

The flashing lights are like a beacon guiding my way. I brake gently to turn left into the car park and at the same time focus on my breathing, in through my nose, out through my mouth. Please God, let her be okay.

I turn into a parking bay and see Sophie, she's sitting on a bench seat staring at the two police officers in front of her. The ambo's are going to their van, they're dressed for action with their fleuro' stripes and equipment but they don't seem to be in any hurry. I take deeper breaths now. She's okay. Thank you God.

A collection of cardboard containers from the local fish and chip shop, 'Fish by the Bay' lay scattered on one end of the wooden slats of the bench seat. I recognize the shop logo even though I'm not close enough to read it. It's a clear profile of a fish shape with intersecting arcs similar to those seen on the rear windscreens of cars. The signs on the cars tell us someone believes. I don't know what I believe any more.

A middle-aged couple, patrons from the movie theatre, have found Sophie tonight. They speak to me slowly with exaggerated diction as if I'm hard of hearing or have difficulty processing what they're saying. My eyes are drawn to the woman's mouth with its red lipstick stain on her front tooth.

The couple tell me they've seen a French film, with beautiful scenery. A romance, set in a small ancient village with cobbled streets and attic houses, all nestled in green fields and vineyards where the way of life is gentle and serene. They struggle to recall the actors' names. 'They were foreign,' they say. They tell me all this as I look at Sophie, their mouths close to my ear. I'm trying to take stock of the situation here in the car park. I thank them for phoning me but they don't go away. They're standing so close to me I'm finding it hard to breathe again.

Soph' was in the foetal position, curled up on the ground whimpering when the couple returned to their car after the movie. They called the police but they didn't want to leave her alone with them.

'You never know', they whisper next to me.

I sneak a quick look at the policemen. They're just ordinary guys, doing a job. The older chap has a bit of weight on him, I think it's a while since he's chased anyone on foot. The younger one's squatting down talking to Sophie. He seems to be reassuring her, his voice low and calm.

'We think she's been dumped here,' the older officer says, ignoring the couple. He looks down at Sophie's legs.

Sophie is looking to the side, away from the small rescue crew in front of her. Bits of dried leaves and dirt have stuck to her jeans. The car park is flat and barren with patches of broken bitumen.

‘Will you take her home?’

I’m guessing the policemen are tired and at the end of their shift. It’s dark and the car park is poorly lit. Part of my brain wonders who’s responsible for the security of lighting here. Is it the local Council or is it the Cinema? Does the local community care about the inadequate lighting or are the residents so used to a lack of funds allocated to their area that they just shrug and put up with it? The officers look at me, waiting for an answer.

‘If she’ll come.’

They nod and seem to be in no hurry, their limbs relaxed. They’re probably thankful it’s not their daughter sitting there.

Other movie patrons are standing at a distance watching, too far away to be involved but close enough to satisfy their curiosity. One girl takes a photo with her phone, this seems to be the trend now, people watching an incident and taking snapshots from a distance. The girl has short brown hair and no physical feature that’s remarkable except for the bright pink phone held in front of her face. The policemen ignore the small group of onlookers. I want to go over and give the young girl a good slap. When did I become so angry?

I sit beside Sophie and put my arm around her, the only shield I have. Her shoulders are thin and scrawny, she feels as if she could break.

Sophie’s so pale, I wonder if she goes out during the day when I’m at work, or if she only emerges after dusk to glide to her new haunts, a silver whisper in the evening air. It was only a few years ago that her freckles were hard to see under her tan and the knots in her hair were from a riding helmet not from neglect.

Ron walked by her side when Sophie started riding the trails through the bush. Shelley was her first pony, a fat Shetland with a mind of its own. Ron must have walked for kilometres back then. I stayed home and cooked; slow cooked lamb with garlic and lemon, a New York Cheesecake and biscuits to last a month. Horses were so unpredictable, their big strong haunches backing into me if I didn’t keep out of the way.

When Ron and I had an argument once, Sophie sat on the couch next to me and told me that if I ever left her father she would have to stay with him because I couldn’t tow a horse float. She looked me straight in the eye when she said this, she wanted to make sure that I understood her. She was eight at the time.

I give the policemen the details they ask for while they fill in the paperwork, there’s always paperwork to be completed. I know what they need and I no longer feel any shame at reciting it. They understand, they nod this to me, tell me they’re glad there was a mother to call.

The two movie patrons are going now, driving off in their four-wheel drive, they look relieved the situation has been taken out of their hands. The other spectators have drifted off. The young girl with the phone looks back over her shoulder a couple of times.

I strap Sophie into my car and comb her hair back from her face with my fingers. She turns her head away from me. For a brief moment I'm glad she doesn't want to look at me, I can smell stale vomit on her breath.

We head back to our rented unit, the headlights catch glimpses of plastic toys in bright colours that poke up through the long grass of front yards.

Further along the coast is an area of affluent holiday homes with vast stretches of glass to capture the sea. The residents can watch the water's edge sweep in and retreat, a mass of sparkling froth. They can't see the huge walls of water, way out in the deep, the great mounds of dark sea moving in long rolls, building up and pounding against each other in anger.

I wonder if wealth can wash away problems like the incoming tide washes out footprints leaving the sand fresh and pristine. I want to knock on the doors to ask those inside, but of course I don't, that would be irrational. Sometimes though to fill in time I imagine their faces, aloof and confused, not wanting to become interested or involved with the visitor at the door because that might make them common not privileged.

It's been a while since I leased out our property to move closer to the hospital. I miss the kookaburras calling out to each other in the early morning, their heads bent back and their throats pulsing with the noisy calls thrown out in the dawn air. I'd hear them in the gum trees lining our dirt track I strode down in the mornings, a cacophony of noise that broke the misty stillness and made me laugh out loud too.

Since the accident there hasn't been much laughter, just months of sitting by Sophie's bed. Then it was months of rehab', Sophie learning to feed herself, the spoon not quite steering to her mouth without some physical assistance, and me wiping away the spills down her chin as if she was a toddler in a high chair. She started to look at me directly for positive feedback as she became aware that things weren't quite right, that the world according to Sophie was fractured and needed to be repaired.

The walking was next, between two rails with the physio's one each side, all the time encouraging and praising each ungainly step. The staff wore tracksuit pants and polo shirts with the hospital logo discreet on the side of their chest. They spoke to each other of bushwalking on the weekends, and of kayaking and triathlons. I used to watch them and wonder if what they saw during the week determined their activities on Saturdays and Sundays, as if they wanted to distance themselves from the physical limitations they dealt with at work. Perhaps they were trying to convince themselves that they were different, that they would never be like those they worked with between the rails.

I walked early in the mornings and tried to clear my head. There were other walkers out as well, some avoided looking at you, seemingly intent on the pile of leaves littering the footpaths, the golden and red hues holding their interest relentlessly. Other people occasionally said 'Good morning', but no one stood long enough for me to talk to. I didn't walk to get anywhere or to cover a certain distance, I just wanted to walk.

When I think back, Sophie's first 'day leave' from the rehab' unit was like a snapshot of the weeks to come. Her hair was just growing back, the short dark stubble didn't yet hide the suture line on the side of her head. We had sat through a 'family meeting' with the health professionals as they were called. We were the amateurs of ill health, the visitors who one day found themselves in a world of tubes, whisperings, and calls of colour codes over the hospital speaker system.

We sat in a circle in the meeting room with the echo of footsteps on the lino' outside. The staff took it in turns to speak of Sophie's achievements and milestones. A short round woman from the occupational therapy team yawned then closed the meeting.

I was to drive Sophie home for the day, we would have some lunch together then I would bring her back to the rehab' unit in the afternoon. When I opened the car door at the service station on the way home and looked over at Sophie, she was ashen. I thought she must have been car sick but she said it was the fumes from the fuel upsetting her.

They'd sent us home with a strip of tablets for pain to be taken at four hourly intervals, and only if needed they stressed. When I crept in to check Sophie after an afternoon nap and tell her that we should be heading back, the strip was empty.

'It would have just been a mistake,' the woman said on our return to the rehab unit, 'she was probably disorientated on her first day home. She must have forgotten she'd already had some tablets.' She shuffled papers and folders into neat piles on the desk and smiled at me before moving away.

The next few weeks after Sophie's discharge, life was like a roller coaster. On the good days I felt euphoric about having my daughter at home again only to sink into despair when she disappeared for hours at a time.

That night when we get back from the movie theatre car park, I help Sophie undress and get into bed.

'Can you bring me some pain killers please mum?'

'Sophie, have you got pain or can't you sleep?'

'Can't sleep. Bits of the accident keep flashing up. I remember we were driving north, dad and I, to the Three Day Event. We'd been watching the sun come up. It was a big orange arc above the row of trees on the far side of the paddock on our right. Dad said it touched the trees with a singed glow like they'd been burnt. I must have fallen asleep then. All I remember next is being on the ground and someone standing over me, saying 'He's

gone, she's still here.' The smell of fuel was everywhere, it still makes me feel sick. People were shouting out for fire extinguishers. It was us they were talking about, dad and me. I couldn't move or speak. I couldn't call out to them and tell them I could hear them. When I wake in the dark I think I'm there again. I want to sleep and only wake in the light so I can see where I am.'

For a few minutes I'm too scared to move in case her words stop so I stand there, tall and awkward. Slowly I ease myself down onto her bed, everything feels numb, my face, my mind, all of me. I can't think of anything but that picture.

Later that night when Sophie's fingers have loosened and relaxed, I dream of sleeping in our own beds on sheets blown dry on the long wire clothes line and of waking to the sound of the cockatoos screeching in the orchard. At home we'll sit on the verandah steps and hear the shrieks of cousins and the chatter of friends and family arriving. I stay there next to Sophie until the cold dawn stirs me to start things moving.

