gate, her eyes hidden by glasses. I wore glasses, too; she was slim, like me, and again, like me, had straight hair. Could that girl be me? I had the strange sense of being in a dream, out of touch with reality. I tried to focus on the girl's face but it was blurred. Had I been there, wherever it was, and been photographed and then forgotten all about it? Laura didn't seem to doubt that I was the girl and yet the photo was sent from Australia.

'That's not Sue,' Gordon said.

'But …' Laura began.

I clung to Gordon's certainty. It most definitely wasn't me. I'd recognise a picture of myself, wouldn't I? I handed her the photograph. 'It's not me.'

She frowned at it, then at me. 'Then who is it?'

'Perhaps it's one of their other children. But it's definitely not me.'

'And you say you've *never* been to Australia?'

'Never.' I said it with more conviction than I felt.

'Stay there. I just want to get something,' Laura said and left the room.

Gordon picked up the photo from the coffee table. 'It could be you.'

'Well, it's not, is it? I'd remember, and I've never seen it before in my life.' I took it back to place it on top of the bureau and glanced at the other photos displayed. There were a couple of Laura and her husband and one of a family group: a man and woman and three children. It was a studio portrait,

sepia tinted. The man wore a dark suit and a moustache and his hand rested on the back of a chair on which a very sad-looking woman sat. Her hair was swept up from her high forehead and I immediately recognised her hands, even then the fingers bent and arthritic: Grandma Jolley. So the moustachioed man was my grandfather, and that little boy with sticking-out ears and a surprised expression my father. I'd never thought of him

Henry, Bertha, Harry, Leonard and Laura Jolley, 1922

as a little boy; for me he was fixed forever at the age I'd known him – his mid-thirties.

Laura came back into the room carrying two shoeboxes. She set them down on the coffee table. 'You never went to Australia, you say.'

For a moment I felt as if my memory must be playing tricks on me and there in those boxes was evidence that I had lived in Australia. I'd somehow blanked it out of my mind.

'Honestly, the furthest I've ever been is Greece, where we went for our honeymoon.'

Laura was rifling through one of the shoeboxes. She pulled out a wallet of photos, selected one and pushed it across the table to me.

'And this isn't you and your brother and sister?'

Three children were lined up on a beach in their swimming costumes, snorkels and masks spread out for inspection in front of them.

'I'm an only child.'

She hastily pushed the photo back into the wallet.

Silence; each of us absorbed in our own thoughts. Had Laura been told, or merely assumed, that the girl in the photo was me? Was she the oldest of the three children on the beach? Laura had put the lid on the box and I didn't feel able to ask her for another look. Had this girl stolen my identity? Or had she – who even Gordon agreed resembled me – been given my name? Was there a second Susan Jolley? But why, when Leonard already had one daughter called Susan? Perhaps a simpler solution was that she was Elizabeth's daughter by an earlier marriage. Susan was a popular name after all.

At last Laura spoke. 'So these are his wife's children, not Joyce's?' She sounded weary.

'I suppose they must be. I know he has other children. Elizabeth wrote and told me. That girl, in the photo over there,

the one you've framed, must be one of them.'

'His wife writes to you?'

'Yes, every now and then.' I didn't want to go into the story about how I'd written to Leonard when I started at university and was feeling lonely and insecure, and how it was a woman called Elizabeth, apparently his wife, who replied, telling me he didn't take much notice of any of his children, but was proud of me. She had enclosed a money order. Blood money I'd called it, yet happily spent it on some new clothes.

'Are you going to tell me now that you've never been to Scotland either?'

This was beginning to feel like a cross-examination and I was being accused of something, but my crime wasn't clear to me.

'I went with Mum and Mick to the Edinburgh Festival when I was about seventeen, but that was the first time.'

'You know, I could never understand why Joyce didn't write, and when she finally did, the handwriting didn't look right.' Laura spoke quietly now, and hurt puzzlement replaced the school-teacherly sharpness of her voice. 'I told Harry and Father, that's not Joyce's handwriting, but they said I was imagining things, that people's handwriting changes. I *knew* something was wrong. Why didn't I act on it?' She suddenly looked old. 'You've never lived in either Scotland or Australia.'

I felt for Gordon's hand. Tears pricked at my eyelids. I swallowed. 'I told you, don't you believe me?'

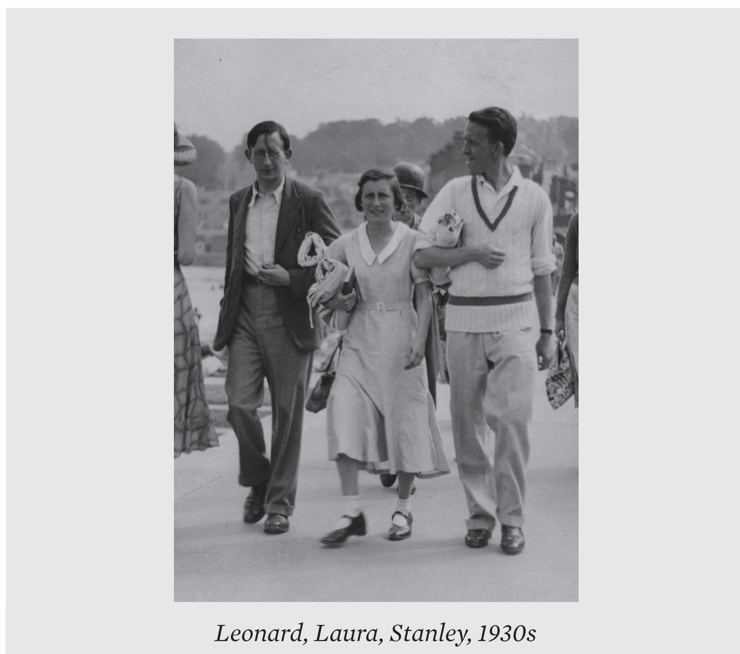
'I'm sorry,' Laura said. 'I don't know what to believe any more. You see, your grandfather and I went to see you off when you left for Australia. We went down to Tilbury and when we got there, they told us we must have got the date wrong. The *Orion* – I remember the name of the ship – the *Orion* had sailed the previous week.'

'You and my grandpa thought we were sailing to Australia?

Why? I don't understand ...'

Laura shook her head and looked away, out of the window into the garden beyond. I wanted to comfort her, but didn't know how to. I didn't know this woman and she didn't seem to be the sort of person to take kindly to a hug from someone she'd only just met.

'Why did you think we'd be on the *Orion*?' My voice sounded small.



Leonard, Laura, Stanley, 1930s

She turned back to face me and Gordon. 'Your grandfather had seen Leonard a week or so before, while you were visiting your mother's family in Kent.' She frowned. 'Or so he said. He told Father that you'd be sailing on such a date and if we wanted to see you and say goodbye, to come to the dock. So when Father told me about it, I arranged to take the day off work to go down to Tilbury with him to say our goodbyes.

But the ship had already sailed. It didn't make sense. Father insisted that Leonard had told him you'd be leaving a week after his visit. I thought he must have misheard.' She took a hanky from her sleeve and blew her nose. 'He deliberately misled us. What could have possessed him? To be so … so cruel.'

Laura's husband Stanley came in, and with him a welcome atmosphere of normality. He showed us round the garden while Laura made us something to eat. Over high tea they asked me about my mother and Mick, their home and their jobs, and we told them about ourselves. Nothing further was said about letters and photographs.

However, just before we left, Laura asked, partly ironically, I suspect, 'When did you last see your father?'

'September 1950.'

Gordon and I walked back down the suburban street.

'Are you okay?' he asked.

'Fine.' I glanced back towards Laura's house, but I didn't feel fine, I felt strange and disorientated. 'Except … I don't think she believed me.'

'I think she did in the end. It was quite a lot for her to take in.'

I wasn't convinced. 'You know, *I* don't know what to believe any more. That photo – the girl looked just like me.'

'But she wasn't you. I could see it straight away.'

'But you said she *could* be me.'

'I was joking. *Like* you, granted, but not you. Really.'

He squeezed my shoulder. 'Hey, don't get all upset. You've got a new aunt and uncle. And a cousin in Australia. You've always complained that you don't have a family.'

I glanced back once again down towards Laura's house, thinking I maybe should go back there and ask more questions, sort it all out. Gordon pulled at my hand, hurrying

us along towards the bus stop.

'Why do you think your mum promised not to contact them?'

'You know what she said – Leonard was in a bad way. Maybe she was scared he'd kill himself. I don't know.'

'But to keep quiet for so long?'

'Seventeen years ... but I suppose if she'd made a promise ...'

'Do you think it was to do with the Brethren?'

The Brethren were the Exclusive Brethren, an extreme religious sect that my mother's family belonged to and who, in the early 1960s, following the instructions of a particularly hard-line leader, James Taylor Junior, had cut off all contact with us because we were not believers. We were dubbed 'worldlies', sinful people who would contaminate the true believers if we had anything to do with them. Gwen, Joyce's cousin who came to our wedding, was the only other member of the family to leave the Exclusives at that point.

'Joyce is a woman of her word,' I replied. 'I don't think it's anything to do with the Brethren. She stopped going to meetings when she was a student, years before she got married, let alone divorced.'

Whatever her reasons for maintaining such a long silence, I couldn't help but feel let down in some way by my mother. I'd always felt so close to her, so why had she kept things from me? Why had she made such a rash promise to my father? Why had she not got in touch with Laura later, when Leonard was married and living in Australia; or when she married Mick, my stepfather?

I felt at a loss to begin to find the answers to these questions, and then others pushed themselves forward. Why had my father lied to his sister and father about us sailing to Australia? And who was the girl in the photograph?