



*'A tale of a beautiful love, of the  
grandest kind.'* – Theresa Smith Writes

**KIM KELLY**

**The Truth  
& Addy  
Loest**



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ADDY LOEST  
IS PROBABLY  
NOT GOING TO  
DIE TODAY

The house on Flower Street was one of those narrow, crumbling mid-terrace wrecks that hadn't seen much love for a hundred years. Its peeling paintwork and rotting floorboards ensured the respectable poor had moved out long ago, as they had across the whole of the inner-city suburb of Chippendale, and in their place a ragtag band of university students, artists and assorted dropouts had come to call it home.

And Addy Loest was one of them – she was all of them, in fact. She woke that morning, a Tuesday, the last day of April, 1985, queasy from a cocktail of last night's green ginger wine and a rapidly gathering guilt at the whole terrible load of herself. She had tried, she had really tried, but now, halfway through the first term of her second year of a combined bachelor's degree of arts and law, she had decided she might actually rather die than continue with the latter. She was not going to become a lawyer. She could not care for the offers or acceptances or considerations of contractual agreements; she didn't want to know one dot about civil and criminal

procedure; the only dispute resolution she was interested in was how she was going to tell her father what she had decided.

*I'll tell him on Sunday – I will*, she promised the inside of her eyelids, not yet ready to face today, never mind Sunday, when she'd make the weekly train-trek home for lunch. Like a good girl. A good girl who respected and honoured her hardworking, self-sacrificing father with the truth.

She could already hear his fist slamming down on the dining table, the flinty remnants of his German accent sharpening with every syllable: *'What did you say, Adrianna?'*

*Don't tell him*, her lesser angel of self-preservation whispered. It wasn't as though he could easily find out: he was a hundred kilometres away, down the sand-swept sapphire coast that lay between Sydney and Port Kembla, where he worked six days a week as hard-headed, hard-hatted foreman at the steelworks there.

She burrowed further under her quilt, its midnight-indigo cover pretending darkness, but it was no use: she'd never get back to sleep again now. Outside, the city had begun to churn, the brakes of a semi-trailer wheezing up to the traffic lights along the main road beyond. It was somewhere around seven o'clock, she supposed, squinting out from under the quilt to find daylight struggling above the rusted tin rooftops of the row behind and through her grime-fuzzed window. She blinked at the pale grey sky, cotton-wool clouds blushed with the sunrise as though they'd brushed the rooftops

on their way past. Her father would be getting himself ready for the day, she knew, combing his silvering hair, lighting his first cigarette, smiling to himself that his daughter would not only be the first lawyer in the family after a generation disrupted by war and intercontinental migration, but that she would be an industrial relations specialist of global renown forging once and for all the socialist utopia that was their birthright. Her brother, Nick, was only expected to win next Friday night's boxing match. Nick, two years the elder, would finish an unremarkable degree in economics this year and would probably go on to become a heavy-weight auditor for the taxation department, but for the time being, he was little more than a muscle-bound ape. They weren't very close, not these days, not like they used to be. Nick was indulged, spoilt, his way into the world of men paved with easily achievable expectation; while Addy's way was —

Her pulse began to thump. She sat up, her chest suddenly tight, aching, her mouth dry.

*I'm going to die.* She was certain, so certain: dread, a great wave of it, crashed about her and within her. *I'm having a heart attack.*

*No, you're not,* she told herself. *The doctors have said there's nothing wrong with you or your heart but existential angst and self-obsessed hypochondria – probably brought on by your own laziness and disappointment with yourself at not wanting to continue with law. Loser.*

She'd been to see a doctor again only a couple of weeks ago, this time at the Women's Clinic across from

the university, a tank-tough matron peering disapprovingly over horn-rimmed glasses at her: 'You're not pregnant, are you?'

'No!' No chance of that. Addy didn't even have a boyfriend, not really, only Luke, whom she referred to as her boyfish, short for boyfriend-ish, just someone lovely she tortured regularly by not having sex with him – and she had no idea of the why of that, either. They'd had sex, of course – they'd been going out almost five months. They'd had sex three and a half times. She just wasn't keen to do it again.

The doctor had sighed as though she'd been told a lie; she told Addy: 'You're very thin. Try eating properly for a month, see how that goes.' With the unspoken suggestion: *Now, get out of my office and stop wasting my time.*

*I am going to die.* Addy was so certain, even as she was talking herself away from the dread.

*Shut up, idiot.*

Yes, she agreed. She got up, the thumping sensation beginning to pass, and she shambled to the bathroom. *I need a hamburger.*

The greasy Joe's up the road, on the corner, didn't open until nine, though. She turned on the shower and undressed, and as she did, she glanced over a bony hip at her bony knees and her bony feet, wondering if her diet was the problem. After all, hamburgers and coffee by day, fried rice and green ginger rotgut by night, and chocolate anything in between, wasn't exactly Pritikin, was it. When she was skint and practising the virtues of imposed frugality, she ate bananas and fish fingers and

creamed corn on toast, sometimes with a slice or two of tomato. When she was drunk, she craved felafel. Her diet was indeed appalling. It also couldn't have been the problem, or not all of it, anyway. She'd been having these unfunny turns for more than a year, on and off; mostly few and far between; occasionally in clusters; occasionally waking her, shaking her in the night, gasping for air: *I'M GOING TO DIE!* Those last were the most frightening of the lot. The first had been more confusing than anything else: she'd been on the train, on the way to the first day of Orientation Week at the university, when she'd felt unable to take a full breath, as though the steamy, summer warmth inside the midday carriage was hampering the process. A nameless panic had prickled around the edges of her heart; her pulse had raced; but then the train had pulled into Central Station, and she'd forgotten all about it – until the next time.

*Stress, that's all this is – stress-head.*

That seemed to be the common thread, except for when it wasn't: like the time, just these summer holidays past, when she was home and sunbathing on Fisherman's Beach, alone and contented, blank-headed, listening only to the gulls calling, playing on the warm breeze; or the time she was making her father a sleep-in breakfast, a few days after Christmas, still celebrating her final High Distinction for English Lit, flipping eggs ahead of a long day of doing nothing but reading the poetry of John Donne, dipping into the texts for the academic year to come, this year, the lines



of one of the poems she'd read the day before swirling through her mind like sweet-scented smoke:

*Our two souls therefore, which are one,  
Though I must go, endure not yet  
A breach, but an expansion,  
Like gold to airy thinness beat.*

*How beautiful*, she'd thought. As the daughter of a metallurgical worker, she'd found that metaphor of the bonds of love expressed in beaten gold particularly romantic: stretched to a gossamer wisp and yet unbreakable, a tiny, tiny wire wound round the globe. And at that she'd found the notion bleakly sad: for she didn't think she'd ever feel anything like that for anyone, certainly not poor lovely Luke, whom she'd only just met then – and as she'd thought of him: *BANG*. Heart was thumping, bursting, not with love but with terror.

'What's wrong, Sprout?' her father had asked her, calling her by that name of deepest affection and permanent concern for her smallness. 'You look as if you've seen a ghost.'

'Nothing,' she'd said. 'No one.' She'd found enough of a smile to fool him, her focus on the burnt-orange kitchen tiles behind him: 'Just dreaming.' *Just fighting to keep my heart in my chest and my feet on the ground.*

She couldn't worry him with anything like the truth, whatever that might have been: *Dad, I think I'm dying*. She never let him know if she had the merest head cold; last winter, she'd sprained her ankle falling out of a pub

on too-high heels, and didn't go home that following Sunday, so he wouldn't see the trouble it gave her: 'I have to study, Dad, I'm sorry – Legal Institutions exam on Monday.' *Liar.*

She'd seen seven different doctors so far, quietly, scurrying into their surgeries like an overgrown and underfed rodent, hugging her too-big shirt around herself, around her conspicuous nothingness, hiding her everythingness: 'Um, I'm not really sure if I'm sick or not . . .' She'd had two electrocardiograms done, and four doses of antibiotics in case it was an infection of some strange kind.

*But it's just me, isn't it. Dying. Of non-specific dying-ness.* She stood there under the shower this bleary, weary morning, resigned, all beaten out in the post-panic settling of her nerves, with the hot water a blessing on the back of her neck. She tested her breathing in the quickly thickening steam: she was all right. She wasn't going to die just yet, unless perhaps a meteor speared through the tiny window above the shower and into her head, or unless the Soviet Union decided to commence the Nuclear Holocaust, or Ronald Reagan, in a fit of dementia, decided to conduct a missile test on Sydney, or the IRA moved in next door. All as likely as Orwell's dystopian nightmares becoming prophecy: *1984* was so last year. There were terrible enough real things going on in the world, she reminded herself: there was a famine in Africa, war in Lebanon, terrorists in Palestine, terrorists in Spain, contamination of Aboriginal land from atomic bombs dropped in the red desert after the last

world war. Addy Loest had nothing to complain about.

She stood so long there in the shower she disgusted herself with the flagrant waste of hot water when so many had none, yet she stood there a little longer, anyway. *I have a hangover*, she groaned some justification. *You drink too much*, she growled back at herself. A flutter of panic followed that she might be running late now for her Contracts tutorial at nine, but then she recalled she wasn't going to attend it, and relief returned. That relief she felt meant withdrawing from law was the right thing to do, didn't it? Wasn't it the right thing to do? She didn't feel this kind of aversion to her other subjects: the thought of English Lit at eleven was one that made her want the clock to go faster, the quicker to discover what new revelation was waiting for her there. What new magic. Today would be the first lecture in a special study of the eighteenth-century poet Alexander Pope. What she'd read of Pope so far had seemed impenetrable, like a string of antique-Englishman in-jokes and allusions she'd never get, but that only dared her to want to know what the fuss was about. She wanted to know Pope's *story*. She wanted to know just about everyone's story: why people thought or felt or spoke the way they did; where they'd come from. Stories: they'd always brought her enlightenments and delights of all kinds, and fabulous mysteries that, on the page, seemed to stay still long enough for her to grasp, to brush her fingertips against at least. Language danced across her soul in shapes and patterns she'd only just begun to identify, not so much as grammatical parts, but as a

dialect of truth. The real truth. She glimpsed a future of herself at a little desk by a window overlooking the sea, or a sea of trees, writing, and writing, and writing, though she couldn't yet see what truths she might tell.

*You are fricken deranged, that's what you are. Need any more proof?*

She turned off the shower, shying from this secret at the bottom of all her unreachable secrets, and dried herself – to the sounds of her housemate, Roz, awakening too, her bed just the other side of the bathroom wall. Moaning: 'Oh yesssss. There . . . There . . .' Roz had a new boy in there, there – the drummer in a band that had a Wednesday-night residency at their most frequented pub, the Harrington Inn, or the Hairy Egg as it was otherwise known. 'Fuck me!' Roz shrieked. 'Come on!' Roz was never shy. Roz was a voluptuously tousled, full-flame redhead, otherwise known as The Unmade Bed, and Addy was a little bit in love with her – more in love with her than she'd ever been with any boy. They'd known each other since Year Ten, having met during a junior high school public-speaking championship, held at Parliament House, in Canberra, and having been the only two from state schools to have made it through to the semi-finals – Addy from Wollongong High, and Roz from Caringbah High – they'd stuck like glue. They were practically from the same regional wilderness as well, south of the metropolis; to the natural inhabitants of the University of Sydney, anyone who hailed from anywhere south of Bondi was a foreigner, to be regarded with some suspicion. 'Don't slow down!' Roz slapped her

drummer boy, possibly on the arse, and Addy heard him yelp: 'Jesus!'

Addy winced, and not only for him. It seemed the more hedonistically and flamboyantly herself Roz had become across the almost twelve months they'd shared this tumbledown terrace house, the more Addy had shrunk. Roz was a fine arts femme fantabulous, painting herself in large, loud splashes across any and all canvases she chose to inhabit; while Addy . . . Addy seemed barely here at all. She hadn't even shown her face at a Young Labor meeting all year; couldn't imagine public speaking anywhere these days; it was hard enough to have to make the required contributions to tutorial discussions. What had happened to that girl, Adrianna Loest, who could stand on a stage and fill five minutes to brimming with all manner of guff, from the meaning of wealth beyond money to whether or not women could be heroes too, and make it fascinating, entertaining, words falling so easily from her tongue. She remembered the crowd laughing with her; she would float upon those drifts of laughter; she would thrill inside the spotlight stillness of their listening silences. That girl her father was sure would change the world. Where had she gone? A mouse-brown ghost in the misted mirror. Was she dead already?

'Yes! Yes! Give it to me!' Roz was off the planet.

Addy slunk back to her room, threw on yesterday's black jeans and flannelette shirt of blue-and-green checks, her usual student uniform these days, and she sat on the end of her bed. The digital alarm clock on

her bedside chest said it was only a quarter to eight, but she didn't want to sit there waiting for hamburger-time, empty and too full, waiting on the end of a terrible play, staring at the blunt-edged numbers glowing emergency-red at her, like the Doomsday Clock set at three minutes to midnight, three minutes to terminal, global disaster. This was a long three minutes. She glanced around her room, not that there was much to glance at, the room being all of three metres by three-point-two; and she'd tidied the barely contained chaos of her wardrobe yesterday afternoon, her nocturnal-frock collection, her trove of most marvellous material things; she'd tidied her already tidy bookshelf as well. She tidied her bed now, straightening her quilt and folding her granny blanket neatly over it, lining up the colourful crocheted squares, so that she wouldn't look like a slob, in case —

*Oh for God's sake — get a life. Seriously.*

She grabbed her bag, her grunge-smudged canvas satchel, checked that her notebooks and her copy of Pope's *Selected Poetry and Prose* were there, as well as her unread library book, *The Poetical Career of Alexander Pope*, and Tacitus' *The Annals* for Ancient History, still faintly smelling of squashed banana, and *Gatsby* for American Lit, too, and then she crept down the stairs.

The lounge room at the end of the bannister was dim, windowless, but Addy could see well enough the remains of last night on the coffee table: the ashtray overflowing, sticky glasses ranged around the board game they'd played — Trivial Pointlessness, or something like that, it was called, a new game that their other housemate,

Harriet, had brought back from somewhere expensive.

Harriet Rawley-Hogue, or HRH as she preferred to be known, was in fine arts with Roz, but that was about all they had in common. Harriet was the daughter of a judge, had gone to one of the country's most prestigious private schools, looked like something Modigliani might have framed, had a boyfriend who was in his final year of medicine, as well as being ridiculously handsome, permanently tanned, about to pop the question any moment, and no doubt this minute cradling her between sculpted arms as they slept in the front room up the hall – HRH's private parlour, complete with four-poster and silk drapery. Harriet was slumming it here with them, 'Learning a little worldliness,' she'd sigh condescendingly; Addy imagined that even Harriet's parents found her insufferable and had turfed her out. Still, the cast-off furniture, kitchen appliances and state-of-the-art stereo Harriet had also brought with her made the pain worthwhile – and made their place pretty cool, by comparison to most student digs. There might have been a hole in the floorboards under the chaise longue, but they had a chaise longue – plush powdery-lavender velvet, with scrolly repro Queen Anne legs. Eye-poppingly horrible, really, but cool.

They also had a piano, thanks to HRH, an elegant old upright, and Harriet's most redeeming feature – not just the piano itself, though. Sometimes, Harriet would play it, and she was very good. She'd play mostly Chopin etudes and Addy could listen to her all day. There was no piano at home, at Port, only the radiogram and her

father's massive classical record collection. Very uncool out there in the Illawarra wilderness of steel and coal, where the only crescendos likely to be heard emerged from the rugby league commentary at a sneaky burst for the try line with three minutes to the full-time whistle, and any music that wasn't AC/DC was for poofers. Music, as in real *music* music, the kinds of music that gave Addy glimpses of who she really was and where she was really from, was something special she shared with her dad; Sunday afternoons listening to Beethoven paint seas of emotions into her she couldn't yet know; listening to the shushing of the surf, to the ripples of generations leading her back to a small town in central Germany she'd never seen. And at this moment, it all made her think of him again – her father.

His fist slamming down on the tablecloth, making the salt and pepper jump.

The instant ache of longing to know the truth of him – to understand – and never being able to ask. Because the truth hurts. The truth hurt him. Sometimes, if she stayed over on the Sunday night, after a glass of Riesling too many, he'd ask her to dance, and he'd look at her, there in his arms, and he'd let her see the tears in his eyes – not for her, but for her mother. They'd met in the dining-room hut of the Balgownie Migrant Workers Hostel in 1955 – he'd been nineteen, almost twenty, the same age Addy was now. Her mother, Elke, had been seventeen, a trainee machinist at the Friedelle Children's Wear factory. They were both orphans, washed up on these shores; they'd done everything properly: scrimped



and saved for their marriage, for seven years they put away every spare penny until they had enough to put down the deposit on a patch of land on Gallipoli Street, living in a caravan there until they could afford to build their humble fibro home, made grand to them with its ocean-facing views, but none of their carefulness could stop fate from robbing Peter Loest of his Elke. She had just told him she was pregnant again, with what they'd hoped would be their third child; she died of an ectopic rupture the next day. Addy was only two and a half, and knew nothing more of any of it, except for her father's silent, stoic grief – a grief she supposed was only ever made worse because she looked so much like her mother, with her fine long nose and large eyes, which, she could only guess from the three black-and-white photographs she possessed, were the same crystalline blue, hair the same pale brown, too. Addy often imagined that if her mother had lived, they'd sit around complaining about their boring hair, and maybe talking about Germany.

'Germany?' her father would snort at any attempt at a question. 'No one wants to know anything about Germany – and neither should you.'

The war and every loss it had brought were still too close for him, forty years on.

*I should get to my Contracts tute. How can I not finish law? How can I disappoint him?*

*Hamburger.*

The resident cat – a stray called No Name – blinked at her from the top of the piano. He was a pretty thing, with an almost perfectly symmetrical marmalade splash

across his otherwise grey face, making it seem as though his green eyes were peering through translucent butterfly wings. He yawned and curled back into himself.

She said aloud, 'You're no help,' reaching into her bag for the smaller of her notebooks, to leave a note, ostensibly for Roz, but really – what for? Just in case? She'd always been a note-leaver, just in case, and yet like the unfunny turns, her notes had subtly, although surely, increased in intensity and frequency lately. It seemed she couldn't leave a space without some explanation, some mark that she'd been there, some clue as to where she'd gone. She wrote now:

*Am never drinking again, et cetera. Have left in search of early hamburger. Should I fail to return within a day or so, assume I have fallen into a vat of salted lard. Died doing what she loved – Addy X*

She tore out the page and placed it under the paper-weight between No Name and her telephone book. Then, just before she turned to leave, just as she was giving the cat a fleeting rub under his pretty little chin, something moved behind her: on the brown couch, the decrepit leather relic of indeterminate age that sat across from the lavender chaise, opposite in every way, with its lame disguise of pink paisley bedspread and assorted scatter cushions. And there was a body inside it this morning. She could see a mess of dark, shaggy hair at one end; black suede boots at the other. A foggy recollection that this was the singer in the band – musical

relation of Drummer Boy upstairs. The band was called Elbow – *Who calls a band Elbow?* – and they were a post-punk, alternative folk-rock, jingle-jangle quartet, duelling guitars around an earnest baritone, like Elvis, but after too many cones, delivering dinky earworms like, ‘She’s a spoonful of blueness, so sweet and so dark, she’s a moonbeam, she’s a daydream, she is barefoot in the park’ – that sort of wet nonsense. She couldn’t remember his name, though, any more than she could Drummer Boy’s. What had they talked about last night? Snatches of chat came back to her, voices raised over the current conversational standards: the looming threat of university fees and other evils of neo-conservatism; and then she’d won a piece of Trivial Pointlessness plastic whatever on the question: *Which race car driver won his third Bathurst 1000 in 1978?* She answered: Peter Brock. The singer boy had jumped up off the floor and shouted: ‘How did you know that?’ Slapping his thighs, he’d loomed over her, all tall denim stovepipes, fashionably threadbare, faintly accusatory. She’d shrugged and poured herself another drink; she didn’t know how to say, ‘My dad loves motor racing, and boxing, and rugby league, and Beethoven, so suck on that.’ She didn’t know how to ask: ‘Why are you so shocked at a girl winning a piece of plastic whatever on a sports question?’

And she didn’t want to talk to him now. She didn’t want to talk to anyone.

He turned again under the pink paisley, squinting up at her, and she couldn’t get out of there fast enough.

\*

‘With a little bit of extra beetroot, please,’ she asked the man at the Olympia Café, the early-opener up on King Street, almost a kilometre away, in Newtown, a long strip of shops on the chipped pastel-plaster edge of western Sydney.

‘More beetroot?’ He looked over his shoulder at her from the grill and smiled. ‘I like the beetroot, too,’ he said, kindness in his gruff, rough voice; a nice man, presumably Greek and about the same age as her father, face lined with some similar boatload of cares.

Addy only nodded in reply. She was almost tearfully hungry now and a dull headache sat above her eyes.

‘You don’t get the beetroot in Maccadonalds,’ he said, turning back to the grill.

Addy nodded again, out the window. She’d never set foot in one of *those* hamburger joints, franchises of which seemed to be springing up everywhere now. Their prices might have been a little cheaper than a greasy Joe’s, but it wasn’t real food, so her father would say; when he was drunk, he’d also say the whole operation was a front for the CIA in a way that left her wondering if it might be true. She watched the first spots of rain dot the footpath outside, cars whizzing by, a bus thundering past, rattling the glass in its tired old frame, and she wondered what this shop might have been, originally. One of the buildings across the road had the year ‘1895’ inscribed on its facade like a block-type date stamp, but the ornate masonry around the arched windows of its upper floor

looked somehow medieval and the decorative pediment above them seemed to have escaped from a Roman temple; the whole thing had been painted the colour of a lime milkshake, and at street level a new Thai restaurant had just moved in. All of the buildings up King Street were individually eccentric in this way – pub, butcher, fruit shop, pawn broker, record store, book emporium, second-hand furniture, bakery, pizza place, Chinese takeaway. All of them had been something grander once, or maybe people had simply cared more then, about the things they looked at – why not put a domed turret or a Juliet balcony on a charcoal chicken shop?

*No such thing as a charcoal chicken shop in 1895 – idiot.*

*I just meant —*

‘Here you go, love.’ The Greek café man brought her hamburger over on a plate, and oh God it was perfect: oozing barbeque sauce and fuchsia beetroot juice, burnt onions and sausage mince spilling from the sesame-seed sprinkled bun, this hamburger glimmered before her as something not quite real. Something magical. This could have had something to do with the blaring glare of the fluorescent lighting inside the shop reflecting at double strength off the mad yellow laminate tabletop on which the hamburger had been placed, but oh it was beautiful.

Addy looked up at the man and beamed: ‘Thank you.’

‘Is okay.’ He smiled again, and reached behind him to the high, tiled counter, for another plate. For one horrific second she thought he was going to join her at the table. *No, no, no!* Hamburgers were best eaten alone,

and this one – this one was special. She didn't want to share it in any sense. But he wasn't going to join her; he placed this other plate beside the one in front of her: it was piled high with hot chips. He said: 'On the house, for you, young lady. Eat up.'

'Oh!' The surprise caught in her throat. He was too kind; he probably thought she was starving, miserably scrawny and broke. She wasn't broke, though: she worked two long shifts a week in the toy department at the Town Hall Variety Store in the city – Thursdays from two until nine, and Saturdays from eight until five – all per the Shopworkers Union regulations and all above the hourly award rates. They were good to her there as well, the managers, always letting her juggle shifts if she needed to with a change of timetable at uni. She paid no tuition fees, not yet at least, her rent was low and she got a fifteen percent discount on stationery and basic comestibles at work. She had it damn easy, really. But this nice, kind man had given her an extra plate of pity. She must have looked like just another poor King Street dero, she supposed.

She hung her head over her food, pushed aside all guilt and self-loathing for the pleasure and privilege of hamburger, and ate every last mouthful as a moral obligation; she ate every chip, too; washed it all down with an orange fizzy drink.

*That's better.* She almost belched out aloud. She glanced at her wristwatch: it was a couple of minutes after nine now – less than two hours until English Lit. She supposed she might head for the library, read some

more Pope before the lecture, but she wrote a note for lovely café man first:

*Dear Mr Olympia Café,*

*That hamburger was superb, and your kindness will never be forgotten. I needed both this morning, very much. I hope you have a wonderful day. 😊 X*

She never signed her name on notes to strangers, just the smiley face and one kiss. As the man was now busy taking an order from a group of construction types wanting an industrial quantity of egg-and-bacon rolls, she tucked the note under the neat little stack she'd made of her plates and left without a word or wave, or a second glance at the half-a-dozen pairs of hairy legs crowding the counter, football socks pushed down above dusty steel-capped boots; didn't turn around when one of them gave her a leery, 'Why don't ya smile, sweetheart,' out the door. She knew that type a bit too well.

The rain was falling a little more heavily, giving her an excuse to pick up her pace, to get away from him, and to cross the road. Under the tin awning here, the rain crashed heavier still; she didn't fancy running through this downpour, all the way to the library – her books would get soaked, and so would she. It was mid-autumn cool turning cold and she was coatless; she hadn't brought an umbrella, either. Supposing she might pick one up for a dollar at the nearest el cheapo discount store, she backtracked to do precisely that, but before she got

there, she passed an elderly woman letting herself into one of the shops along the way, muttering something under her breath, seeming to have trouble with her keys, grappling with them awkwardly, as she carried four sizeable shopping bags, those sort of roll-up nylon bags that fit half a cow in them once unfurled, two slung on each arm.

Addy instinctively slowed, and asked: ‘Can I give you a hand?’

The woman frowned over her shoulder, but there was a smile in her bright blue eyes. ‘It is all right, thank you, dear,’ she said. ‘I have fought with worse.’

An accent thickly, unmistakeably Germanic.

Addy laughed, with some warm reflex: ‘All the same – let me help with your bags. Please.’

‘That’s very thoughtful, dear.’ The woman smiled entirely now, a big, broad smile that seemed to comprise most of her face. She was quite elderly, perhaps seventy or more, and her hair, pulled back in a timelessly stylish chignon, was white, but there was something jaunty about her; spry. She wore a simple yet smartly tailored suit of plum-coloured wool, expensive-looking, European, and black shoes that appeared equally so. Addy immediately wanted to know her – know what a woman like this was doing letting herself into a shop in shabby old Newtown. What kind of shop it was Addy couldn’t recall. *A haberdashery?* Although she found herself in Newtown once or twice a week, she didn’t remember this shop at all; or perhaps it was only that the lights hadn’t been switched on yet, making the window



seem unfamiliar. Was that a zebra's head she could see within the sweep of a red velvet curtain?

She said to the old woman, taking two of her bags: 'It's no trouble. I just enjoyed a plate of free hot chips. One good deed deserves another, et cetera.'

'Good, good,' the woman replied distractedly, finally popping the lock, and giving the door a little kick with her fine patent-leather toe.

Addy was met with a draught of some sort of floral scent, as though the old shop exhaled. She took a couple of paces back, to check her bearings, asking herself again: *What shop is this?* In looking up between the awning of this one and the next, to try to see the facade above, she copped a face full of rain; her vision blurred, but she saw clearly enough: this was a building of bare brick, small colonial bricks, dark pink, almost the colour of the woman's suit, and unadorned in any way; it was perhaps the oldest building in the row. A bus honked – she was standing there with one foot on the road – and as she stepped back across the footpath, she saw the shop window now glowed, and so did the name of the place, in swirling cursive, quite unmissable gold lettering: *The Curiosity Shop*. There was the zebra, looking out from behind that red curtain, and the harlequin splash of a large tiffany lamp, a cave of wonders beyond: shelves of books and bric-a-brac, chandeliers and long-fringed shawls, and shoes, lots of shoes . . .

Once again, Addy looked left and right and back down the road at the Olympia, to check that this was in fact King Street. It was. Ali's Lebanese lay directly

across the road: she'd had a felafel roll there last Saturday night. *This shop must be new*, she thought, following the woman through the open door. She placed the bags beside a glass display case here – one that was filled with brooches and bangles and beads, all glittering. The woman stood over the other side of it, pulling out frocks from the bags she'd brought in, shaking out a chiffon skirt speckled with soft gold sequins. This was a slice of heaven as far as Addy was concerned.

She asked the woman: 'Are you just setting up shop?'

'Setting up?' The woman was intent on smoothing frock-froth onto a padded-satin hanger. 'What do you mean?'

'Have you only recently moved in here?' Addy asked, still taking it in – embroidered corsets, lace-up boots, paste-jewel clutch purses – and calculating how much she could spend; the zebra seemed to smile approvingly, papier mache gatekeeper of all good things. 'Have you just opened?'

The woman chuckled, pulling out another frock, one of deep turquoise taffeta: 'No, dear. I have been here for eleven years. Twelve years in June.'

'How can I have not seen this shop before?' Addy couldn't keep the childlike wonder from her voice, as though she'd been flummoxed by a conjurer's trick.

The woman shrugged, not looking away from her work, continuing to plump out the bow on the back of the taffeta; she said: 'When we are young, there is so much to see, but we see what we must eventually, when we are ready to open our eyes to it.'

Addy's skin tingled at this cryptic crumb of wisdom, and at the beautiful sentence that delivered it. She asked, more to signal her respect than from necessity: 'May I look around?'

'Of course!' The woman chuckled again. 'Enjoy yourself.'

'I will.' All thoughts of getting to the library fell away. Addy glanced at her watch: subtracting walking time, she had an hour and a half to enjoy herself here.

The shop was narrow, perhaps no more than three metres wide, but it seemed to go on for the best part of forever. An hour and a half, Addy realised within moments, could only provide a mere reconnoitre ahead of many, many visits to come. There was too much she wanted to buy, everywhere she looked: a cut-crystal perfume bottle with a lilac tassel; a wall mirror etched all around with rambling pansies; a red net petticoat spotted with flock polka dots; a super-cute polyester shirt of purple cartoon petunias – *Only two dollars?* So said the tiny paper tag pinned by a thread to the wide collar. And rack after rack of amazing pre-adored frocks that appeared to be sorted by both colour and style. All of their prices were reasonable, too, it seemed, but Addy only had about fifteen dollars left until payday, two days away, and most of that would have to go on general sustenance. She had to buy *something*, though – a souvenir of first experience.

*Hmmm.* She entered what seemed to be the final section, a cul-de-sac of books, floor to ceiling. She could die here – happily. *Young woman found expired under a*

*pile of barely scuffed near-new-release paperbacks, after suffering fatal attack of indecision at what to read next.* Some of the spines of the books hadn't even been cracked. And here, right at nose level, was what looked like a pristine copy of the latest great Australian blockbuster, Kathleen McAllister's *The Fire Flight*. Addy hadn't read it yet, nor had she seen the television mini-series it had recently spawned. Perhaps it was time. She opened the cover to check the pencilled price: *Fifty cents!* That was it, decision made.

She began making her way back to the front of the shop, book in hand.

*And the purple petunia shirt as well – why not?* She grabbed it from its rack on her way through.

'Success?' The old woman asked, adjusting a dress on a mannequin by the jewellery-display case.

'Success?' Addy repeated the question, all other words having left her at the vision of loveliness that met her here.

The dress – on the mannequin – she had to have it. Her heart pounded now with instant and unshakable desire.

*This* dress. It was made of pale-sky tulle over charmeuse, full-skirted, with a wide, round neckline and capped sleeves – the complete bundle of Addy's favourite shapes. But more than this, so much more, the tulle was appliqued all over with a shower of blooms – ruby-hued poppies mostly, true-blue cornflowers, too, tumbling among their leaves and stems – all of them falling into a garden that settled at the hem.

‘Exquisite, yes?’ The old woman pinned its price tag to the lining at the back of the bodice.

‘Mmm,’ Addy managed to reply, mesmerised. This was the pinnacle of womanly joy frockified.

‘It is so small at the waist,’ the woman sighed, patting it at hip height. ‘It will not be easy to sell. But it is very pretty. Many will come to look.’

Addy nodded, placing the book and the shirt on the glass top of the display case.

The woman took them up to check their prices. ‘Ah good, good,’ she said, and smiled her broad, jaunty smile at Addy: ‘Two dollars and fifty cents, please.’

Addy rummaged in her purse, taking out two scrunched-up dollar notes and some coins, but she could hardly drag her eyes from the dress.

‘Why don’t you try it on, dear?’ the woman said, her gaze lively and knowing. ‘You are a little thing underneath that boy’s shirt, are you not?’

‘I’m sure I can’t afford it,’ Addy mumbled, suddenly embarrassed at her flannelette checks and black jeans. She didn’t like to draw attention to herself in the light, in the staring glare of day. It was only at night that her frocks came out to dance, only after a wine or a beer or three, and that now embarrassed her, too.

‘It is twenty-eight dollars and seventy-five cents,’ the woman informed her with Teutonic exactitude. ‘A lay-by purchase may be arranged, should it be required.’ The woman took up a feather duster, adding, ‘I will leave you to think about it,’ and she turned away to dust the shoe shelves behind her.

*Twenty-eight dollars and seventy-five cents . . .* It was a bargain for a dress like that. Even if it was no doubt older than Addy was; 1950s, probably. At any age, this dress was one of a kind – absolutely priceless. Panic fluttered through her: *I have to have this dress*. For it wasn't just a dress. It was a story. A hundred stories she had to know; stories that could only be known by wearing them. She glanced at her watch: almost quarter to eleven. Where had the last fifteen minutes gone? She had to go or she'd be late for her lecture; she'd arrive a few minutes late now as it was.

She said to the woman: 'I don't have time to try it on. I . . .' She was also reluctant to lay-by anything. She'd witnessed something of the perils of the system at the toy department of Town Hall Variety: women who'd get halfway through repayments for Christmas or birthday gifts they'd bought for their children, only to unexpectedly lose a job or a husband and – *whoosh* – money and toys would disappear entirely, no correspondence entered into. Interest-free but rough justice indeed – no consumer protections once you signed that kind of contract.

'I understand, dear.' The woman smiled over a pair of silver-spangled stilettos – *Oh dear God, I want them, too*. 'When you return, if the dress is still here, then it must be yours, hm?'

'Hm.' More wisdom. But when would Addy be able to return? Today, after English, there was lunch with Luke – *I can't stand him up again* – then there was Ancient History, then that *Gatsby* American Lit tute.

She wouldn't leave campus until four-thirty today at the earliest. 'What time do you close?'

'Four o'clock.'

*Of course you do.*

The woman and her feather duster disappeared around a bank of tall shelves in the centre of the room.

Addy scribbled a note, surreptitiously, she hoped, tearing off a corner of *The Fire Flight's* title page with the wish:

*Wait for me. Please.*

*Addy X*

Leaving her name as though they were already friends. She folded this scrap of frock-longing so that, to the untrained eye, it might have seemed less than nothing, a bus ticket discarded, a shopping docket lodged somewhere unlikely, waiting to be swept away, and she tucked it into the slim belt, a dark green band, buckled at the waist.

*Please.*

'Addy?'

That was the voice of a man, a deep voice promising authority, and she turned as if caught in the act of some petty crime.

It was the boy from last night, the singer in the band, last seen under pink paisley bedspread on the brown couch. Her stomach turned around hamburger and seventeen flavours of inexpressible shame. Now that she was giving it a moment's further thought, had

they had some sort of argument about student fees over Trivial Pointlessness at some early hour of this morning? Had she really called him a ‘frayed-denim fascist’? Or had she only thought it? She couldn’t be sure. And for all that she didn’t actually care, her heart had started thrashing about again. He was standing at the rack of men’s jackets at the arse-end of the zebra. *What the frick is he doing here?*

She remembered his name now, too, half of it, anyway: Dan. Or ‘Dolly’, as his drummer-boy mate called him.

*Dolly? Because his shoulder bones poke at his sleeve-seams as though his shirt is still on its hanger, and his thick dark hair curls at the hinges of his jaw, a frame for the blush of his cheeks.*

Hers were scorching.

He looked like John Donne – that portrait of the poet as a young law student, or whatever that painting on the cover of her text was called.

She said, ‘Yep. Hm. Hello. I’m late for English Lit.’  
And she darted out into the street, into the rain.



ALSO BY KIM KELLY

*Black Diamonds*

*This Red Earth*

*The Blue Mile*

*Paper Daisies*

*Wild Chicory*

*Jewel Sea*

*Lady Bird & The Fox*

*Sunshine*

*Walking*

*Her Last Words*

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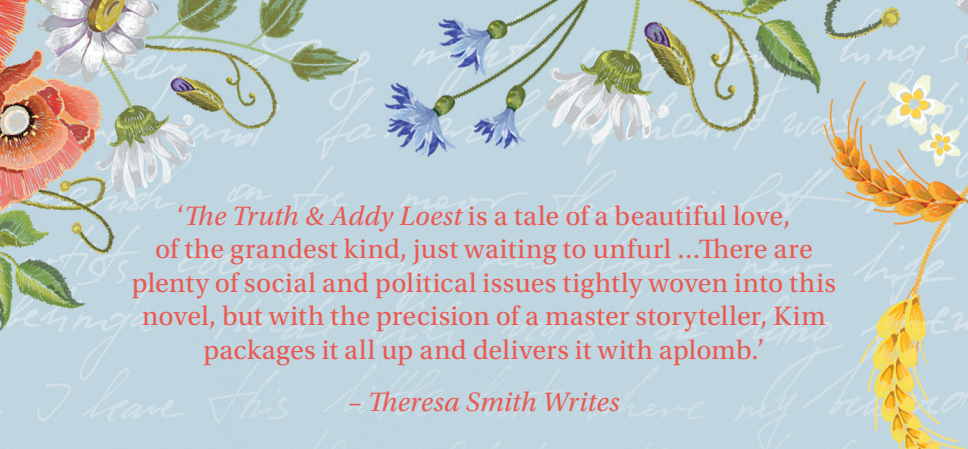
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**'The Truth & Addy Loest is a tale of a beautiful love, of the grandest kind, just waiting to unfurl ... There are plenty of social and political issues tightly woven into this novel, but with the precision of a master storyteller, Kim packages it all up and delivers it with aplomb.'**

**- Theresa Smith Writes**

Addy Loest is harbouring a secret – several, in fact. Dedicated overthinker, frockaholic and hard-partyer, she's been doing all she can to avoid the truth for quite some time.

A working-class girl raised between the Port Kembla Steelworks and the surf of the Illawarra coast, Addy is a fish out of water at the prestigious University of Sydney. She's also the child of German immigrants, and her broken-hearted widower dad won't tell her anything about her family's tragic past.

But it's 1985, a time of all kinds of excess, from big hair to big misogyny, and distractions are easy. Distractions, indeed, are Addy's best skill – until one hangover too many leads her to meet a particular frock and a particular man, each of whom will bring all her truths hurtling home.

Told with Kim Kelly's incomparable warmth and wit, *The Truth & Addy Loest* is a magical trip through shabby-chic inner-city Sydney, a tale of music and moonlight, literature and love – and of discovering the only story that really matters is the one you write for yourself.

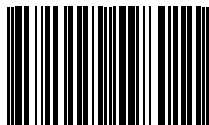
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