

*This book is dedicated to my sisters and brothers, my children,
my grandchildren, and all women and children who've feared
the consequences of breaking the silence — the courageous
adults and children who refuse to forget.*

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WHEN WE REMEMBER
THEY CALL US
LIARS
SUZANNE COVICH

SNOW WHITE AND THE BLUEBELL BRACELET

One by one the girls in our family all knew about Old Jock and the skirts he crawled into — from the time Pretty Sister knelt beside us and asked us to put our hands together to pray. ‘Close your eyes,’ she’d gently say, and my twin sister and me, side by side, would lower our heads, tuck the tips of our pressed-together fingers under our chins and do the Our-Father-who-art-in-heaven-keep-us-safe-in-our-beds trick. At least that’s what I think we’d say. And then we’d scramble into bed before Dad got home, she’d tuck us in and kiss us on the cheek, and we’d drift into fairyland, knowing God watched over us.

Pretty Sister loved to be called pretty, and that’s what people called her. But her real name was Vonni. Dad had different names for her when she grew bigger, just like we had different names for him — Old Jock, the Old Man, the Old Bastard.

Vonni was in grade one when Ella and me were born and Mum, worn to a frazzle, took her out of school for a year to help around the house. Vonni’s the one who always put us to bed. She’s the one who remembers Mum, before we were born, crawling across the floor with big veins popping out of her

legs from the weight of Ella and me. She's the one I've come to really love.

Our house was on the hill next to the orchard where a man on a tractor sprayed trees to kill insects and make the apples grow big and juicy. This is the house where my story begins. It's the same house that was in danger of burning down if the huge pines caught fire and blew up, as they reckoned pines did. When Pretty Sister, for some godforsaken reason, lit the dry needles at the lopped-off top of one of the trees, she pissed on it quick to put it out. 'What the fuck!' Mum screamed, as she waited for the pine to spew flames all over the house. 'You get the hell down here this minute!' Vonni scrambled down and took off across the paddock like a scared rabbit.

I can't remember if she got belted for that. But the way Mum raised her voice to make sure we got the message about Dad's dad when he slept in our laundry sticks in my mind. 'Youse kids stay away from him! Hear? Keep your trikes away from that bloody laundry! Take them and ride over there!' And that's exactly what my twin, my little brother and me did, making tracks, racing and falling again and again into mud, losing pennies we'd saved in small tins attached to the handlebars of our trikes.

My little brother's name is Peter, and I can't remember when he was born. He just slipped into the house on the hill and I didn't even notice. Ella and me were walking already, but only just. As he grew big enough to play with us, Mum told us we had to protect him because he was a small-boned kid. You can see what she wanted back then. She wanted to raise us right, wanted us to care for each other, but that meant do as I say, not do as I do. More than anything else, she wanted kids to be proud of.

My mum was a great housekeeper, like her own mother — not a speck of dust. 'You could've eaten off your mum's mum's

floors,' the big-nosed owner of the cherry orchard told me when I asked what she remembered about my grandmother. 'Before she died, she'd have her kids on their hands and knees, picking bits and pieces of cotton off the coir mat in the kitchen. Poor thing.' And often Mum had us on our hands and knees, sliding around on the wooden floors on old woollen jumpers to polish the boards — in and out the rooms until she could see her face in the buffed-up surface — until she'd had the break from us that she needed.

As a young mother, she went to great lengths to get it right. She wanted others to know that whether she'd had a mother to raise her up or not, she'd learned enough to know what to do with us. Mum was fourteen when her mum died, but she certainly knew about manners, and she knew the difference between kids you could take just about anywhere and a pack of out-of-control animals.

We never swore when Mum was around. We got smacked in the head for that. We never put our elbows on the dinner table, never licked our plates and never ate with our mouths open. No one in her kitchen was ever going to have to look at stews and soups and fresh garden vegies sloshing around in open mouths. We never spoke unless spoken to and never left the table without please and thank you.

We never died from that, and we never died from stuffing our mouths with hot chook food. We never died from tasting the corbies we scooped from small holes in the paddocks with thin wire hooks. On our hands and knees, we'd gently poke and move the hooks around and around until we squished them, hooked them, and hauled them up to toss into a jar for fishing. Fat grubs, brown heads, alive and wriggling.

We never died from smacks on the arse, or the mad cow that swished her one-horned head around and around the apple we flicked through the fence at the end of a stick to send her

half crazy. Once, she gored Peter in the guts when he fell from the toilet roof, tossing him this way and that in the paddock as he screamed. Ella and me watched with our words caught in our throats. We'd tried to stop Peter from getting on the roof but he wanted no bar of that, just as we wanted no bar of what the cow was doing to him.

Maybe that's why Dad ran that old cow down with his ute and broke her hind legs, then shot her in the head in front of Pretty Sister. When I think of that, all I can see is the back of a ten-year-old girl — her skinny legs, her fair hair — and she's crying. She couldn't stop crying. But she got used to stuff like that. She toughened up.

'I loved that old cow,' Vonni tells me. 'She gave us our milk. Mum made butter from that milk.'

It was good not to die. We all knew that, and even though deep water was a place where you easily could, we never died in the ponds in the paddocks, where we stretched facedown along banks between reeds to grab frogs — our hands like eyes beneath dark water. We loved it when the frogs tucked themselves into slimy little balls and lay still in the palms of our hands. We loved their eggs — black dots in see-through jelly, stuck to reeds. We loved the sounds they made at night as we lay curled up in our beds.

There was a lot to love in the valley, but whenever Vonni sat on the front verandah, telling us stories about the Pitch-a-Patch Man who rose up from the paddock near the river to crawl over the road and over the fence and into beds to snatch us from sleep — hairy-armed, always hairy-armed — fear drilled like spears into our spines and hearts and guts and we might just as well have been dead.

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I was four, tall enough to stand on the running board of the old black DeSoto parked under pines that housed spiders in the cracks of their large crusted trunks. Stretched up to look in at the wood grain on the dash and the dials and the shine, I hooked the tips of my fingers into the gap where the windscreen ran up and down. I was conscious of the way my dress was lifting, hoping beyond hope that no one could see. Us girls had to have eyes in the back of our heads. Shivers and goosebumps let us know when those eyes were working, and the sense of being watched was often with me.

I knew that it was not okay for someone to see my pants. It was the lace that worried me — cheap cotton lace that trimmed the edges. And I also knew that, for some reason, it was not okay for me to be on this side of Dad's car. Maybe it was the fingerprints I left on the duco. Maybe it was the fact that I was alone and no one from the house could see me. 'Stick together,' Mum repeatedly said, and that's mostly what Ella and Peter and me did. It's what Vonni, Big Brother and my big sister Lizzie did, too. Two sets of three who stuck together.

In the paddocks we'd lie low, Peter and Ella and me, bellies flat out on grass near plovers' nests, watching the birds heading towards us inches above the ground like planes zooming in to attack — the spikes on their wings ready to strike. The closer they got, the readier we got to spring from the ground, waving and jumping and screaming as they whooshed into the air. Our hearts thumped. We rolled around in the grass. We loved the grass and we loved close shaves. They made us feel strong. On warm days, we lay on our backs, making shapes in the sky, telling stories about the people and the animals we saw in the clouds. When it rained, misting the valley, or when fog got thick enough to cut with a knife, for some reason I felt safe.

I loved this valley, loved the daisy chains we made, and dandelions we blew into the wind, turning each little seed into

a fairy who flew away to faraway places to make our dreams come true. I loved the box full of old rags on the verandah that we cut and stuffed into bags to make pillows. Sinking into them in winter, watching the white caps on the mountain I called Snow White as she stretched majestically across the land, I'd shut out the noise in the house. I practised disappearing. I pulled clothes over my head, or imagined myself being that mountain — long and high above the valley. No matter which way you looked at her, she was beautiful. As if she was lying on her back, Snow White's nipples peaked like mine did when a cool breeze caught me as I lay on my back watching clouds in clear weather. Somehow she was within me and I loved her.

It was easy to hide in the box of old rags, especially when it rained or snowed. No one wanted the front door open, and only an idiot braved such weather. No one knew I was there. At least, that's what I thought. Curled up in the silence, I'd see myself riding on the backs of the magnificent horses grazing or galloping in the paddocks near the river. Someone had read *Hiawatha* to us, someone had shown us the pictures, and, like the Indians, I'd soar on my horse over obstacles, winding in and out and under the branches of trees. Sometimes I slept down deep in the box and sometimes I shrank myself to the size of a tiny plastic doll on a leaf, drifting downstream on the river.

Even now, when I read or write, I love to hear the rain on tin or feel the cool breeze on my face. And if there's snow, I wrap myself warm and sit for hours — outside, in corners of verandahs. I cry. Snow makes me cry. When I do things like that, it's hard sometimes for people to understand. They think I'm teetering on the edge. They think I'm mad.

My mother said I was psychic when I told her, before she died, that I could remember sucking her big brown nipples as she rested at the table in the kitchen of that house.

'Draw it. Draw what you reckon you remember,' she said,

and I drew the long kitchen, a door to the outside and a door to the passage, with dark wood on the bottom of the walls. I made out the shapes but not the detail — Mum with me, and Ella in Vonni's arms near the old wood stove. Two milk churns stood near the door where Mum sat. When I drew the pines, which seemed to just hang there in the window above the old wooden sink, Mum was stunned. 'How can you remember that? You were too small.'

'Dunno, Mum, but I can still see it.'

'Bloody psychic, that's all I can say.' And she looked at me and into me as if I were some strange creature, pleased to think that I remembered that far back.

There was hessian on the walls somewhere, so Vonni says. Lizzie reckons it was probably over the hole in the bedroom where she kicked the wall when she and Vonni were messing about. Lizzie was thirteen when we left that house. She was the biggest. Vonni was eleven. Big Brother was ten, Peter was three, and Ella and me were about five years old.

I can remember the old yellow toilets on the hill at the school where Vonni and Lizzie and Big Brother went. So maybe Ella and me were already at school. If we were, it was too short a time for it to stick among the clear and broken bits I've framed within my memories. Sometimes, it's good to stand back and leave the memories, sealed off like glassed-over pictures in a gallery. Now, as I get really close, they come to life and the feelings stand out — feelings I cut off for more than half of my life.

We all have our memories — my brothers and sisters and me — and they differ here and there. But one thing never changes, and that's Old Jock — what he did and how he scared the living shit out of us. The last time I sat on my father's knee was the day he fiddled with the lace on my pants and locked a bluebell bracelet to my small wrist.