



## A Terrible Business

SUE BRENNAN

"GORDON CUNNINGHAM IS DEAD," Kim's mother said when she called. "Thought you'd want to know."

Kim asked the obvious question.

"Lung cancer," her mother told her and tutted. "Forty-two years old."

It was the cigarettes that did it, though at the wake, someone smoked outside behind the rhododendrons. Mrs. Cunningham found the butts jammed into the soil the next day.

Gordon was the oldest of seven, so at the funeral the front three pews on the left were occupied by his parents, six siblings, their various spouses, and, altogether, fourteen nieces and nephews. Gordon's wife and their one child, a pudgy eighteen-month-old determined to escape, sat to the right of the casket with her parents. They waved things—church bulletins, combs, key rings—in an effort to keep the child amused while their daughter wept.

As Kim hurried in—the drive down from North Sydney was fine until she got to a three-car pile up at Helensburgh—she scanned the church for her parents. The Cunninghams were part of the parish's DNA. It would be unthinkable for Kim's parents, the Butlers, not to be there. Around her, she spotted the Taylors, the Dal Santos, and the Frasers, all stalwarts of the parish.

"Hi," she whispered as she sat beside her parents. "Almost didn't make it. Accident up at Helensburgh that—"

Her father leaned forward and put a finger to his lips. Her mother patted her on the knee and handed her a hymn book. Kim noticed the once-over her

mother gave her appearance and the familiar disapproval. Kim flipped through the book and then placed it on the seat between them. The congregation stood and began singing as the priest and his entourage of altar boys, frocked in black, red and white, ambled after him.

Kim looked over at the Cunninghams. The blonde hair was a dominant trait—they were known for it—and spotted Charlotte immediately due to her height. At almost six feet, she was as tall as her brothers. Kim noted that Charlotte's long hair was braided and tied with a thick black ribbon that Kim felt was a little immature for a twenty-four-year old.

Kim had known Charlotte, the youngest of the seven, since they were in kindergarten. They'd made their first communion together—little brides of Christ in white sateen and polyester lace. They both chose the same confirmation name—*Elizabeth*—and hated their parents, school, and the world, together in their teens. They'd experimented with make-up and compared tips for inserting tampons. Various *firsts* were shoplifting, smoking grass, ear piercing, getting drunk on Spumante, hitchhiking, and sneaking out of their bedroom windows to go and wander the neighborhood. When Kim lost her virginity and described it in gory detail the next day, Charlotte's eyes watered.

There was a seventeen-year gap between Charlotte and Gordon. As kids, Charlotte and Kim spied on him making out with Karen Breslin at the parish picnic. As a teenager, Kim thought he was aloof, boring, and unworthy of interest. He wore short-sleeved white shirts and thick maroon ties, like some kind of Mormon. She couldn't remember what line of work he'd gone into.

When they all sat, Kim realized that one of the altar boys was her brother.

"There's Chris," she said to her mother, who looked at her as though to say, *well, of course.*

Chris was fifteen, almost.

"Isn't he too old for that now?" Kim asked.

"Shh."

Chris was solemn, too much even for this. Kim saw his eyes seek them out, and she smiled and gave a little wave. He wouldn't be at the reception afterward. Being a Tuesday, he'd have to go back to school. She felt guilty that she'd let the arguments with her parents stop her from calling each week, let alone visiting more often. The last time she was down, three months ago, her mother had asked her if she was still living with *those homosexuals*.

“Those nice *people* you mean?” Kim had asked. “Tim and Nazim? Yeah, still living with them.”

Kim had moved from a share-house of three young women from country NSW who’d all moved to Sydney to take up jobs with Australia Post. Now, she was living with Tim and Nazim who were sales reps for a record label, and Linda, a woman in her mid-thirties who ran an independent bookstore. As the only public servant—the tax department—and non-creative in the house, Kim was occasionally the butt of snide remarks, but generally they all got along well.

“I don’t think it’s appropriate,” her mother had said.

“I don’t care what you think,” Kim had replied.

Kim had struggled her whole life, it seemed, trying to figure out what was *appropriate* and had given up. Her mother had called her *ungrateful*, a *disappointment*, and as things got more heated and Kim let loose with a few expletives, a *little guttersnipe*.

The priest, a rotund man with a heavy Italian accent that Kim couldn’t be bothered trying to understand, eventually relinquished the stage for the eulogies.

Evan Cunningham, now the eldest Cunningham, walked up to the pulpit. He was dressed in a navy suit and had some kind of green handkerchief sticking out of his breast pocket. Kim thought there was a special name for that and tried to remember what it was. He took his time starting. He looked around at his family in front of him, and over at Gordon’s wife and child. He unfolded a piece of paper, flattened it out and sniffed.

Finally, he said, “Gordon was a good man, a good brother, a good son, a good father, and a good husband.”

*Jesus*, Kim thought. *How original. How stirring. You forgot good neighbor, good co-worker...*

She began doing the math: another hour of this, then another hour at the cemetery—add an hour for the drive there and back—then an hour, two, for the reception at the Cunninghams’ and a catch-up with Charlotte, and back up to Sydney. She should be back in time for Bjorn Again, the ABBA parody group who were playing at the local pub. Tim and Nazim said they were fab, and Kim wanted to crimp her hair before she went.



Kim and her father stood in the corner of the Cunninghams' living room with paper plates loaded with cubes of ham, sticks of cabanossi, gherkins and Jatz crackers. They each had a paper cup half-filled with white wine that came from a box. They placed the cups with care on top of the TV.

"Finger food," her father said. "Wine. Feel like I'm at a party."

"Well," Kim said. "That's basically what it is."

Her mother hadn't come. As they'd watched the coffin being lowered, she'd claimed to have a stomachache. Both Kim and her father knew that wasn't so. She didn't like socializing, plain and simple.

"This place hasn't changed a bit," Kim said, looking around. "Look, that mat under the dining table. It's the same one."

The female Cunninghams bustled about with cakes and coffee cups. As the house filled up, Kim had trouble locating Charlotte. She was last seen bringing in two barrels of Kentucky Fried Chicken. The smell had preceded her, and a few people said it made their mouths water, no doubt about it.

"She still working there?" her father asked. "I thought they only employed the young ones. Cheaper ones."

"She's at a chemist now," Kim told him. "The one across from Woolworths."

"How's your job then?" her father asked.

Safe territory.

Kim told him how she'd recently done some training in property tax. This wasn't particularly interesting—nothing about her job was—but she had to tell him something. He didn't want to know about house parties, the drugs she had tried, or the three one-night stands she'd had since she'd moved up to Sydney.

"That car of yours is okay?" he asked.

The car was fine, but again, it was a neutral topic. She talked about the car.

Jim Docherty—her father's mate and fellow member of the parish council—came into the room.

Kim's father called out, "Jim. Here."

Jim came over and gave Kim's father a rub on the back. It was an affectionate gesture that made her realize she hadn't kissed or hugged either of her parents in years.

"Terrible business," Jim said. "Too young."

Kim and her father nodded. The two men recalled how they both used to

smoke like chimneys back in the day. Wouldn't do it now.

"Bugger to give up," Jim admitted. "But you have to, don't you? Specially with kiddies around."

Kim could remember her father smoking when she was seven or so, and the amber-colored glass ashtray that sat next to the TV Week on the coffee table.

"Is it true," Jim asked, edging closer to them and lowering his voice, "that the little one has something wrong with her?"

He tapped the side of his head.

"First I've heard of it," her father said and looked at Kim.

She shrugged and looked at the phone in the hallway sitting on a special table that was also a chair. She wanted to call her number, though she knew that none of her housemates would be home.

"Terrible business," Jim said again.

Through the crowded room, Amelia Cunningham, older than Charlotte by three years, was making her way toward them. She paused at each group, touching shoulders, giving and receiving kisses. Amelia, in many respects, was the big sister that Kim never had. She used to let Charlotte, and by default, Kim, dress up in her clothes. Amelia had always been besotted with children, blood-related or not. At twenty-eight, she had three of her own.

"Kimmy," she said and kissed her on the cheek. "I'm so glad you could make it. And you, too, Mr. Butler. Mr. Docherty. It means the world to us. And to Laura."

Laura, Gordon's wife, wouldn't know any of them from a bar of soap, but this was the kind of thing Amelia said and probably thought.

"I'm so sorry about Gordon," Kim said. "It's awful."

"He was so sick," Amelia said. "He really fought it. Lots of treatment, but in the end..."

"At least he had time to," Kim's father said and kind of winced, "say goodbye?"

"Yes, exactly," Amelia said emphatically and closed her eyes. "It was very...at the end...very peaceful. He had the last rites."

Kim's father and Jim Docherty almost bent in half with relief.

"Father Vella," Amelia said and the men nodded.

Kim felt repulsed by the three of them. By all of it. *The last bloody rites? Oh perfect. That makes it all okay then. I bet that's what she's been going around saying*

*to everyone—he had the last rites. Yes, thank you. It’s okay, he had the last rites...*

“Where’s Charlotte?” Kim asked. “I should find her.”

Amelia said she was in the kitchen, and Kim took her paper cup from the TV and went out the front door. It was easier to walk around the outside of the house to the back than through the crowd. In the backyard, some teenagers were keeping the younger children occupied with totem-tennis, and, strangely, bubbles. The swimming pool was filled with leaves and the filter gurgled rhythmically.

The back door led directly into the kitchen and there was Charlotte, pulling a tray of scones from the oven. She dropped the tray onto the bench and shook her hand, saying, “Ouch.”

“Hi,” Kim said. “When did you learn how to cook?”

Charlotte smiled, gave a small laugh, and then began to cry. Kim put her paper cup on the bench and went and held her.

“Can’t cook to save my life,” Charlotte said after a while, pulling away. “I’ve been left in charge of all this.”

“I’ll help,” Kim said. “What are we doing? Butter? Jam?”

“Fuck, I don’t know,” Charlotte said and they both instinctively looked around for a parent to tell them to watch their language.

They stood side by side splitting scones and smearing them with jam and cream. Charlotte told her how Laura was already talking about selling their flat and moving back to Melbourne.

“Mum’s devastated,” Charlotte said. “Losing her son and then her granddaughter.”

“Well, it’s not like...” Kim started. “Melbourne’s not that far away. And Laura would want to be near her folks, right?”

*Besides, there’s thirteen other grandchildren,* Kim thought.

“No, it’s not that,” Charlotte said. “They’ve never really got on.”

She went on to tell Kim about how her mum thought the Flanagans were up themselves. When Gordon first brought Laura over to meet them, she thought that Laura had airs.

“What the fuck are ‘airs?’” Kim asked.

Then, when the two families got together for the engagement—the Cunninghams bought a big Weber barbecue for the occasion—Amelia had overheard Mrs. Flanagan telling Laura that she hoped Gordon didn’t want her

to breed like a rabbit, too. And there was also something overheard, or seen—Charlotte couldn't remember—about the cutlery not being right.

"Let's dump these in the living room and go outside," she said.

They sat on the back step with a couple of Victoria Bitters and a bowl of potato chips.

"I shouldn't eat these," Charlotte said, selecting the smallest chip from the bowl, holding it in front of her face and placing it on her tongue like the Eucharist. "Trying to lose weight."

"Why?" Kim asked.

Charlotte weighed less than she did, although it was hard to be sure with the baggy jacket and shoulder pads the size of an American footballer.

"Just..." Charlotte said and trailed off.

Kim looked at her friend. She'd always been slim, but, yes, she was definitely looking a bit gaunt. The watch sat loosely on her wrist despite being fastened as tightly as it could be. Her ankles were sticks poking out from her trousers. Surely, though, if she was anorexic she wouldn't have *said* she was trying to lose weight. And she wouldn't have eaten the chip, would she?

"How's work?" Kim asked.

Charlotte said it was okay, and that she was also doing an accountancy course at TAFE. Kim said that could lead to something interesting. Something stable.

"You sound like my parents," Charlotte said. "How's your job?"

Kim told her about her ditzy co-worker, Vicky, sleazy supervisor, Pete, and hot-but-too-old Ian who was in another team. Then she told her about her housemates and the fun they had. She was basically out four nights a week and meeting new people, seeing a lot of live music.

"You should come up," Kim said, trying to imagine how Charlotte would fit in.

"You should come down," Charlotte said.

"I do," Kim said. "Not for a while, maybe, but I do."

Charlotte nodded and sipped her beer. Kim wondered why they had drifted apart like this. Weren't they essentially the same person?

"I don't like Sydney," Charlotte said after a while. "Too pretentious."

"What, the whole city?"

Charlotte raised her eyebrows. Nearby, a small boy was standing with his

hands above his head hoping to catch a bubble that was being blown in his direction.

"He's got Buckley's," Kim said.

They watched the bubble wobble and drift off to where the four garbage bins stood in a row against the fence.

"Go get it, Andy," Charlotte called and the boy ran off.

"Whose is he?" Kim asked.

"Amelia's," Charlotte said. "He's sweet. How're your brothers anyway? I saw Chris up there today."

"Yeah, I know, right?" Kim said. "Isn't he too old for that shit?"

"That *shit*? Remember us wanting to be altar boys? Altar girls?"

"Yeah, like when we were nine."

Boy, hadn't that led to some interesting discussions with her father about women's place in the Church?

"So how are they?" Charlotte asked.

Kim told her that as far as she knew Chris was doing okay at school and Bernard was in his first year of a BA.

"I thought he joined the army," Charlotte said.

"Didn't make it through the physical," Kim said.

The totem-tennis had descended into a thwacking competition among the older teens, while the smaller children gathered around a puddle of soapy water with their bubble-wands. Someone had tipped the water out, or it'd spilled.

"Were you, you know, there when he died?" Kim asked.

"No," Charlotte said and rolled her eyes. "That's another thing—Laura didn't want us all crowding in. Mum and Dad were there. And *her* parents. I got to say goodbye, though. Before."

"That's good," Kim said and was unable to think of anything else besides, "that Laura. Wow."

It was an invitation to bitch—to band together against something or someone as they used to. But Charlotte stood and stretched.

"Are you seeing anybody?" she asked out of the blue.

"Not really," Kim said, thinking of too-old Ian and their flirting. "You?"

"No," she said. "I was but it fizzled out."

She looked expectantly at Kim.

"What?" Kim asked and picked at the label of her beer bottle.



"I think it's interesting that we don't know that about each other anymore."  
"Yeah..." Kim started, but didn't know where to go.



Charlotte lost her virginity at eighteen to Tony Cook. She said, the day after it happened, that it didn't hurt at all and what had Kim been going on about?

"What, no blood?" Kim asked, shocked.

Charlotte was dreamy with the whole thing—relieved that it hadn't been a horror movie and that Tony wasn't a user—until she missed her period. They studied the calendar on which Charlotte marked her cycle faithfully with a blue pen.

"Every twenty-three days," she said tearfully. "Like clockwork."

In their circle of friends, there was no one they could turn to, so they went to Amelia. She was engaged to her boyfriend of four years, Trevor, and in their eyes worldly. Two days later, Amelia drove them in silence to Trevor's flat. Kim didn't know what was going to happen there, but when Charlotte called and said they'd pick her up, she was ready.

The flat was on the second floor of an old block of four, and Amelia let herself in with a key. She showed them around and took particular pride in the kitchen which, she said, Trevor had renovated himself. It had a wall-oven *and* a microwave. Amelia had chosen the door handles—they'd almost come to fisticuffs about those, she said and laughed—and the feature tiles of grapes that ran at eye level around the stove and sink.

"Where's Trevor?" Charlotte asked.

"He'll be here soon," Amelia said. "Let's sit."

She indicated the round kitchen table, found five glasses and put them out.

"Five?" Kim mouthed to Charlotte.

Charlotte shook her head and shrugged.

Amelia brought a carton of apple juice to the table and sat.

"Are there any biscuits?" Charlotte asked.

Amelia went and found a packet of Fruit Pillows. Kim hated those and knew that Charlotte did too, but they both took one.

"You don't need to worry," Amelia said and reached for her sister's hand. "It's very understandable. The way things are these days."

Kim had no idea what she meant, unless she meant that falling pregnant was understandable.

"I don't think any less of you," Amelia said and looked at Kim. "Both of you."

"You told her I've done it?" Kim asked Charlotte, and Amelia put her hand firmly on the table between them. Kim felt betrayed.

"What am I going to do?" Charlotte asked and started to cry. "If I'm pregnant?"

"Now, now," Amelia said, and then they heard a key in the door.

Trevor entered with an older man that Kim, for some reason, thought was a doctor. He was in his mid-forties, with a ruddy complexion and thick brown hair, and he carried a briefcase. As he walked toward the table Amelia rose and said, "Father," and Kim saw the small gold crucifix pinned to his collar.

Trevor introduced the priest as Father Patrick, a good friend of *his* family, and, it went without saying, someone Charlotte could trust. When the priest spoke, Kim momentarily fell under a spell. His voice lilted up and down like a boat on a swelling ocean. It was like listening to a fairytale.

"Back in Ireland," he said, "I saw this many times, it's sad to say. Good Catholic girls—and lads too, don't get me wrong now—getting caught up. Caught up in each other and losing sight of Jesus. I'm here—your good man Trevor and his beautiful fiancée, Amelia—asked me to come here and guide you, Charlotte. And you, too, Kim."

Amelia explained that she and Trevor had done a marriage preparation course that Father Patrick led, and they knew the temptations and also struggled, but believed that prayer and community was the way forward.

*They're both virgins*, Kim thought and kicked Charlotte under the table.

"I believe in the sanctity of marriage," Trevor said, possibly registering the shock on Kim's face. "I'm blessed to say that I found a woman who feels the same way."

Amelia smiled demurely.

Father Patrick took over from there. He didn't need to know names of the young men involved, he said, but Charlotte gave them to him anyway. What he wanted was for the five of them to hold hands, nice and firm now, and open their hearts to the Lord.

They sat there for almost an hour, holding hands in a circle around the juice and the biscuits. The priest, Trevor, and Amelia took turns speaking.

Sometimes it was an Our Father, sometimes it was a string of Hail Mary's that Kim thought was sending them off down the rosary path. Then one of them would start saying something like, "I know you're here with us, dear Lord, waiting for all of us—for aren't we all sinners?—to come to you. As a friend, as a son, a daughter, a teacher...speak to us, Lord. Fill out hearts and show us the way..."

*It's like the séances we used to have as kids,* Kim thought, *except they were fun.*

They weren't only praying the baby away—which was how Kim came to think of it because Charlotte got her period two days later—they were seeking forgiveness. Father Patrick said that Jesus would welcome them back. All He wanted was their utmost, heartfelt contrition.

"I'm so sorry," Charlotte said eventually, barely audible. She sniffed. "I'm sorry, Lord."

Amelia, who was sitting between Kim and Charlotte, squeezed their hands tightly. Kim wondered if Charlotte truly thought that what she'd done—what they'd both done—was a sin, or if she was just saying that. She sure was putting on a good show.

Kim thought about the afternoon she went to Mark Nolan's house. His parents were at work and his younger brother, who he was minding, was playing video games in the lounge room. She and Mark started kissing. Really going for it. Trying to swallow one another. He got his hand up under her T-shirt and kneaded her chest—God knows she'd been praying for bigger boobs since she was fourteen. T-shirts, jeans, and undies came off with barely a glance at each other. There was no foreplay and no condom. He lay on top of her, alternating between kissing her and wetting one and then two fingers and inserting them into her vagina. When he pushed her leg aside with his knee, they stopped kissing and turned their faces aside. The pain was short and sharp—maybe she had exaggerated that a little in the re-telling—but the blood was copious. Kim couldn't believe how bright it was. She apologized, and Mark said that it didn't matter. She had no idea how he explained to his mother. Then, they'd gone into the lounge room and taken over the video game from Mark's brother until it was time to go home for dinner.

It had seemed the most momentous event at the time, walking home. Recalling it now it was almost mundane. Birds hadn't fallen from their perches. The world hadn't spun off its axis. Her mother had asked her to bring in the

washing, and she'd helped Bernard with his geography project after dinner. Kim knew her parents would go berserk if they found out. They'd be so very disappointed. She was tired of being a disappointment.

"And what about you, Kim?" Father Patrick asked.

"I'm sorry," she said, looking around and added, "Lord."



Kim's father was slumped over and sound asleep until she applied the brakes hard at a red light.

"Careful," he said and repositioned himself so that he was sitting upright. "You'll pop in for a bit? Say hello to Chrissie? Can't say what Bernard will be up to."

She didn't want to hang about too long, but it would be nice to check in with them and pick up something from the garage. Moving out of home was a work in progress.

"Sure," she said.

"Fancy staying for tea?" he asked. "Your mum would love it."

"Gotta get back," she said, knowing that her mother would not love it. In fact, she'd be put out. "Work in the morning."

He looked straight ahead. It was later than Kim had anticipated, and she was stuck behind one of the buses that went up and down the highway. She wished that she had the kind of relationship with her father that she could say, *Hey, what's wrong with me and Mum? Does she even like me?*

When they walked into the house, her mother was scraping carrots at the sink.

"Hope you didn't spoil your appetite," she said. "They usually have junk food at those things."

"Dad's drunk," Kim said. "I had to pour him into the car."

"Don't be ridiculous," her mother said. "How was it?"

Kim went to find Chris.

Puberty was being downright nasty to her youngest brother. He was all limbs and greasy hair and pimples. His room smelled like some kind of ointment used for sore muscles. He was on his bed with the Walkman she'd given him for Christmas. She could hear the tinny sounds of AC/DC.

"Working okay?" she asked.

He removed the headphones and said, yeah, it was. She asked him how school was going, knowing that all kids hated being asked that question. He told her it was okay.

"I was surprised to see you at the funeral," she said. "Isn't there a cut-off age?"

"Someone got sick," he said. "I don't do it much now. Mum and Dad like me to."

"Just tell them if you don't want to."

*Yeah, right*, she thought. Like she'd been able to stand up to them when she was that age. Besides, she hadn't really wanted to. It was only when she moved out of the Catholic bubble that she realized that none of it made any sense.

"Bernard around much?" she asked. "You guys hang out?"

She wanted that for him. Better than being alone with them.

"Nup," he said. "Mum says he uses this place like a hotel."

"He's probably got a girlfriend," she said and teased, "How about you? Anyone you like?"

He looked at her as if he didn't understand the concept.

"All right then," she said and laughed. "Hang in there, buddy."

"When are you coming down again?" he asked. "I mean properly."

"Couple of weeks," she lied.

She rummaged through the boxes in the garage. One was full of high-school textbooks and was split at the sides. It had squashed the box of clothing beneath it. She had to take half the books out in order to lift it. The clothes were littered with cockroach shit. It suddenly didn't seem worth the effort—finding a jewelry box that had once been a centerpiece on her dressing table. It had been a gift for her twelfth birthday and featured blue satin lining and a ballerina that twirled to a tinkling "Somewhere My Love." She thought having it at her place in Sydney would be retro and funky.

"Looking for anything particularly?" her mother asked when she went back inside. "When are you going to clear it all out? Your dad has to park his car in the driveway."

Kim had heard it all before—if he got rid of the lawnmower that didn't work anymore, then he'd have room to park his car. It wasn't her boxes that was stopping him.

"Remember that music box you guys gave me?" she asked. "You seen it?"

"That old thing?" her mother said and turned on the small TV that sat on top of the fridge. She could watch the soaps and afternoon gameshows, and her father liked to watch the news while they ate dinner. "It probably got chucked."

"Why?" Kim asked. "It was mine."

"I *know* that," her mother said and turned the channel dial. "But it was broken. You ruined it."

"What?" Kim asked, indignant. "I did not."

But then she remembered investigating under the little bit of tulle that was the ballerina's skirt, and peeling back the satin lining to the metal innards where the music came from.

"I didn't ruin it," she repeated, but quietly.

"You did," her mother said stepping back, finally satisfied that she'd found the right channel. "It was very disappointing."

Her father came into the kitchen to wash his hands.

"Why're you doing that here?" her mother asked. "Can't you do that in the laundry, or the bathroom? There's always someone under my feet."

There was no clear reason why her father was washing his hands in the kitchen, but neither was there anyone under her mother's feet. This was just the way they were.

"Better get going," Kim said, wishing she had an "eject" button.

"Look," her father said, drying his hands on a tea towel. "Is that the crash you passed?"

On the screen was footage of a crumpled green Mazda being loaded onto a tow-truck. The reporter said that the driver, a P-plater, had been travelling over the speed limit and tried to overtake the driver in the blue Holden, a mother with two children in the car.

"Dear God," Kim's father said.

A third car, the reporter said, was an elderly couple who were apparently related to the woman and were following at too close a distance. They weren't able to stop in time. They ran up the back of the blue Holden, and the driver, Frank Giacometti of Sutherland, had died on impact due to...

"Oh, my Lord," Kim's mother said.

"I'm going to get—" Kim started, but both her parents shushed her.

They wanted to watch the sheeted body being lifted into the back of the ambulance. They wanted to know who else had died, and how were the two

children. Kim took her car keys from her bag and, on impulse, kissed her father on the cheek as he stood there in front of the fridge. Then, she kissed her mother. She may as well have kissed two statues in a museum.

"I'm off," she said, and as she walked down the hallway, she knocked on Chris's door and called out, "Bye bye."



On the way to the pub, arm in arm between Tim and Nazim, the three of them sang "Fernando," "The Winner Takes It All," and "The Day Before You Came," which Tim insisted was their best song. They argued over which one—Benny or Bjorn—they'd fuck if they absolutely had to. Neither of them asked how her day had been. She'd been scolded for being late, handed a Malibu and Coke, and sent off to her room to get ready.

The pub was smoky, sweaty, and heaving with women in white pantsuits and men in satin blouses. They pushed their way through and got to the bar. Tim put his arm across Nazim's shoulders and called over to the bartender, who he knew. He knew everyone. Kim shuffled around on the spot behind them, excited for the show and tense with the thrill she felt whenever she was out and dressed up, and free to do whatever she wanted.

The first song was "Waterloo," and Kim screamed along with everyone else at the dum-da-dum-da-dum-da-dum-da introduction that went on longer than the original. The audience worked themselves into a frenzy, whooping and clapping their hands over their heads. Tim, Nazim, and Kim jumped up and down until the singers finally belted out, *My, my!*

At the end of the first set, they found that they were standing near some friends of Tim's. They formed a circle, and then two more people joined, and a few more. Before she knew it, Kim was somehow out of the group looking at the backs of people's heads and unable to find a way in. She went outside, telling herself she needed some fresh air. She sat on a low brick wall and watched the traffic speed past. The pub was on a highway and it was a busy time of night. Across the street, a group of people were tentatively stepping off and then back onto the footpath. They were heading over to see the band if the feather boas and silver boots were anything to go by. A car sounded its horn as one of them stepped out.

Kim thought of the car crash—the elderly man from Sutherland dead, and his wife in a critical condition. She'd heard about it on the radio on the way up. The mother and two children had abrasions. As Kim had driven past the site, she saw the glitter of smashed glass on the road in the headlights. The P-plater was unharmed, but look what happened? All because he wanted to get somewhere a few minutes earlier. Gordon Cunningham was dead, too, all because he liked a ciggie. Here were these idiots across the highway, risking their lives for a night out. And Charlotte, denying herself the pleasure of a few potato chips, for what? What was going on with her?

When there was a break in the stream of cars, the group raced toward her screaming and laughing.

"Love your hair," one of the women said as they walked past.

"Thanks," Kim said.

She stood up and faced the pub. The crowd inside cheered as the band came back onstage. "Agnetha" or "Frida" was saying something, but the sound was distorted. Then she heard the piano's glissando and felt a moment of pure joy and was transported back to her bedroom. She and Charlotte stood side by side. They pointed straight ahead and sang, *You can dance!* And then they turned and sang into each other's faces, *you can ji-hive!* They'd practiced all the steps to all the songs in Kim's bedroom.

"Turn that down," Kim's mother would yell, but later she'd be whistling the tune to "Chiquititia" or "Hasta Mañana."

Kim turned and walked along the highway. It was no fun if the face you were looking at while you were singing, *you can ji-hive*, wasn't as familiar to you as your own. It was after nine o'clock but possible that Charlotte would still be awake when she called.