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The Cry

Written by Helen Fitzgerald

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The Cry

HELEN FITZGERALD

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For Dad

I was sitting with you when I typed The End,
and then you died.
I know what you'd say: 'Nellie Bly, it wasn't all your fault.'

Brian Desmond FitzGerald
27.01.1925 – 06.10.2012

Part One

THE INCIDENT

1

JOANNA

13 February

It was the fault of airport security.

At airport security, Joanna's nine-week-old baby boy was screaming. Her partner was busy taking off his trainers. A stocky uniformed woman was saying: 'Can't take these.'

'What?' Joanna asked, her newborn gnawing at her T-shirt through his howls.

'These liquids. The bottles are more than a hundred millilitres. If you need more for the flight, you've got to have proof. Do you have something in writing?'

'No.'

'In that case, I'll have to dispose of them.'

'But you can't. It's Calpol – paracetamol – for the baby, and antibiotics. I've got an ear infection. And, look, they're not full.'

'Can I help?' a freshly scanned and shoeless Alistair offered.

'We'll have to throw these out,' the security woman repeated.

'I told you about the hundred-millilitre rule, Joanna.'

'Did you?' Probably. She couldn't remember.

Alistair turned from Joanna to security woman, from

problem to solution. 'Can one of us nip over to Boots and get some smaller bottles?'

'Well, yes, you can do that. But you'd need to go to the back of the queue and come through again.'

'You go on with Noah,' Joanna suggested. 'I'll go back and sort this.'

She handed over her baby and zig-zagged back the way she had come.

*

It was the fault of airport security.

If Joanna hadn't gone back, if she hadn't bought two small, clear hundred-millilitre bottles from Boots, if she hadn't poured liquids into each while kneeling on the floor in front of WH Smith, if she hadn't waited in the queue for another hour while her breasts ached: if she hadn't done any of these things, then she would still have her baby.

*

The flight to Melbourne took twenty-one hours. The first seven – Glasgow to Dubai – were the worst. Noah cried the entire time. She couldn't recall one minute when he didn't. For five of these hours, Joanna tried doing the things she was supposed to do, in the order she was supposed to do them.

Round One. One hour from Glasgow. Plane flying over the North Sea. Alistair watching a movie which made him laugh very loudly which made Joanna want to kick him.

Food? She pressed his head towards her breast – too hard perhaps? Was he biting and pinching at her deliberately? Was that a punch?

Nappy? She felt inside it with her finger. It was clean, thankfully, because if it hadn't been, her finger would now have poo on it.

Bored? The rattle and the Bananas in Pyjamas teddy bear made his eyes turn evil.

Tired? Are you kidding? At nine weeks, his determined angriness gave him so much energy that he almost wriggled himself out of the airline cot attached to the bulkhead in front of her. She caught him just in time.

Round Two. Three hours from Glasgow.

Plane flying over Germany. Alistair asleep.

Food? Wah.

Nappy? Wah.

Bored? WAH.

Tired? What sort of a mother are you?

*

She went through this routine, over and over. Round Three. Four. Five. And so on. Just as the mothers at the breastfeeding group had taught her.

'He's trying to communicate with his beautiful little voice,' one of them said. 'You just need to listen.'

'It's really not rocket science,' said another. 'Isn't he cute! Little petal.'

She hated the mothers at the breastfeeding group.
Did she hate Noah?
Is that why he's gone?

*

Alistair had walked Noah up and down the aisle twice in the second hour. He was glorious. People smiled at him, said: 'Oh, the wee soul, he's tired.' Offered to hold him for a while. Poor guy. New man. What a hero. Why had he chosen an unworthy and useless woman to be the mother of his child? He walked forty feet in the second hour, and then he handed Noah over, sat down, and ate his meal. Loved his meal. Enjoyed it. With red wine. He was so content that he fell asleep before the air hostess had cleared his plate.

Joanna hadn't managed any food or wine. Given the choice, she'd have opted for the wine, even though breastfeeding mothers get stared at with chisel eyes if they dare to drink.

Alistair was asleep. His very large head, which Noah had inherited (thanks for that, Alistair) was resting comfortably on a luminous green inflatable pillow. He looked pretty. He always looked pretty. When she first saw him at the polling booth, she was taken aback by his boy-band prettiness. You don't get men like that in Glasgow. His carefully messed dark brown hair never budged, and was perfectly in place as he slept. His hair helped him look younger than his forty-one years, standing erect to camouflage the thinning patch at the middle-back of his massive head.

How could he sleep through this? Noah's crying had drowned out the engine noise and the air conditioning. People were pressing earphones to their heads, turning the entertainment system's volume to maximum. They looked at Joanna occasionally, saying so much with their eyes. *What is wrong with your kid? Why, WHY, did they seat me near you?* These people would complain when they arrived at their destinations. *Some women should not be allowed to conceive.*

She gathered these looks and added them to her pool of bubbling rage. Her ear infection had taken hold of the back of her head and neck – a heavy, shuddering, all-consuming pain that made it almost impossible to think clearly. Noah would probably scream more loudly and the passengers judge her more harshly if she put him down to get two caplets of Anadin Extra and a dose of antibiotics from her hand luggage, so she wouldn't risk it, not yet.

'Emirates is child friendly,' she had read online. They weren't friendly at all. They were judgemental child-hating bitches, especially the one with the bright red bob. She was over forty, her hair dyed and groomed to perfection bar a few millimetres of grey roots; her size fourteen body bridled by magic knickers and padded bra. She'd plastered on so much foundation you could trace a wee set of boobs on her chin with a lengthy fingernail if you had the inclination and the fingernail. She was on the way out, Joanna assumed, clinging on to a young-girl's job for dear life, but not to the extent that she thought it necessary to be kind. This woman had cleared

Joanna's uneaten meal away while she was walking Noah up and down the aisle, rocking him back and forth in a pointless attempt to subdue him. This woman had said 'Yes, of course' when Joanna asked for an extra warm towel to wipe the puke from her shoulder, but hadn't delivered it. This woman hated Joanna, and Noah.

Everyone on this jumbo jet hated them. Probably even the pilots, who must have been able to hear him from the cockpit. They probably couldn't hear the radio because of him. They may well have considered crashing the plane to escape this noise.

Not like a cat on heat, the noise. Not as many pauses.

Not like a horror film scream. They're quite satisfying, those. Joanna did them sometimes, locked in the bathroom. It was her *time out*, as the mothers at the breastfeeding group had suggested. They probably didn't mean *time out* should be spent screaming horror-movie screams in a locked bathroom, but this is what she had taken to doing, since Noah.

Not pigs being slaughtered at the abattoir either. Joanna had heard this on a documentary on the Discovery Channel once. They sounded more content, the pigs.

She could not describe his cry. All she knew was that it never stopped and it had to stop.

Other people's babies didn't cry like Noah. There were two infants in her section of the plane. They hardly made a sound. Their mothers looked happy. Their mothers looked as if they were in love with them. Their mothers looked as

if they were in love with their fathers. Perhaps because their fathers were not sleeping.

Yep, Alistair was still sleeping.

STOP CRYING, NOAH!

She didn't want to wake Alistair. She would be a martyr instead.

Alistair had always managed to sleep. Every night, he went to bed around midnight, put his head on the pillow, and was dreaming happily within ten minutes. It surprised her that he had never once, ONCE, woken to deal with Noah's cry. Maybe he wasn't even asleep, clever fucker.

Right now, four hours into the seven-hour flight to Dubai, she looked at Alistair with his mouth half open, and wondered about smothering his pretty face with the pillow.

Oh, she wasn't really imagining that at all. No, no. She was just tired. She hadn't slept for more than three hours in a row for nine weeks. Plus, her neck was going to explode. She desperately needed her Anadin caplets and antibiotics. She stood up, with Noah over her right shoulder, and opened the luggage compartment above her. One of her bags fell out onto the lap of the elderly woman in the seat behind her.

'Oo!' The woman rubbed her thin leg, in pain.

'Oh shit; sorry,' Joanna said.

'I'm fine, really.' She stopped rubbing her leg and smiled.

Joanna felt terrible. And she should not have said 'shit'. 'Excuse the language. Here, let me put it back.'

'No, no, you have enough on your plate.' The elderly woman

stood and lifted the bag. It wobbled precariously as she attempted to get it back in the compartment. The passenger next to the old lady eyeballed Joanna as if to say *On top of everything, now you are letting a little old lady lift your bag!*

'Have you checked his nappy?' the injured woman asked.

'Erm. I did a while ago. I was just going to get—'

'Maybe you should try the nappy?' The woman made a sniffing noise.

Oh Lordy, she had forgotten the routine. She hadn't gone through the steps for a while now. Silly Joanna. She lifted Noah up and sniffed at his bum. The elderly woman and the passenger beside her winced. Oops, she shouldn't have sniffed at his bum like that, in full view of everyone. Joanna had forgotten how to behave in public.

He smelt. He was dirty. There was a reason for his cry!

'You're right!' Joanna grinned a crazy grin at the woman. Hallelujah!

Joanna put Noah in the cot and returned hand luggage Number One to the overhead compartment (black suitcase containing medicines, emergency toiletries, toothbrushes, and books for Alistair to read because Alistair would probably be able to read *three* books on this long-haul flight from Glasgow to Melbourne). She retrieved hand luggage Number Two (blue sausage bag containing nappies for Noah, wipes for Noah, Sudocrem for Noah, spare clothes for Noah, blankets for Noah, toys that Noah hated for Noah) and raced off to the toilet.

It was at the front of her section of the plane. The door proudly advertised baby changing facilities. It was occupied.

Her child stank.

And screamed.

People were tired now. They'd been flying for five hours. The cabin lights were off. It was nearly midnight in the UK. The four people in the queue in front of her had obviously decided to avoid eye contact altogether. If they looked her in the eye, they would have found it impossible not to throttle her.

At last, the toilet door was open. In a minute, she would have changed the nappy, and the world. The reason for the cry would be gone. Noah would fall asleep. Joanna would order a glass of wine without caring what the red-bobbed bitch thought, drink it in the dark, no eyes looking at her breast-feeding crime, and then fall asleep herself.

She had forgotten to put on her shoes. She forgot everything nowadays, Joanna. She forgot what she had just done and what she should do next. The toilet floor was covered in piss. As she stood over the smeared toilet, putting the lid down with her pinky and pulling down the tiny baby changing board, she could feel urine on the floor seeping through the thin airline socks from her disappointing Emirates goody bag.

She held his wriggling body still with her left forearm and fumbled to pull a wipe from the packet in the filthy sink. Nappy undone, she grimaced at his effort – four hard balls.

The petal was constipated. A breastfed baby should not be constipated. Maybe it was the cheese she had scoffed before driving to the airport. One third of a packet of strong Cheddar. On its own. She had no time to flourish it with bread or biscuits. Her greed and poor planning had made his tummy sore.

She couldn't wrap the nappy with one hand. As she was trying, the plane dipped suddenly and the seatbelt signs beeped on – turbulence. Noah wriggled. The four hard pieces of baby poo rolled onto the floor. Forearm still on his chest, she tugged a few sheets of toilet paper from the dispenser, reached down, and scrambled to grab the moving excrement. No big deal. Shit was part of the shit job. It was no more bothersome to her than picking up four Maltesers. She put the wrapped poo in the used nappy, managed to stick the bundle together with the Velcro, and shoved it into the overflowing bin.

Wipe, Sudocrem, nappy on. This was one of the many chants Joanna had taken to repeating. If she didn't say them to herself, she would forget. She would forget to put his nappy on.

When she walked out of the toilet door, the queue had grown, and she realised she was desperate for a pee. She had forgotten to go. Too late. She'd go some other time.

Joanna's ears were hurting. She hadn't managed to take her medication. Best laid plans. She'd probably missed two doses already. She walked past the steely queue and made her way to her seat.

Alistair was still asleep.

Despite the nappy change, Noah was still crying.

Just as she sat down, the air hostess with the red bob approached her with a kind smile.

'Excuse me,' she said.

Joanna looked up hopefully. She was going to help. At last.

The air hostess leant down and whispered, 'Some of the passengers are complaining.'

'Sorry?'

'The crying is upsetting the passengers.'

A film of angry blood travelled to her eyes. 'Oh really? Which ones?' She stood up, almost hitting the air hostess' leant-down head with her screaming infant.

'Just take your seat, madam,' the air hostess said.

'Hi everyone!' Joanna said, loudly enough for ten rows of five seats to hear, but not loudly enough to wake Alistair. 'This helpful lady has just informed me that some of you have been complaining about Noah.'

She was holding her baby like a mad Michael Jackson on the balcony. Realising this, she clenched Noah to her chest and continued: 'Who was it?' Not just ten rows now, the whole section could hear her. They hushed. There was a drama going down on flight EK028 to Dubai.

'Whoever you are, I know how you feel!' she said.

Joanna nudged past the air hostess – who looked a little frightened after making a weak attempt to stop her – and addressed the elderly woman who'd helped her earlier. 'Was it you?'

The elderly woman shook her head.

'You, then?' she said to a girl around eighteen years old sitting five seats back. 'Would you like to take him for a while? See if you can calm him down?'

'You?' Joanna had moved two rows further down and was holding the wailing infant in front of a thirty-year-oldish man in a suit. 'Would you like to complain personally? Well here he is!'

'Listen,' the businessman said. 'You need to calm down.'

'CALM DOWN?' she yelled.

'Joanna, honey, how 'bout you give him to me?' This came from Alistair. The air hostess had woken him and escorted him to the scene of the outburst.

'Sorry, everyone,' he said before thinning and cutie-pieing his voice as if bribing a dog with a biscuit. 'Come on . . . just hand him over to me, darling.'

Joanna almost threw the baby at him.

Or did she *actually* do this?

'She just needs some sleep,' Alistair said loudly, smiling. Almost everyone smiled back at him.

The glorious hero.

Joanna stomped back to her seat in her stinking socks, her pretty perfect man and slightly less distraught son trailing behind her.

*

'Hold him for a sec,' Alistair said, handing him back to

Joanna and getting the bag with the medicines from the overhead locker. He opened one of the clear bottles of medicine and tasted it. 'That's supposed to be strawberry? Yuk! Here, this'll settle him.' He spooned the clear liquid into Noah's protesting mouth, Joanna pushing what had escaped back in with her finger as gently as she could.

Alistair returned the bottle to the case and the case to the overhead locker. 'I think he's hungry. Look, he's having a go at your shoulder.' Noah's mouth was open, his head moving to the side, searching for food.

Joanna undid her shirt and pulled down her bra. Once upon a time, she would have taken care to cover her nipple in public. Now she didn't give a shit. Alistair placed the baby on her lap and he began to feed.

She felt the painful tingle in her breast ease and her nipple soften. The release of the milk felt like a class A drug might feel: ah, to be whisked away on a warm magic carpet. Maybe one day she'd try a class A drug.

Noah fell asleep as soon as the wheels hit the tarmac.

Of course he did.

2

MELBOURNE SUPREME COURT

27 July

'You were a passenger on Emirates Flight EK028 from Glasgow to Dubai on 13 February this year?' a female lawyer asked the sixty-something woman in the witness box.

'I'd been visiting an old colleague. He lives in Stirling.' The lady in the witness box, Ms Amery, did not seem nervous at all, quite the opposite.

'Do you recognise the accused?' The lawyer pointed to Joanna, who was sitting at the front of the courtroom beside her own lawyer. Joanna had been pointed to a lot these last hours. Each one stabbed harder at her chest.

'Yes.'

'Can you tell me how you met her?' The female lawyer spoke slowly, loudly.

'I may be old but my hearing and my comprehension are fine. No need to talk to me like I'm a brainless gnat heading for the hospice.' Ms Amery's comeback obliterated the supercilious look on the lawyer's face. 'I was seated behind her on the flight from Glasgow to Dubai and although the plane changed for the second leg from Dubai to Melbourne, we kept the same seat numbers, aisle seats they were. I was 18H,

Joanna was in the bulkheads with the baby cot – 17H.'

'She was travelling with her partner and her baby, yes?'

'That's right. She was . . . She . . . was . . .'

'Out of control?'

'Leading the witness!' Joanna's lawyer had taken to his feet.

The female lawyer smiled an apology. 'Can you describe Ms Lindsay's behaviour on the flight from Glasgow?'

'I was trying to find the exact word. It was a long flight and she was very stressed. Her baby wouldn't stop crying and no one was helping her.'

'Was she rough with the infant?'

'Objection! Ms Amery's definition of "rough" is subjective.' Joanna's lawyer didn't look up as he spoke, which somehow gave his words more power.

'Overruled.' The judge nodded to the witness. 'You can answer the question Ms Amery.'

'How was she with the baby? Gentle? Rough?' The female lawyer was aggressive now.

'Well . . . he wouldn't settle.'

'Was Ms Lindsay rough with her infant?'

'I wouldn't say—'

'Answer the question please. Yes or No. Was she rough with the infant?'

Ms Amery looked at Joanna again, and then at the lawyer, who moved in closer.

'Was she rough with Noah? Was. She. ROUGH?' The lawyer was no more than five inches from the witness's head.

'Yes.'

'You're saying Ms Lindsay was rough with baby Noah. She shook him.'

'Yes, yes, but—'

'No further questions.'

3

JOANNA

13 February

The fifteen-and-a-half-hour flight from Dubai to Melbourne was uneventful. They boarded the plane after a two-hour wait in transit. The airline had promised Joanna that her buggy would be available for them during this time. It wasn't. It was in the hold. There was no getting it out. And there were no spare buggies in the airport.

Despite this, it was a beautiful two hours. Joanna sat on a chair outside a café and gazed at the contented baby in her arms. She couldn't understand why she had been angry. How could she have been mad with this gorgeous child? Ah, she loved him. Little Noah.

Alistair looked sprightly after his long snooze and tapped away on his laptop. She adored his energy. From the moment Alistair woke, to the moment he put his head on the pillow, he was purposeful and happy. While Joanna could do nothing for long periods of time, often indulging in mini-depressions involving daytime talk shows and True Movies, Alistair was always busy, positive and uncomplicated. Her perfect antidote.

'I'm a nutjob,' she said, stroking his forearm.

'*My* nutjob!' Alistair smiled and kissed her on the lips.

So she was. Since his wife fled, she was all his: his to stroke on the forearm, to kiss on the lips, to get mad at when she wasn't coping, to ask for help, because he would always have the energy and the willingness to find solutions.

Need to believe we are for ever? *Have my baby.*

Need the tap fixed? *I fixed it!*

Need a mushy email? *Joanna, last night you looked more beautiful than any woman I have ever seen. Let's go to Amsterdam next weekend!*

Need to be told you're a wonderful mother and the cleverest and sexiest woman in the world?

'A nutjob who also happens to be a wonderful mother and the cleverest and sexiest woman in the world,' Alistair said, kissing her again then returning to his laptop.

In the first two years of their relationship, Alistair had been wildly romantic. After his wife Alexandra found out about their affair and left, he made big gestures. The beautiful love letters (well, emails), the trip to Amsterdam, the living room full of red roses when she turned twenty-seven, making love to her months later while saying: 'Remember this, can you feel it? We're making our child.'

She kissed Alistair on the shoulder: her administer of medicine, her fixer of things, her maker of happiness. Noah would sleep more soon, she would sleep more soon, and the roar and the tingle of those first two years would return.

Alistair was on the laptop typing an urgent press release involving the transport minister, a married fifty-two-year-old

who'd claimed expenses for posh meals with a member of the Young Labour Society. The story wouldn't have been a story if the supporter in question wasn't blonde, the owner of a set of DD breasts, and only just sixteen. Joanna read the headline: 'Ross Johnstone defends "legitimate party meetings with promising young politician".'

'You quashing a shitstorm, hon?' Joanna asked.

He pressed Ctrl+S. 'Quashed.'

It wasn't long before Joanna fell asleep on Alistair's shoulder.

*

'It's time to board.' Alistair was smiling at her when she woke. 'Are you okay? What a nightmare that first leg was. He seems settled now, eh?'

'He does.' He had the longest eyelashes, this boy. And dark, dark hair, like his dad. He'd be a heart-throb one day.

'Here, you need your antibiotics.' Alistair opened the bottle, took a dab from the rim, taste-tested it, and spooned the medicine into Joanna's mouth. 'Is it still very sore?'

'It was, during the descent. It's a bit better now.' She put her hand on Alistair's cheek. 'I love you.'

'I love you too.' He kissed her on the forehead. 'I'm taking him for this flight, all right? You feed him when I say, but otherwise, you have nothing to do with him.'

'Really?' She looked at her sleeping baby again, lulled by his peacefulness, reluctant to give him up for so long. 'Oh, but . . .'

'But nothing. You need rest. And when we get to Point

Lonsdale, you're going to express some milk and Mum's going to take him to her house for twenty-four hours.'

'You organised it already?' Imagine – time off to sleep, eat, go to the toilet, eat cheese *with* biscuits, go for a walk, make love . . .

'I arranged it with Mum two weeks ago,' Alistair said.

Typical Alistair: thinking ahead, looking after her, getting things done. Sometimes, she had to pinch herself. Was he real? Was he really hers?

*

Joanna couldn't remember much of the first part of the flight from Dubai to Melbourne. For the first eight hours, she slept, waking twice when Alistair gently prompted her to feed the baby. It was the best sleep she'd had since his birth.

With five and a half hours to go, Joanna woke with a jolt. The cry. Her ear was throbbing with pain and Noah's noise was jabbing at it. Oh God, no, not this again. Every day seemed the same, every night, every minute, the same. It would never be different. This was her life now. Until she died.

The cry was coming from the back of the plane. Joanna looked behind her and saw that Alistair was holding Noah in the queue for the toilets, nappy and wipes in hand. She put her trainers on and walked towards Alistair and the baby.

'Let me take him,' she said.

'Absolutely not. He's fine. Just a dirty nappy.'

The toilet door opened and the businessman Joanna had accosted on the previous flight exited. When he saw Joanna, he glowered. He'd worn a suit the entire trip and it appeared unscathed. Lucky guy. Joanna's clothes were covered in all sorts of shite.

'Get back to your seat and rest!' Alistair said.

'Can I not have a pee first?'

'Well, okay.'

Locked in the cubicle, Joanna berated herself. Alistair had managed with the baby for eight hours, much longer than she'd managed on the first leg of the flight, and he was still cheerful, still willing and able to keep going. He was so much more capable than her. Why did she find a tiny baby so hard to deal with? The breastfeeding bitches were right: it wasn't rocket science.

Joanna did as Alistair kindly suggested after going to the loo, but couldn't rest. Her ear was killing her and Noah's crying was getting louder, more distressed. The nappy change hadn't worked.

'Have a kip, hon,' she eventually said to Alistair. 'You've done a marathon, you're a star. I've had enough sleep – I'll be fine, honest.'

'Are you sure?'

'Really, I'm fine.'

Alistair handed the baby over and was asleep within ten minutes.

For the next three hours, Joanna went through the routine

again and again. Nappy? Bored? Tired? Food? Nappy? Bored? Tired? Food? Nappy? Bored? Tired? Food?

She tried the emergency dummy she'd packed in case he might change his mind about it.

Nappy? Bored? Tired? Food?

She tried walking, rocking, singing, humming, tickling, massaging.

Nappy? Bored? Tired? Food?

The looks had started again. Passengers were getting annoyed. A young air hostess was scowling at her.

She wouldn't lose it this time. She would cope.

She might need a little assistance, though. There was nothing wrong with needing a little assistance.

It wasn't easy, getting the Calpol in. She lay Noah on her lap, his head resting on the crook of her left arm, opened the bottle, filled the spoon, leaned his head back, and gently prised his mouth open with her finger. Noah wriggled as she moved the spoon towards his mouth – some of the liquid dribbled down his chin and onto his bright red bib. He jerked his hand and a good dollop of it ended up joining the many stains on Joanna's once-white T-shirt too.

She put the medicine in the black case and the medicine-coated bib in one of its outside pockets, put the case back in the locker, and sat down.

Noah must have taken some of the medicine in because, within half an hour, he had fallen asleep on her lap. She felt her eyes closing within minutes of his.

When Joanna woke, Alistair was sitting beside her reading a book and Noah was wrapped up on his lap, baby-seatbelt on for landing. They were descending into Melbourne. The city sprawled on beneath her. In the distance, she could see smoke from the fires that were raging.

Joanna had travelled around Europe a lot after university, and every summer since she'd been teaching she went to Spain or Italy or France, but she'd never been to the southern hemisphere. She dreamed that one day she and Alistair would build a holiday house here with the money she inherited when her mum died. It'd have a veranda overlooking the sea. She'd researched the trees she'd have in her garden: a wattle tree, a lemon, and a *Syzygium*. She'd make Lilly Pilly jam from the pretty pink-red berries of the *Syzygium* while Noah jumped on the trampoline.

'Has he slept the whole time?' she asked Alistair.

'He woke and cried for a bit,' Alistair said, 'but I got him settled. You slept through it! Well done. See, it is possible.'

Joanna felt invigorated, happy. 'You, Mr Robertson, are the best thing that has ever happened to me.'

4

JOANNA

15 February

Alistair transferred Noah to the nifty buggy-cum-car-seat which was waiting for them just outside the plane. The baby was wrapped snugly in his blue blanket, his tiny face barely visible.

'Shh, no!' Alistair scolded Joanna when she leant down to check on him. 'Don't wake him!'

Alistair was right. Even looking at him might cause this blissful calm to erupt.

Wheeling Noah ahead of them in the buggy, they manoeuvred through the queues at immigration, collected their baggage, and exited the air-conditioned terminal building.

Joanna wheezed in a mouthful of boiling air and panicked – it felt like someone had put the nozzle of a hair dryer in her mouth.

They walked as fast as they could to the car rentals parking area, not wanting to disturb Noah by removing his blanket.

'Can you smell it?' Alistair's Australian accent was stronger already.

Joanna sucked thick air in through her nose. 'Eucalyptus?'

'Eucalyptus and . . .' Alistair clicked the doors open to the

hire car, put his hand up and held it out '. . . bushfire.' A piece of ash from the fire that had been raging for three days floated down and landed on the palm of his hand. 'God it's good to be home.'

Alistair detached the buggy seat from its frame and strapped it into the car. He put the cases that were on the trolley Joanna had wheeled from the terminal in the boot, the smaller ones on top. A perfect fit. He'd probably asked the rental people to give the measurements of the boot to make sure the cases would fit before choosing this model. Joanna smiled at her organised manly man.

He sat in the driver's seat beside Joanna and checked his phone. 'Shit!' he whispered.

'What's wrong?' she asked quietly.

'That young labour girl with the tits has spoken to the *Daily Mail*. Says the dinners with Johnstone weren't just dinners. He liked to wear a dog collar. Shit shit shit. What's the time?'

Joanna looked at her watch, which she'd adjusted when they taxied in. 'It's 3 p.m. here.'

'So that's 6 a.m. in the UK. I'll call the office when we get to the house.'

*

Air conditioning now almost too chilly, they headed along the Tullamarine Freeway.

'Never thought I'd say this, but I am aching to be in Geelong,' Alistair said, looking at the smoggy Melbourne

skyline ahead. Geelong, a one-hour drive from Melbourne, was a poor cousin to the money-dripping metropolis of Victoria's capital and Alistair had been scathing of it as a teenager and young man. He'd craved Melbourne or, better, London. But as he made his way to the Princes Highway which would take them west, he looked more and more excited. He told Joanna he was looking forward to eating burgers on the beachfront and mooching in the country-town-feel shopping centre and driving along the Great Ocean Road. But most of all, he was desperate to see his daughter, Chloe.

Joanna first met Chloe four years ago. It wasn't a good meeting. Joanna was in bed making love to her daddy. Chloe was standing in the bedroom door, next to her mummy.

'Who's that?' ten-year-old Chloe had asked, pointing to the naked woman on top of her father.

Joanna jumped off her lover, grabbed the sheet and attempted to wrap herself in it.

'That,' Alexandra said, 'is a fucking slut.'

Alistair sat up, completely naked. 'Alexandra, watch your language,' he said.

'Oh sorry, darling, of course,' his wife said to her already deflated husband. 'Swearing will traumatise our daughter.'

'Chloe, go to the kitchen,' Alistair ordered.

'But what are you doing with that woman?' Chloe asked.

'Kitchen! Now!'

Chloe obeyed her father and left the bedroom.

'Alexandra, will you please let us get dressed? We'll talk

about this calmly. Okay? And not in front of Chloe.'

They didn't talk calmly. Alexandra threw a lamp at Joanna, who dressed and left. Alexandra then hit Alistair, refused to discuss an amicable divorce, waited till Alistair left the following day for a conference, packed, and fled, taking Chloe with her.

Alistair phoned Chloe regularly in the months that followed, and would have flown to Australia to visit, if not for several emergencies in Westminster.

But his attempts to make contact dwindled in direct proportion to his growing desire to make a new family with Joanna. (*Need to believe we are for ever? Have my baby.*)

This new family might have been enough for him had the following story by feared Tory blogger James Moyer not popped up on his Google Alert shortly after Noah was born.

Aw, how sweet are these photos of Alistair Robertson and his family? Mum and Dad pushing their pride and joy through the Botanics. He's the right man to champion family values, the right man for Labour to prime for a safe seat in the next election.

But hang on, that woman's his mistress, not his wife.

And the baby's his second child, not his first. His first, fourteen-year-old Chloe, lives 12,000 miles away, and he hasn't bothered to see her for four years.

And if you look even more closely, which I have, there's more . . . The ex-wife, Alexandra Donohue, was caught drink driving yesterday . . . on the way to collect her daughter from the animal sanctuary.

The value of a Labour family?

Nada.

Alistair and Joanna had come to Australia to fight for custody of Chloe. Alistair's lawyer was very confident. The mother took the child from the UK without asking or even telling the father: kidnapping, yes, they could call it that. The mother did not reveal her whereabouts for over a month once she arrived there: that'd be called non-cooperation or evasion of responsibilities. The mother collected the child from her voluntary work at the Healesville animal sanctuary under the influence of alcohol, and was planning to drive the child home drunk: that was neglect . . . hell, that was criminal.

'It's not because of that idiotic blog,' Alistair said to Joanna before they left. 'I don't care about work. Since Noah, since our family, what matters is clearer than ever. That woman was always a drinker, and now I know she's happy to endanger the life of my little girl. Chloe should be safe. She should be with her dad. She should be with an inspirational, kind, caring, responsible woman – with you, Joanna – and with her baby brother, she should be with her *family*.'

Joanna couldn't even cope with her own child. The thought

of looking after someone else's terrified her. But she loved making Alistair happy, and everything he said was fair and right.

As they drove along the freeway towards Geelong, Joanna turned to Alistair and said, 'Will she always hate me?'

'She doesn't hate you now,' he said, touching her thigh. 'She doesn't know you. Everything's going to be perfect. Everything's going to be just great.'

*

Alistair approached every situation, no matter how difficult, in the same way: Get the facts. Decide on a plan of attack. Get the job done.

According to Alistair, these were the facts of the affair:

He and his wife were strangers. When it ended they hadn't even had sex for a month.

Alexandra was, in fact, a mentally ill paranoid bitch with an addiction to alcohol.

He and Joanna were soul mates. She couldn't dispute this, could she? He had never felt this way before. She was his best friend. She was the love of his life.

Therefore there was nothing wrong with what they had done. They *had* to do it. They were *meant* to be together.

His initial plan of attack was simple: Explain the situation to Alexandra. Ask for a divorce. Remain friends in order to share the custody of an emotionally unscathed Chloe. Live happily ever after.

This plan hadn't worked well.

But Alistair maintained that he and Joanna had done the right thing, the only thing they *could* do, considering the strength of their love for one another. And it would all work out eventually if they were patient.

Alistair was a patient man.

And he'd been right in the end. Okay, so it had taken time, and it wasn't as simple as he'd hoped, but things are never simple.

It would work now. Everything would work now.

All they had to do was get the job done.

Get Chloe.