

Paper Daisies

KIM KELLY



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Hooroo

Become who you are!

Thus Spake Zarathustra

Berylda

‘Time, gentlemen,’ the examination supervisor calls from the top of the room, but my pen already rests, my physics paper completed four minutes ago. I dare a glance across to my right: Doug Jefferies is scribbling out a last answer to the final question on magnetism, even as he is closing the booklet, pretending he is not still writing. Bert Hughes in front of him runs his hand through his hair, breathing out the tension with a cocksure snort, stretching out his legs beneath the desk. I barely breathe at all; I keep my hands flat to the desktop, either side of my work, for I am not a gentleman.

I am the only one of my kind in here, and the supervisor, a fusty old frock-coated curmudgeon, reminds me of this with a sneer as he whips away my paper; as swiftly as he manages an avuncular nod of, ‘Good luck, Jefferies,’ for my neighbour. Only fitting, I suppose, as Doug is the nephew of one of the members of the professorial board.

The door is pushed open and thirty sweaty gentlemen rush out as bright summer midday rushes in, a stream of light piercing this dark-panelled tomb.

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‘Miss Jones.’ A straggler reaches across me to hold the door. Clive Gillies-Wright. He grins his certain medal-winning grin. ‘How’d you go with all that, eh?’

‘Fine. Thank you.’ I step past him and into the sun. My examinations are done. Literature. Latin. Biology. All fine. I can’t wait to shove my results in Uncle Al– Don’t think about him. Look into the sky, brilliant blue above the chimney pots, and breathe in all my small but certain achievements thus far. Enjoy this moment: here, now. Today, the fifth of December, 1900. I am a student at the University of Sydney, and next year I will be admitted to Medicine – at last. I shall not fail. *Nearly free* . . . my sister Greta whispers to me on the breeze, across the miles between us.

And now, across the quad lawn, only a few yards away, in the cool shade of the cloisters, here is Flo. My friend. Waiting for me. But she’s got lost in her book, sitting there on the stone wall, getting a numb bum.

At the clatter of the sweaty thirty heading towards her, she looks up and sees me; she waves, shouting out, ‘Bryl! Oi – over here!’

Her voice rings around the pillars and flags and I laugh. Flo, darling Flo McFee – medal-winning indelicate. Fabulous.

Ben

‘Mr Wilberry – sir? Excuse me?’

It’s Gregham, at the door of the herbarium, assistant to the chair. I suspect he’s come with another instruction from Dubois himself. What does our esteemed Head of Botany want now, perchance? That we deem wattle a weed? Or perhaps the eucalypt – all five hundred of its species? Sheep don’t fatten or fleece well enough on it so let’s dig it up and burn it, *oui*? I should like to send Gregham off with a message for Dubois: Bugger off. Go back to where you came from, Professor Jean-Pierre bloody Continental trespasser.

I rub my eyes, take a moment before I turn around. I blink down through the looking glass on the bench, set above the native specimens of *Viola betonicaefolia* and *hederacea* I’ve just pulled out – examples for my end-of-year general extension lecture on differentiating indigenous species from those introduced, such as the common European *odorata* – which actually is a weed. Dubois has already made his annoyance at this lecture known: *What is this knowledge for, should I venture to ask? Flower arrangements for the Christmas holiday, oui?* No, it is knowledge for the floral record,

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for posterity perhaps – if the sheep should damn well eat them to extinction. It's been a battle all this year, since he arrived. A battle which *conservation fanatics* such as myself will possibly lose in the long run; but I'm going down fighting, in my way.

Gregham clears his throat behind me.

I clear mine too; can't keep the man waiting.

I turn around and see he's holding out an envelope. Perhaps Dubois has finally gone above Professor Jepson, our faculty dean and my ally, and had the chancellor agree to my sacking – which I will have overruled. He doesn't know how things work in this country – not at all. This continent may be large, but its principles are simple. One doesn't sack a Wilberry – you arrogant little Frog.

'I'm sorry, sir,' Gregham says, and he does look sore.

I'm about to tell him not to worry about it, it'll soon enough be sorted out, but he adds: 'I'm sorry – I read it. By accident. The telegram, I –'

He leaves his stammering there as I open it. And I know what it is. I see it in Gregham's sorrowful eyes as clearly as I see it typed out across this page in my hand:

RETURN HOME A.S.A.P. IF YOU CAN. YOUR MOTHER IS DYING.

Mama. My dear Mama. So this is it; her time has come. This telegram is from her doctor, Doctor Blaine. Not unexpected – it's been her particular battle all this year, a slow battle for her life – but the blow is not easier for knowing that. The cancer is finally having its way. And I've got to get to Brisbane to her – now. Got to get home to Queensland. And I am here in Melbourne, a thousand miles away.

I push past Gregham at the door, and I run.

Berylda

‘Here – look.’ Flo opens the flap of her tote to reveal the amethyst glint of a half-pint flask. ‘Gin.’

‘Oh no you don’t,’ I warn her off. Post-examination fatigue is coming quickly upon me, beginning at my knees: I’m not sure I’ll make it all the way across the grounds of University Park back to Women’s College without a feeble feminine rest. I’m not getting up to no good tonight.

‘Oh yes we do,’ Flo insists. ‘We’ve got the Wonderland party – for Clive. Don’t you remember?’

‘Oh. Yes. Now you mention it.’ Clive Gillies-Wright, who will undoubtedly win the Physics prize and probably the Higher Maths prize too, is having a going-away party. Really going away – to the Transvaal. Deferring academic excellence for a year on the veld hunting Boers with the Scottish Horse Regiment, doing his duty for Queen and Country.

‘You can’t rat out, you’re Alice.’ Flo elbows me and I’d fall over my feet but that she scoops me along, that same elbow now under my arm, her hand squeezing mine conspiratorially.

‘I won’t rat,’ I say, as if she’ll hear anything else. Her shoulders

are broader than mine and she's half a foot taller. But I won't rat, as I usually do with ra-ra rugby boys' things; I'd usually rather stare at the wallpaper, alone in the common room. Clive's all right, though; I should say hooroo, fare thee well. I ask her: 'Where'd you get the booze?'

'Hoddy.' She leans into me, pressing me with her warmth for her youngest elder brother, Hodson, who's articulated-clerking now at the family firm, McFee & Packhorn, in the thick of the Phillip Street legal fraternity. She's adored and indulged by all three of her brothers, all lawyers, wanting their little sister to join them at the profession too, and jealousy pricks at the thought. Her family is perfect; mine is – Don't think about that.

'Hoddy is a very naughty boy,' I say. 'What if you get stupid on the hard liquor and someone takes advantage?'

She pulls a maniacal, cross-eyed face at me: 'I should be so lucky!' She laughs at herself: even tipsy she's intimidating to boys – perhaps especially then – and she doesn't care. Her laughter fills the distance across the park and winds around the squat, square convent-like tower of Women's. For a moment I am scooped up and away along a string of her tight golden curls escaped from under her hat. She is as curly as I am straight.

'Besides,' she says, leaning into me again, but serious now, 'Hoddy just told me the cadavers in the Legislative Council are most definitely not going to consider the bill again before the summer break.'

The Women's Franchise Bill. I'm not much surprised but Flo is taking it personally, as she does these sorts of things. She glowers over at St Paul's as we pass it, as if the boys who reside there are responsible, as if we're not attending the Wonderland party there for Clive tonight. She rails the rest of the way back to our digs, about the attorney-general, misnamed Wise, having killed the bill last Wednesday before it got a proper hearing in the Upper House: 'Is New South Wales going to be left the only colony where women

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have no voice at all – in a *Federation*? In less than a month we'll be a state, a proper *state* – with no women's *vote*.'

Like the entire rest of the world, bar New Zealand, and South and Western Australia, and I must suppress my ambivalence: voting is the least of what I want for women; for me, and for my sister, Gret. But I can't tell Flo half of any of that. Not now. Not yet. One day I shall confide in her, though, speak of the depths. When I am sure of her confidence. Maybe next year –

'We can't lag Victoria – my God,' she rails on up the path. 'What if they get female suffrage in Melbourne before here? What disgrace would *that* be?'

'I'm sure they won't get the vote before us.' I laugh, uncaring of that ever-enduring inter-colonial sport, the Sydney–Melbourne tit for tat, and my laugh is such a distant bell it can hardly have come from me. A cloud swoops across the sun and I can only see Uncle Alec smashing down the women's vote, should he win the Bathurst seat in the New South Wales parliament next year; he will smash it down with a blithe and easy wave amongst the men, behind closed doors, stepping out of the House with a rueful smile, pretending his hands were tied. Resentment swoops through me, a black crow's wing. I would not have had to endure this first year of Arts – the humiliation of compulsory literature, of Shakespearean sonnets and snide Pope, soppy Keats and femicidal Browning – if he hadn't forced me to. Alec Howell: stamping me with the suggestion of some kind of failure before I even set foot in this university. No one does a year of Arts any more before admission to Medicine – no one capable of sitting the Medical entrance exam, at least. No one like me. I will be twenty by the time I return here to begin my future properly in the new year, my sister's future, too; I am too young to vote, should that ever be permitted, but old enough to strike out along the path that must be ours: free of him. *But Berylda, you must be sure you are up to the challenge*, he said, in holding me back this year. He always sounds so reasonable. Don't think about him. Don't let him intrude. Don't let him spoil this day.

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‘Oh Bryl, listen to me going on and on,’ Flo squeezes my hand again. ‘I must need a drink.’

I squeeze back. ‘Me too.’