

Home from the Indies and home from the ocean,  
Heroes and soldiers we all shall come home;  
Still we shall find the old mill wheel in motion,  
Turning and churning that river to foam.

You with the bean that I gave when we quarrelled,  
I with your marble of Saturday last,  
Honoured and old and all gaily apparelled,  
Here we shall meet and remember the past.

*Robert Louis Stevenson, 'Keepsake Mill'*

# *Contents*

Letting go	9
Arrival	47
Miss Salt of the Sea	95
Births and deaths	133
News from home	163
Family	203

letting go

## *Fan*

Adelaide, October 1906

Fan awoke to a seagull calling to her through the open window. The air was already warm, which meant the ocean would be as flat as one of Ma's oatcakes.

Her bathing suit gaped a bit around the arms and chest – 'up top' as Auntie Florence so delicately called it – but Ma reckoned there was no money for a new one and it would have to see out the summer. Under her bare feet, the floorboards crunched with sand. So much for Ma and her 'sweep up that mess, young lady'. Fan probably still had sand in her hair and up her nose and goodness knew where else, but Ma didn't have a broom for those places.

In the kitchen, Ma was reading a letter.

'Ma, I can't find my hat,' Fan said.

'Isn't it on the back of the door?' Ma asked.

'I looked.'

'You should be more careful.'

'Auntie Florence usually brings a spare.' Fan noticed an envelope on the table. 'Who's that from?' She reached for it, but Ma snatched it away.

'None of your business.' Ma shoved the envelope into her apron pocket and pressed it to herself like she thought Fan might dive in for it. 'You planning on leaving the house in that state of indecency? Where are your clothes?'

'I was hoping you'd let me go for a quick dip on my own, early, 'cos it's already warm. Please, Ma. I'll look after Tom and Ned all day for you. Promise.'

‘All day? You must be keen. All right. Just this once and only’ – Ma pointed her finger at Fan – ‘only if there’s somebody else on the beach.’

Fan stared open-mouthed at her mother.

‘Don’t die of shock, Fan. I said just this once. Don’t go in if it’s rough. Or where you can’t touch the bottom.’

‘It won’t be rough, but yes, I know, I know,’ Fan said. ‘You worry too much. I’m the best swimmer in the whole of Semaphore.’

‘I wish you’d stick to dry land,’ Ma said. ‘Your dad says you’re more fish than girl.’

‘You should try it one day, Ma.’ Fan kissed her mother’s cheek. ‘I might be a fish, but you’re chicken.’

Fan ran past the corner shop where she’d once nicked an apple on a dare, only to spit it out because she’d felt so guilty. Past the butcher, whose window had cracked years ago but which he’d never bothered to get fixed. Past the apothecary’s shop, whose newly painted walls were already peeling from the salt and wind and blinding summer sun. She ran past the houses that got bigger the closer you got to the seafront, and over the road that divided where she lived from where she swam. Fan took a flying leap across the dunes, reaching through every inch of her arms and legs towards the bright blue sky. Then one big breath in, and the more-fish-than-girl was underwater, opening her eyes, nothing but the heartbeat of the ocean thudding in her ears.

The water held her steady and her hair spilled like ink as she surfaced. Floating on her back with everything bright and sparkly, Semaphore Jetty looked so close. Fan knew she could swim and swim and look up and still feel like she’d got nowhere. One day she’d do it – she’d swim from Semaphore to Largs and barely come up for air. Bloody hell, she’d swim all the way to Brazil, as Ma and Uncle Ernest would say. Ma would huff and bluster, no doubt about it, but Uncle Ernest would talk Ma round as usual and say, ‘Agnes, don’t worry about Fan. She’s a good swimmer,’ and then he’d make a big fuss about swimming with her even though Fan wouldn’t need the help. And Ma would no doubt hurry along the sand shouting at her from the beach, ‘You stay close to Ernest or God help me I’ll throttle you myself!’ Funny how Ma only ever talked about God when she was mad as a snake about something, and then it was always assumed that God would be on Ma’s side.

Fan licked salt off her lips. Why would God have given her these long arms, these strong legs, this mermaid hair, if she wasn’t supposed to be at

home in the water? Fan let herself sink to the bottom. She dug her hands into the seabed and opened her eyes and watched brown seaweed float by. Surely this was all the God anybody could want.

From the end of the road, Fan could see somebody sitting on the front step. She ran, to make it look like she was in a hurry in case it was Ma waiting to yell at her. It was Dad, sitting where he'd sat most of last week and the week before, whittling a piece of wood. He hardly acknowledged her, didn't even tell her off for trailing sand into the house. Maybe Dad was having a summer holiday, although Ma hadn't said anything. Fan would've thought somebody on holiday would smile a bit more, but she hadn't seen Dad smile for weeks.

## Agnes

Adelaide, October 1906

When the letter had arrived a few days ago, the shock of seeing her name and address on an envelope from Western Australia had made Agnes cry out. She scanned the page and skimmed news of a move to a new house away from the stench of the East Perth river, a place with a tram line and the promise of electric lights. She hurried through the weather, an arthritic hip and a fickle milking cow. She re-read the pages looking for one word: Walter. It wasn't there.

*I can no longer live with your father for various reasons. His heart and mind are failing and the drink has ruined him. I have asked him to leave. You must take him on.*

Agnes's head ached between her eyes. After so many years of silence, it was the same old Annie, pointing out the mess and asking someone else to clean it up. She wondered if Annie had meant to write *take him in*.

'Is he dead?' George asked.

Agnes shook her head.

'Is it Walter?'

'I wish there was something, anything, about Walter. But it's just chit-chat, and ...'

'What, love? What's wrong?' George rested his hand on hers.

'She says she can't live with him anymore. She's thrown him out and expects me to do something about it.'

'How can a woman throw her husband out?' George took the letter from Agnes and began to read.

'Annie's never been one for doing things the usual way.' Agnes rubbed her forehead. 'And you don't know my father.'

George kissed her hair, spoke in a soothing voice. 'So she thinks he hasn't got long.'

'However long he's got is too long,' Agnes said. 'I don't know why she thinks it's got anything to do with me.'

In the distance, the bell rang at the port.

'There's the bell, love,' George said. 'Here we go again.' He flexed one arm up like a circus strongman. 'Who needs those young wharfies, aye?'

Agnes kissed his forearm. 'I'm sure things will pick up soon, love.'

In an hour, George was back, grim-faced and silent.

'Tomorrow will be better, I'm sure.' Agnes rested her hand on his shoulder, but he flinched and pushed it away.

'You're all the family I need,' Agnes was fond of saying to Ernest, Florence and Sarah, but today the trip to Rosewater made her feel nauseous. She'd barely opened the door before her news spilled into the room: the letter, Annie, her father, the throwing out and the taking on.

'Annie was always so tolerant of your father's ... temper,' Ernest said.

'He was on his best behaviour when you lived with us,' Agnes said. 'Walter and me hardly recognised him. He didn't want our cousin saying anything bad about him.'

'Ernest, darling, what do they do in the west with the old men who have no family or nowhere to go?' Florence asked.

'They sleep rough. In the streets,' Ernest said. 'Boarding houses. The churches do what they can.'

'Well then, it's settled,' Florence said, patting Agnes's hand. 'Annie can find him a room in a boarding house.'

'You must have known this day would come.' From the armchair, Sarah tapped her walking stick on the floor. 'He must be nearly eighty, Agnes. He's outlived all his brothers, including my dear Sam. Do you want your eighty-year-old father sleeping on the street?'

'It won't come to that, Mother.' Ernest put his arm around Agnes's shoulders. 'Poor Ag. Florence is right, you know, as always.'

'He's an old, sick man with nowhere to go,' Sarah said. 'Perhaps he's outlived all his mistakes, too. He's still your father, Agnes.'

'I'm not going back, and Annie's not shipping him here like some kind of cargo.' Agnes smiled at Florence. 'You're right. It's settled.'

A week later, George fell into bed in the blackest part of night and rolled over to give Agnes a whisky-kiss. She curled around him. He stroked her



hair and whispered, 'Guess what, Agnes, love, I asked around. I know where I can get all the work I want. Plenty of it.' And the way he fumbled with her, well, Agnes knew he was his old self again.

'Fremantle, love,' George said. 'Word has it there's loads of work there. Other Sunderland men say so. Shifts every day. Wages every week.'

'I told you, I'm never going back.' Agnes pulled away from him.

'Your old man could pay us something for board and lodgings. You want it to keep going like it is here?' George's voice had a flinty edge. 'We need the money.'

Agnes rested her head on his chest. 'Annie can find him a room in a boarding house or one of those places the church has for old men down on their luck.'

'Agnes, love.' George sat up on his elbows. 'I know you said things were bad when you left Perth, but what kind of daughter leaves her father to die on the street?'

'It's not like that.' Agnes's eyes welled. 'I'm not a monster, George.'

'I know, love. I'm sorry.' George held her. 'Maybe the old man's mellowed with age.'

'Not him.'

'We could give it a go in Fremantle. I know I can earn good money there.' George kissed her hand. 'I tell you what, if it doesn't work out, we can always come back.' He stroked her hair. 'I promise.'

Semaphore beach was crowded with families in colourful hats. The water teemed with swimmers and beyond the jetty, tiny white waves flickered and disappeared. Fan and Tom ran ahead to their usual sheltered spot in a shallow dip of dune. Ernest and Florence's children followed in a straggly line. Ned was last of all. Agnes, Ernest and Florence followed the trail of footprints until they caught up to the children. The sky was bright and clear but beyond Largs, around the blind curve of coast, Agnes noticed the horizon was stained with purple cloud, and she shivered. Perhaps there was more than one storm coming today.

Florence pulled a hat out of her bag. 'Please don't send this one to Fan's Mysterious Hat Graveyard.'

'Oh, Auntie Florence, it's beautiful.' Fan put it on. The hat itself was plain, but Florence had tied two white ribbons around it and they danced in the breeze. She pulled the brim down low and tight, then just as quickly tossed it on the sand. 'Race everyone to the water!'

'I'm swimming with you all today,' Florence said, 'so none of the usual tiresome rules will apply.'

The scramble of arms and legs and bathing suits began and the children disappeared into the water. Even from this distance Agnes knew the bony curve of Tom's spine, Ned's lopsided walk. And, of course, Fan's unruly hair, her sweet, clear voice shouting some order at the others, always with her head half-turned towards Agnes and half-turned towards the open sea.

Agnes had packed marmalade sandwiches and brought enough money for ice-creams. The children stayed in the water much later than usual, long after the breeze began whipping the waves up, and Agnes resisted calling them in. Fan declared she was the last person in the whole of South Australia to leave the water that day.

'The best day ever, Ma. The best.' Shivering and dripping, she pressed a small stone into Agnes's hand. 'I got it way out there. Aunty Florence didn't mind how deep I went.' Fan twirled. 'See? I'm still here, it didn't swallow me up.'

'Florence has eyes in the back of her head, young lady.'

'I got that stone 'cos it reminds me of you. See how dark it is? But when the sun warms it up it goes lighter and you can see lots of pretty colours.'

'Thank you. I think.' Agnes put the stone in her pocket and took George's old jumper out of her bag. 'Put this on.'

'Best day ever,' Fan repeated, and pulled the jumper over her ears. The arms hung almost to her knees. 'Ma, I'm thinking about something important.' Fan bit her lip like she always did when she was nervous. 'I know you think I can't, but I want to swim between the jetties. I know I can do it.'

'It's a long way, Fan. And dangerous. Most grown men can't do it.'

'Can't I at least try?'

Once everyone was dried off and dressed, they walked back towards the tram. Ernest and Florence herded their children on board.

'How about next time?' Agnes said to Fan. 'Next time we all come here for a Sunday beach day, you can try the swim.'

Fan threw her arms around Agnes. 'You're the best, Ma.'

That evening, the rain crashed loud and shrill on the tin roof.

'I bloody well hate you.' Fan's eyes blazed.

‘Mind your language,’ Agnes said.

‘I’m not going.’ Fan kicked the leg of the table.

‘That’s enough,’ George said.

‘I knew something was up. Marmalade sandwiches. Ice-cream. Swimming between the jetties. I hate you, Ma.’

‘I said that’s enough.’ George’s jaw tightened. ‘Watch how you speak to your mother, young lady.’

‘What about Ma? Why don’t you tell her off for all her big, fat lies?’

‘Shut up, Fan. You’re making it worse,’ Tom said. Ned’s bottom lip trembled.

Fan ran from the kitchen. Down the hall, a door slammed shut.

Agnes did her best to answer the tide of questions from Ned and Tom. Things were tough on the Port Adelaide docks and there would be more work for their father in Fremantle. Her father – their grandfather – had fallen ill and his wife, Annie, couldn’t look after him anymore. He would be coming to live with them. Ned mouthed *grandfather*, a word he didn’t know, and Tom repeated it slowly. Tom said a grandfather was some kind of family but Ned still didn’t understand.

‘What’s he like?’ Tom asked. ‘How come you never said anything about him before?’

‘There was nothing to say before.’ Agnes reached for George’s hand. ‘My father came out from England many years ago for better prospects – to seek his fortune, like so many men did, when things were bad in England. Your dad did the same.’

‘That I did,’ George said. ‘Never wanted to go back.’

‘I left Western Australia when I was young,’ Agnes continued. ‘I met your father in Adelaide, and here we are.’

‘Is there a beach?’ Ned asked. ‘Will it be like here?’

‘A port, a beach, a roof over our heads,’ George said. ‘Just like here.’

Agnes lay awake long after George had gone to sleep. It wasn’t long before the rain slowed, but the low sobbing from behind Fan’s closed door made everything feel damp.

*Edwin*

Perth, October 1906

Edwin struggled. His back had ached constantly for the better part of a week. He lined the wooden trunk with newspaper and put in a pair of boots, his tailoring bits and pieces. He covered all that up with another layer of newspapers, then put in his few remaining books. A couple of waistcoats and shirts. His good jacket.

He coughed with the effort, but he was determined not to ask Annie for help. The days of helping each other were long gone. After so many years, he could usually tell what she was thinking, but not today.

He pulled on his threadbare socks. These days he was grateful for cooler mornings, because his feet and ankles always swelled up in the heat. Years ago, Annie knitted him a new pair of socks each winter. He made her a dress each summer. It was one of the little things they had begun to do after Walter had left and there was an unspoken need in the house for kindness. Edwin would say how warm the new socks were and Annie would twirl and unpin her fine, grey hair and parade like a tailor's model. He couldn't remember when they had stopped these exchanges. Just that one winter, he'd pulled on a pair of socks and realised how old and full of holes they were. He was wearing the same pair now.

He put the almost-full rum bottle in his pocket. He'd need it to help get to sleep if Agnes's children were noisy. He'd need it if Agnes's children were quiet, if truth be told.

'Don't forget that.' Annie pointed to an old brown leather bag. It was no bigger than something you'd keep a pair of boots in.

'I'm unlikely to forget it.'

‘Good. I don’t want nothing of you left behind.’

‘Except the house,’ Edwin said. ‘You’re happy for me to leave that behind.’

‘It’s the least I deserve after serving my sentence with you.’

It had been Annie’s idea to sell up and buy a little plot this far south of the river, with its promise of trams and electrics, and he took joy in blaming her whenever something went wrong. Despite the stench from the slaughter yard and the often-stagnant river, he hadn’t wanted to leave East Perth. Even after that terrible winter when Smith deserted his family for the goldfields and Mad Molloy shot two blacks and then himself, Edwin refused. Told her all her talk of land and curses meant she’d been talking to lunatics too long. It was only when she’d said, ‘What if Eddie comes back? If we stay in East Perth, he’ll always know where to find you,’ that he’d felt a tightening in his guts. He felt it now, although it was probably just too much rum and not enough dinner.

‘No need to watch me pack,’ he said to her.

‘Oh, but it’s the last pleasure you’re ever going to give me, Edwin. I want to make sure you’re really going.’

‘By God, you are the worst of all my punishments.’

‘My dear Edwin.’ Annie folded her arms and smiled. ‘Despite my daily prayers, you ain’t dead yet. You could have years left. Who knows what punishments the good Lord’s still got up his sleeve?’

After she left him alone, he drank more rum and tried to remember the last time he felt anything for Annie but sour contempt. It had been years since she made up a bed for him in the sleep-out and locked the door to the house at night. Edwin opened the brown leather bag and took out a bundle of letters. Sometimes he read them and sometimes he didn’t, but he needed to know they were there. He opened the tobacco pouch and held the lock of straw-gold hair to his cheek.

He drank more rum. Would he recognise his daughter? Agnes was barely eighteen when she left and now she had children of her own. Edwin stared into the blank years and tried to imagine an older version of his brown-eyed, gritty daughter, better than Walter at all the things that mattered, the only girl who’d lived. His eyes burned, his heart burned, he rubbed his chest – the damn drink.

Annie shouted some insult or other from the next room. He thumped the door in reply. He drank more rum and unfolded the blue cloth and traced his calloused fingers over the embroidered image of Lichfield Cathedral. There were moth-holes around the cloth’s edges, and the white thread had yellowed, but Eliza’s stitching had lasted. His sister had always

been so much smarter and better at everything than he was. He could imagine her examining his life and finding shoddy workmanship: 'The tailor's son had all the advantages, but in the end everything he made fell to pieces.'