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Opening Extract from...

The Devil's Staircase

Written by Helen Fitzgerald

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1

It was fifty–fifty. Mum had it, and had died in a pool of her own mad froth. Fifty-fifty for Ursula and for me. Our eighteenth birthday presents – hers now, mine in four years' time – would be decided by the landing of a twenty-cent piece, a head or a tail.

I tried to hold Ursula's hand as we walked through the car park and into the hospital, but she flicked me away. After that I only remember corridors, hundreds of them leading to hundreds of others. And I remember sitting in a family waiting-room for hours while Ursula and Dad talked about test results and then I remember Ursula running out of a room with her arms wide open, grinning from ear to ear. I hugged her and we twirled around in the room together. Lovely Ursula. She wouldn't go the way Mum had gone, to a moody forgetful place that reduced her to stinking incapacity and then ended her at forty.

☼

The darkness descended on the way home from the hospital that afternoon. I was certain that Ursula's test result meant bad news for me. Dad explained that this was bullshit, but I didn't believe him. As far as I was concerned, one of us had

to have it, and if it wasn't going to be Ursula, then it was going to be me.

I was fourteen, and from then on my only thoughts would be of death. I would stand still for the remainder of my teenage years, looking into the air at a slowly falling twenty-cent piece.

The drive to Kilburn was a typically boring freeway drive – flat, dry and fast. There were thousands of large loud trucks speeding and overtaking tiny little family vehicles. There were hungry-looking sheep in dry fields and at least two splattered animals on the side of the road. There was a funeral parlour on the outskirts of Kilburn, a cemetery, and pigs squealing at the bacon factory in our street. There was darkness, seeping into me.

I missed out on a lot in those four years:

I never went on the Scenic Railway at Luna Park.

I never kissed a boy in case I began to love him.

I never applied for university.

I never lost my virginity.

I was already dead.

☼

Three weeks after my eighteenth birthday we drove to Melbourne. I imagined I was walking along the corridor of a Texan penitentiary. Instead of yellow-brown paddocks I saw the steel grey of cells. My Dad was the priest, rambling prayers breathlessly one step ahead of me. Ursula was the silent guard, cuffed to me, leaden. I was moving towards the

room I'd end in, letting it happen, not stopping it, and when I looked in the wing mirror I noticed I was eating Cheesles. I wondered why people bothered with last meals as I sucked the orange gunge from the rice ring, but then I realised that there should always be time for Cheesles because Cheesles are bloody wonderful.

Dr Gibbons had been part of my family's life for as long as I could remember, and not in a good way. As kind and as gentle as he was, he represented needles and coffins to me, and whenever his thick old frame appeared a wave of terror overwhelmed me. The wave came over me more than ever as Dr Gibbons took my blood, as he asked me loads of questions, and as he made me sign things. 'Two to three weeks,' he said. 'I'll call you.'

'Can I have a few minutes to myself?' I asked.

'Of course.'

'I just need a bit of a walk.'

I left Dr Gibbons and Ursula and Dad standing in the hospital room and walked down the stairs and then outside. I stopped at the car to write a note, popped it on the windscreen, then crossed the six-lane road.

As I weaved my way through the slow-moving traffic, I realised the darkness was going. I didn't imagine a car coming from nowhere and smashing into the side of me, sending my flattened head and twisted body twenty feet into the air and then down onto the nature strip with a thump. As I walked through the park, I didn't imagine a man in a large overcoat appearing from nowhere and either

(a) pulling a knife from under his coat and slicing my throat from ear to ear or (b) dragging me into the bushes, ripping off my pants and raping me while draining the air from my windpipe with his elbow. As I walked to the other end of the park, I didn't imagine falling into the man-made lake and getting my feet tangled in weeds and yelling for help but not getting it.

I didn't imagine anything death-related, for the first time in four years.

I reached the main road on the other side of the park. The hospital had disappeared from view completely by then. I waved down a taxi.

Turning around, I looked at the trail of non-death behind me, took a deep breath, opened the door and said: 'Tullamarine Airport.'

2

I hadn't travelled further than Melbourne since I was ten, and that was only a day trip to see the penguins at Port Phillip Island. It was our first expedition without Mum, intended to cheer us up, but I remember finding the rows of tourists and the waddling penguins scarily similar and feeling a bit depressed that both had ended up in the same place doing much the same thing.

My vague plan had been to travel once I knew the result, to make the most of the years I had left, so I had the passport I'd applied for in my shoulder bag. But after the blood was

taken, it hit me that I would have a pretty crap time if I knew I was dying. In fact, knowing was going to be pretty crap full stop.

I needed to *not* know. And I needed to get away now.

The one-way ticket cost $800, two thirds of the amount I'd managed to save at the Craigieburn Mint, where for six months I'd made money, literally. I bought it and ran as fast as I could to the check-in. What if Dad and Ursula found me? What would I say? What if they arrived and begged me not to go? What would I do?

'How many bags?'

It was the gruff Qantas check-in person, who had obviously been talking to me for some time, and I hadn't been listening. I'd been thinking about Dad and Ursula racing around corridors and parks looking for me, getting in the car and seeing the note I'd placed under the windscreen wiper.

Dear Dad and Ursula,

I'm sorry but I don't want to know. I won't let it take me over. It's been doing that for years and I've been wasting my life. I'm going to London to <u>live</u> and I'm going to be fine. I love you both more than ever and more than anything,

Your Bronny.

'None?' asked the Qantas check-in person. 'What do you mean, "none"?'

'I'm travelling light,' I said.

He raised his eyebrows before handing over my boarding pass and I ran, just in case they were arriving in the car park, just in case they were racing behind me to shout, 'Stop!' because stopping was the last thing I wanted to do.

☼

I was scared of heights, so I closed my eyes and remembered what my Dad had told me after forcing me to climb to the top of the old jail's watchtower. I'd emerged from the stone spiral staircase to find sweeping views and a flimsy wooden barrier that I thought would break at any moment.

'Breathe deeply,' Dad said. 'Don't think so much. Imagine you're on terra cotta.'

It had made me giggle, but it hadn't worked then, and it wasn't working now.

I decided alcohol might.

Two hours later, I was sitting on top of the world, sipping its Bacardi and Coke. I had a whole row of seats to myself and had gathered enough courage to peek out the window. Australia was going on and on beneath me. I'd lived in an Australia with boundaries – the Great Dividing Range, Melbourne, the old railway, the O'Hair farm – and had never fully understood the extent of my country. It never ended. From seat 23b, where I was sipping my seventh Bacardi and Coke, Australia was an infinite dried-out pancake.

It had taken a while to order the first drink because I had no idea if I had to pay for it or not. This was my first flight anywhere and I knew nothing about passenger etiquette.

'Would you like something?' the airhostess had asked, and I was too nervous to say yes, so I watched several rows order drinks first before being absolutely sure that the booze was free, and then ordered seven in quick succession.

'I'm Bronny!' I said to the man in 24c. 'I've had too much to drink.'

'You should never tell a man you've had too much to drink,' he said without smiling.

'Okey-dokey,' I said, returning to my seat, my face reddening. What did he mean?

'What does it mean if a guy says, "Don't tell a man you've had too much to drink"?' I whispered drunkenly to the woman in 23a.

'It means he's a prick,' she said, and I smiled, but I didn't know why, because I had no idea what she was on about either.

I went to the toilet and threw up into the metal bowl that told of each and every bottom that had sat upon it, leaving splotches of blood, wet poo still clinging to the sides, a dangling seat cover, a rubber glove. I added my story to the bowl in the form of Bacardi and Coke and reconfigured Cheesles, popped two tic tacs in my mouth, and returned to my seat. Then I fell asleep for a very long time.

A very long time on a long haul flight, I discovered, was two-and-a-half hours. That meant there were two hours to go till the transit experience in Singapore. I was hungover, my legs were fidgeting furiously, the flat dried-out pancake below had turned to ominous black water, and then the pilot

announced that we were cruising at 30,000 feet. 30,000 feet! That's a lot of feet. I closed my eyes and prayed that if there was a God could I please die floating slowly enough – without engines one, two, three and four – to write goodbye letters to dear ones before plummeting into the concrete ocean?

I was panicking. What was I doing? I had no money, no contacts, no clothes and no job prospects. I asked for paper and a pen, no longer worried about what I could or could not do as a Qantas passenger. (Judging from the group of graduates in 11 and 12 who were throwing cashews into each other's mouths from great distances I figured I could pretty much do anything I liked.) The writing material came and I began a second letter to Dad and Ursula.

Dear Dad and Ursula,

I've made a mistake. I have no money, no contacts, no clothes and no job prospects. I'll save till I can come home . . .

I tore it up. What good would it do to worry them? Anyway, it was ten minutes to landing.

I got off the plane and shuffled into the massive terminal building. People moved purposely on or beside huge moving walkways. Everyone seemed to know exactly where they were heading. I followed them, jumping on the walkway and holding the band at the side carefully.

That's when I met the man in 24c again. Hamish was his name. He was teeny, with John Lennon glasses and bright lips. I smiled at him.

'Still drunk?'

I shrugged.

'First time, eh?'

'Yeah.'

I'm not sure if he followed me, or if I followed him. All I know is that I spent my time in Transit-ville with Hamish from Toronto; who was heading back to London after going to a friend's memorial service in Ballarat. Poor girl, one minute she'd been sailing off Devon, the next she was dead somewhere at the bottom of the sea. I sat with Hamish for the next two legs of the journey and he talked me through several full-blown panics variously prompted by turbulence, an unidentified flying thing not far from the wing under my window, a passenger who held his bag (bomb) a little too tightly, a full-blown fist fight between one of the graduate cashew-throwers and a parent whose toddler got hit in the crossfire. We watched the disconnected pieces of three movies. We stood together in the passport queue at Heathrow, where to my horror Hamish informed me that I was not an EU member and would therefore have to stand in the *other* passport queue with the Chinese and Africans. Then we got the tube together to the Royal, where Hamish ran an Internet café. He'd told me the hostel was cheap, clean and good fun. Even better, he'd said, a cleaning company came round each morning to gather casual workers for the day.

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'We're full,' the hostel manager said, eyeing me up and down and then handing Hamish his key. 'You should've booked online.' I could have cried. I had arrived in London with 400 Australian dollars, which I'd expected would do me till I found a job, but by the time I'd arrived in Bayswater, I'd spent 150 of them. I had enough money left for three nights in a dump like the Royal, which didn't have any room anyway.

I took off my windcheater and sat on the bench, dizzy and faint. I was wearing jeans, runners and a flimsy singlet and had forgotten to put a bra on the morning before, what with the stress of finding out for certain if I was going to die.

'Oh, will you look at that,' the manager said, glancing down at me and then turning to his computer screen. 'We've got one after all.'

3

The hostel manager, an Aussie-Italian called Francesco, had thought Bronny was a boy till she took her windcheater off. She wasn't a boy. She had large unclad eighteen-year-old breasts and so a room had appeared. Room 13, with the chick from New Zealand. Yes, yes.

He offered to carry her bags, but she had none, so he showed her to the room, a two-berther on the second floor. Hers would be the bed by the door.

'I don't suppose you have a spare towel?' she asked.

'On the strict condition that you come to the party tonight,' he said, captivated by several things other than the aforementioned breasts – her honest face, her natural, under-groomed hair; and her smile, which seemed entrancingly shadowed by melancholy.

It was a deal.

After Bronny had showered and dried her hand-washed pants under the hand drier, she had a nap. Her room-mate, Fliss, was still at work apparently, so she slept soundly, then went into the Internet café on the ground floor. The café was at the front of the hostel, overlooking the street. Hamish was sitting at one of the six terminals. The coffee machine in the corner seemed to be the only 'café' part of the room.

'G'day,' Hamish said, putting on a bad Aussie accent, before setting Bronny up on one of the terminals to write an email to her family.

'Ursula and Dad, I'm fine,' Bronny typed. 'I'm at a hostel in London and it's really friendly. I've already got a job. I love you!'

After finishing her email, Bronny offered Hamish the pound she owed him.

'Buy me a drink instead,' Hamish said.

He looked cute without his glasses on, Bronny thought to herself, and they headed to the basement together, both feeling as though they had been best friends forever.

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The party was in full swing. About twenty twenty-somethings were standing in the dining room area with MTV on full blast. Bronny did a quick scout of the room and noticed that everyone was relaxed, drunk and happy. She hadn't been to a party since Rachel Thompson's fourteenth in Seymour, which had ended at 9 p.m. with cake and lemonade. Bronny downed several beers, the first beers she had ever downed, and then introduced herself wildly to her new world:

Fliss, her New Zealand roommate, who'd just finished her shift at the pub. She was a wannabe model: dark shiny hair, deep brown eyes, ten feet tall and so thin she was see-through.

Ray the ginger Jo'burg locksmith.

Zach from Torquay in Oz, long-haired, guitar-toting, and a lover of Lenny Kravitz.

Pete from Adelaide, with huge muscles and a stern grimace to match.

Cheryl-Anne from Wagga Wagga, whose brown hair was straighter and thinner than paper and who had a three-year-old daughter: in Wagga Wagga.

And Francesco . . . Mmm . . . Francesco, with his unusual accent.

'Just suck it in!' he'd said, as Bronny sat over the bong later that night. 'Hold it in for a few seconds and then let it out slowly.'

Her cough lasted longer than is socially acceptable, and ended with arms in the air, a Heimlich manoeuvre, two glasses of water and a 'whitey'.

'Don't worry about it,' Francesco said, as he watched her sitting fully clothed under the running shower.

'Hold my hand, I'm slipping away. I can see a light.'

'I'll hold your hand, but you're not going to die,' Francesco said, as the water slipped down over her extended lower lip and onto her T-shirt. 'You're going to have waves, then throw up, then we're going to dance. And in the morning we're going to go to that place in Queensway and have smoked salmon and cream cheese bagels.'

4

After Francesco had seen me through the whitey, he escorted me back downstairs and we danced non-stop. We held hands, embraced for the slow ones, and sat close to each other on the sofa in the corner of the dining room. We were officially together, I assumed, a couple. We talked about all kinds of stuff – what he'd seen travelling, which was restaurants, what he did back home, which was eat out. I told him about work at the Mint: how some guy put his hand in the coin-blanking presser and lost his finger, and how a woman had been killed by a four-wheel-drive on the way to the MacDonald's down the road. The vehicle had swerved to miss a stray sheep – it missed the sheep, but splattered her all over Ronald. Francesco asked me if anything other than death and destruction went on at the Mint, and I said I didn't think so. My job was so boring – I was a filing clerk – that stories of injury and death were the only memorable aspects of it.