

## KEEPING SECRETS

Judy left the magazine on the laundry bench, open at the diet section. Looked like good ideas she hadn't seen before. She leant down to extract the heavy wet items from the front of the washing machine then reached into the basket of dirty whites: a pair of the boys' undies, cricket socks smeared with brown dirt from last week's match, Greg's favourite business shirt, the collar starting to fray at the edge. Judy held the shirt in front of her, wondering whether it was worth keeping. Then she saw it. A light brown stain on one side, like foundation, and below it a light pink stain, like a fingerprint. She stared at them until her eyes blurred then passed her finger across them. They smudged so they were fresh. Quickly she bundled the shirt around her hands and threw it into the machine, followed by white bath sheets, white hankies. Just throw it all in, she thought.

Judy stepped back into the kitchen, picked up the phone and dialled.

"Hello this is Greg."

"Hello darling," she said.

"Oh Judy, hi..."

"I know you're busy, I just wanted..." She panicked. "I just wondered what you'd like for tea tonight."

"Tea? Oh Judy, I'm really snowed under with work..."

"Oh, of course," she said. "Sorry." The washing machine thrashed the clothes about. Judy pictured Greg's shirt pristine white, like it was before. "I'll just make lamb cutlets, the boys love their lamb."

"Oh babe, look, I'm gonna' be late tonight," he said. "Got another pitch meeting with Tom. We'll probably just order pizza in. Don't wait up. Love ya." The phone clicked in her ear and she wondered how much more she could take.

Judy wished she'd stuck with the black shoes. Even sitting in the car, these were causing the soles of her feet to throb. It was going to be a long night. Greg was more eager than usual. New shirt. New aftershave. Both a little over the top, she thought, at his age.

Half a dozen cars were parked illegally outside the restaurant, dropping people off then moving on to find a park. Greg spun the steering wheel to the left, tyres screeching on the wet bitumen. He was more impatient of late, about everything, even snapped at Nathan after soccer which he'd never done before.

Greg parked the car with the bonnet partly blocking a driveway then got out, slammed his door and stood on the footpath, tapping his right foot, as she put on her jacket and pressed her hair down. Ten extra minutes of hot rollers had left her hair with a look of haughty surprise.

“Do I look alright?” she said.

“Of course you do,” he mumbled, striding up the hill toward the restaurant.

Golden cherubs hung from the ceiling, a grotesque plastic grapevine leant precariously against one wall, and opera music blared from old fashioned speakers. Judy saw Tom in the back corner as he raised his hand to get Greg's attention. As Greg pushed through the crowd, Judy followed his tall square frame, like a loyal pup.

“Hey Tom,” Greg said.

“Hey mate.” Tom nodded. “Judy.”

Their snug triangle was infiltrated by a young woman in a red dress, her breasts in danger of tumbling out of her cleavage.

Greg looked at Judy. “Do you want a drink?” he said.

“Yes please.” Judy smiled, ready to be introduced, but Greg started walking toward the bar, his hand resting on the woman's lower back, like he'd done it a hundred times before.

Beef Stroganoff was his favourite. The boys loved it too. Judy couldn't stand it but long gone were the days when she was able to cater for her likes as well as theirs. The boys were having a knee slapping competition on the sofa - slap, slap, giggle, slap, slap, squeal. Greg would get sick of it before the next ad break.

Speak of the devil. He put his empty glass down on the bench, and opened the fridge door. Judy stirred the hot dish to get rid of the tiny lumps of cream.

“Where's the soda?” he said.

Judy kept stirring. "Perhaps we're out of it."

Greg slammed the fridge door. "Since when do we just run out of soda?" He put his hands on his hips.

She'd had enough. "I'm not the one who drinks it," she said.

"No, but you're the one who shops."

Her hands started shaking. She didn't know what to say, didn't want this anymore, just wanted to disappear. The boys started another round, louder than before - slap, slap, giggle.

Judy stopped stirring. "Does she shop for you too?" she said, picking up the heavy clay pot to take to the table.

"What did you say?" He blocked her path.

"You heard me," she said.

He grabbed her shoulders. "Don't ever say that again, do you hear me?"

His saliva sprayed her face as his grip twisted her upper arms. She heard the disgust in his voice then felt the slap across her face, like the crack of a whip.

The pot smashed to the floor as she grabbed her cheek.

Greg stormed out.

The boys rushed in. "Mummy, what happened?" they said.

Nathan vomited for what Judy hoped was the last time.

"When's he going to stop?" his brother said.

"Stop your whinging, Nick, you could show some concern for your brother." Judy stroked Nathan's burning forehead. "I need your help."

"Aw, Mum." Nick pulled the covers up over his head.

"All you have to do is watch him while I go to the shops." She stood up and walked to the door.

The stench of responsibility was enough to stir Nick. "Mum, its midnight," he said. "Nothing's open."

"The convenience store should have some glucose," she said, watching Nathan's forlorn body draped over the side of the bed like an old blanket. "He's terribly

dehydrated.” She pulled a sweatshirt over her head, trusting that pyjama bottoms wouldn’t cause offence in the middle of the night.

There was only one car parked outside the corner store. A bit like Greg’s except he was up the coast on business. A tall man rested against the car bonnet, his ankles crossed in a relaxed manner. Like Greg. As Judy turned into the small parking lot her headlights shone on the parked car.

A young woman bounced out of the store, holding a tub of icecream and a punnet of strawberries. She melted into the man’s embrace, and devoured his mouth with hers. Her crotch ground against his as he rubbed his hands over her arse then smacked her before she walked around to get in the passenger side.

Judy pulled into a parking space just as Greg got into his car, turned on the headlights and drove away.

“Wake up Nathan, sweetie, time to get up.” He rolled away from her. She tried Nick. “Time to wake up.” Nick reached out his arm to repel whatever it was that disturbed his slumber.

“Don’t wanna’ go to school,” Nick said, pushing her away.

“No school today,” she said. “We’re going on a holiday.”

He opened one eye. “What?”

Nathan sat up in bed. “Where to?”

“It’s a surprise,” Judy said, clapping her hands together. “Now up and at ‘em, get yourselves dressed.” She’d done it by the book. Have a plan, it said. Know what you’re doing and plan every detail. She’d always been an excellent planner. Even Greg thought so. It had taken six months but now, on the morning of her finest moment, she knew the wait was worth it.

“Where’s Dad?” Nick said, pulling his jumper over his head.

“Your father’s going to meet us there.” Judy was relieved they were too tired to query her.

“What do we need to pack?” Nathan was the organised one.

“All done,” Judy said, her heart pounding as she watched them tie their sandals. She’d packed their belongings. Nick’s stuffed donkey. Nathan’s cricket cap. The boys followed her to the front door. She saw the pile of photo albums under the coffee table. That had been the most time consuming and rewarding part. Slowly cutting her face out of every photo they’d ever taken together.

“I need to go to the toilet,” Nick said.

Judy nudged him from behind. “There’ll be plenty of time for that when we get to the airport,” she said, closing the door behind them as the taxi’s headlights crept up the driveway.