

A History of Dreams

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original writers.'
HANNAH KENT



Jane Rawson

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of
Dreams

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BOOK ONE –
AN OVERTURE
FOR GIRLS

A new civilisation

*Adelaide, Australia, at the beginning of summer
and the end of the school year, December 1937*

‘Come on!’ Margaret Beasley grabbed her younger sister Esther’s hand and dragged her up the platform, while their friend Audrey trailed behind. They were late, but the train was so slow it had barely hit walking pace and Margaret and Esther pulled themselves up into the closest carriage and, puffed, cooled themselves in the breeze from the open doorway.

‘I’ll catch you up!’ Audrey called, running back down the platform towards the last carriage.

‘What’s Audrey up to?’ Esther asked.

Margaret fanned herself with a school newsletter, intended for their mother, and peered up the platform. ‘Audrey is a mystery,’ she replied. ‘Come on, let’s find a seat. What’s happened to your shoelaces? Is that twine?’

‘Manila rope. I borrowed it from father’s shed. It has a breaking strain of 500 pounds. Don’t you think it looks more interesting than shoelaces?’

Margaret decided against answering. She had enough to think about, trying to find somewhere nice to sit. She much preferred it when they got to the train early and she and Esther and Audrey could commandeer a dogbox for themselves. Three shrieking, laughing high school girls were enough to ward off all but the most arrogant boys, and Audrey, Margaret’s best friend, could usually be trusted to make quick work of the arrogant ones.

The last of the city was slipping away now and the tracks were curving towards the ocean. They began to make their way up the corridor of the train.

‘Do you think we’ll go to the hills this year?’ Esther asked as they got to the end of the carriage with no sign of Audrey.

Margaret had been thinking about her leaving exams, going over the finer points of geography she’d been studying last night. ‘Oh, I don’t know, Es,’ she said. She was still angry when she thought about last year’s trip away. Their infernal cousins had come to meet them at Belair – Harry, Malcolm and Ernest – and had ruined the entire week. Margaret had been looking forward to time alone, time to walk in the bush and make sketches, time to think her thoughts, time to consider her future as she entered the final year of school. But the boys had been insufferable, loud and demanding, expecting Margaret and Esther to make lunches for them, to watch them play cricket, to listen to stories about the stupid school they went to in Glenelg. To top it off, on their second-last day, when Margaret had finally found some time to wander alone, when she’d settled herself by a little forest creek and begun sketching some studies of Guinevere and Arthur, Malcolm had shown up and began ranting at her about some boy in the year above him, and when she’d asked

him to please just leave her in peace, he'd grabbed her and kissed her and told her she was an ice princess before tipping her bag of pencils into the creek. This after she'd overheard him telling his brother the day before how dumpy and ugly he thought she was. The worst part had been when they got home, and she'd told father about terrible Malcolm. 'Try to be kinder to your cousins,' father had said. 'It's unbecoming for a nice girl to be so spiteful.'

Margaret flushed, thinking about her father's disapproval. 'Perhaps it would be pleasant to just stay home this year,' she said.

'I think Audrey missed the train,' Esther said. She'd lost interest in the topic of their Christmas holidays. 'Have you seen anywhere we can sit?'

Margaret peered into the next compartment. 'Do you mind if we join you?' she asked the girls sitting there. They didn't mind, and Margaret and Esther sat.

'What do you think we'll have for dinner?' Esther said, as they pulled in at the next station. They watched as the girls – young women, really, come from offices in town most likely – quietly left the train. Esther started telling Margaret about the book she was reading, but Margaret was hardly listening, thinking about next year at university in Melbourne. Esther had another year of school left, but Margaret knew her sister's brilliant scores in music and English would be enough to get her into the conservatory once she graduated. Margaret would miss Audrey terribly when she left Adelaide, but perhaps she and Esther could still live together in Melbourne; then again, maybe it would be more exciting to room with a brand-new set of girls. She had just begun imagining her Melbourne friends and the intellectual conversations they would have over tea, when two boys burst in.

'Oh, the Misses Beasley,' one of them said, pretending to tip an invisible hat.

‘Beasley, you say?’ said the other. ‘What a pleasure to make your acquaintance.’ He grabbed Esther’s hand and pulled it to his lips. She snatched it away.

‘Do you mind?’ Margaret said. ‘We’re trying to have a civilised conversation here.’

The boy threw himself down beside her. He smelled of stale sweat. ‘Civilised?’ he said. ‘We’re frightfully civilised, aren’t we, Alf?’

‘An ornament to any event,’ the first boy agreed, and squeezed himself in beside Esther. ‘Hello young lady,’ he said. ‘My name is Alf. Pleased to make your acquaintance.’ Margaret knew the boy – he was in her year – but she’d never thought much of him.

Esther raised an eyebrow at him. She’d been practising raising one eyebrow and was delighted to have the chance to use her new skill.

‘Traditionally,’ Alf said, ‘you would provide your name.’

‘I like to think of myself as a radical,’ Esther said. She began humming the ‘Internationale’.

‘Anyway, I know who you are,’ Alf said. ‘You’re Esther Beasley, little sister to Margaret. Isn’t she, Maggie?’ He patted Margaret’s knee.

Margaret ignored him. Standing in the doorway was Matthew Sands, two years older than her and the son of an old family friend. He looked strikingly tall and narrow, slouched in the entrance to the compartment with the sun glinting off his dark brown hair. He nodded to her, and she returned the nod, feeling particularly small and square. She pulled her skirt down over her knees, trying to hide the ink smudges she’d acquired during the day, then realised she’d made her legs look even shorter. She frowned in frustration. She and Matt had been friends, of a sort, when they were children and had often been thrown together; they had both liked digging

in the dirt, imagining lost cities, drawing plans for castles. That had all been put aside when he'd moved on to high school and she'd been left behind at the local primary. And though they'd often chatted in the corridors once she'd started at the Tech, she'd noticed a kind of cool disgust creeping into his manner during his last few years of school and had been ashamed to trouble him any more with her friendship.

'This birdie looks alright,' said Alf's friend. 'Esme, did you say?'

'Esther,' said Alf.

'Esther, Esther, Esther,' he sang-chanted her name. 'Yes, she seems just the sort. Not too pretty, not too bright, but just right.' He winked at her. 'I like your cute little nose,' he said, 'though your hair's a bit of a mess.'

Esther sighed and stood up to retrieve her satchel from the shelf above her seat.

'Oh, let me get that for you, m'lady,' Alf said, and leapt up to grab for it, his too-small shirt pulling up and revealing a rash of pimples across his lower back.

'Thank you, no; I can manage quite well by myself,' Esther said.

'Quite the little suffragette, aren't you,' he said.

'Must you?' Margaret asked, tearing her eyes away from Matt. 'You're adding nothing of merit to our ride home.'

Esther placed the case on her seat, opened it, and took out the novel she'd been telling Margaret about. As she was closing the case, Alf grabbed it from her. 'Then at least let me lift your heavy burden to its resting place,' he said.

Esther tried to pull the case from him, but he was stronger and was victorious. She took her seat, opened the book and pretended to be absorbed.

'What are you reading?' Matthew asked from the doorway.

Esther didn't answer. 'Pardon me,' he tried again, 'but I said, "what's that you're reading?"'

She held the book up so it obscured her face and allowed him to read the cover.

'Georgette Heyer, hey?' said Alf. 'Any good?'

'Yes, thank you,' she muttered from between its pages.

'I don't think she wants to talk to us, Sands,' Alf said. 'But perhaps we can learn a little about her, and crack that steely carapace, by taking a look through her bag.'

He took a seat and opened the case on his knee. 'Now what do we have here,' he said. 'Pens, pens, pens, pencils, pencils – a very scholarly young lady.'

'Put that back!' Esther said.

'Alfred!' Margaret said. 'Leave her alone!'

'I think you dropped your novel, Miss,' Matt said. 'Keep going, Alf. What more is there to learn?'

'Very neat copybooks,' Alf said. 'No blotting, very nice. Oh, but what have we here?'

He pulled a cloth-wrapped bundle from the port and held it up for the boys to observe. 'Some feminine mystery, perhaps?' he said. 'The source of her powers to bewitch and beguile? Shall we unravel it? Shall we break the spell she has us under?'

Matthew, still leaning in the doorway, laughed. 'By all means,' he said. 'Unmask the enchantress.'

'I would *kindly* thank you to put that down!' Esther said. A blush had stained her cheeks and Margaret could see she was genuinely angry and perhaps even afraid.

'Stop!' Margaret said. 'Matthew, tell them to put Esther's things away!'

But Matt did nothing of the sort. 'I'm not their sergeant major,' he said. Instead he applauded as Alf began, slowly, to unravel the package.

Margaret realised what it was just as Esther grabbed for the boy's arm.

'Put it away!' Margaret cried, stern now, but it was too late. The cloth unravelled and the bloodied pad tumbled to the floor of the compartment, landing between the boy's feet. He pulled them away as though the pad were on fire.

'Well, well,' said Alf. 'Perhaps she is a witch. What do we do with witches?'

'Burn them, of course,' replied Matthew.

Esther made a sound like an angry cat and pounced over his feet to grab the pad away. Matthew started laughing and Alf was pronouncing, over and over, 'There it is, gents: the source of her charms, the sauce of her charms.'

'Alfred Manning, what on earth are you doing?' cried a voice from the corridor, commanding.

Margaret dragged her eyes away from her sister, who was trying to pull the pad from under the boy's foot.

'Who were you accusing of witchcraft?' Audrey said as she stepped into the compartment. Her black hair hung down her back like a flag, as though all it would take was a slight breeze and she would be flying into battle. Her school uniform managed, somehow, to look like the robes a Sultan's wife would have worn as she prepared herself for war against the infidel. Margaret wondered, as she so often did, why a girl as startling, glamorous and unique as Audrey would be best friends with someone like her.

'And you,' Audrey said, turning her burning eyes on Sands, now finally standing upright, his louche pose abandoned. 'I'd have thought you were too old for this nonsense, Matthew. Why are you wasting time with these children?'

Sands frowned. 'I'm coaching their cricket team,' he muttered, but Audrey ignored him.

‘Oh look,’ Alf said, ‘it’s Red Audrey.’

‘Mr Manning,’ she said, ‘you know as well as anyone that school rules specifically state there is to be no consorting between young gentlemen and young ladies in the public eye while in uniform. While you have somehow given this place the appearance of a nursery, I am fairly sure the Head would still regard it as a carriage of the South Australian railways and therefore a public place.’

‘He doesn’t care about that rule, do you Alf?’ said the other boy. ‘No one does!’

‘I think you’ll find, young man – what is your name, young man?’ She took a notebook and pencil from the pocket of her tunic.

‘Walter Raleigh Stevenson,’ he said.

‘He’s Thomas Frost,’ Alf said. Audrey wrote it down.

‘Well, Tom,’ Audrey continued, ‘I think you’ll find Alfred does mind, don’t you, Alf? Alf, you see, already has two black marks against his name for this very same offence, and his leaving results now hang in the balance. The last thing Alf – and perhaps more importantly, Reverend Manning, his esteemed father – need at this precarious stage of young Alf’s life, is another black mark. Isn’t that right, young Alf?’

‘This is my station anyway,’ Alf said. ‘You boys can do what you like.’ He pushed his way out of the compartment, being careful not to brush against Audrey as he did.

‘Thomas Frost,’ she said, turning to the other boy pressed up against the window, still exasperating Esther. ‘I believe I know your mother. Mrs Geraldine Frost, isn’t it? Of course! From the tennis club! What on earth would dear Mrs Frost think if she knew her son was tormenting a young lady, publicly, at her special time of the month? That is what you’re doing, isn’t it, you terrible boy. What a profound lack of respect. I can only imagine what your mother would say.’

‘Alright, I’m going,’ the boy said. ‘But you’re still a filthy Red.’
‘And you are a poorly mannered child,’ she replied.

Only Matthew, who had regained his composure and affected stance, was left.

‘Impressive speech, Miss Macquarie,’ he said.

‘You can toddle off too if you know what’s good for you.’ Audrey had dropped her haughty tones and reverted to her usual speaking voice with its undertones of northern English burr. She plonked into the seat so recently abandoned. ‘Are you alright there, Es?’ she said to Esther, who had retrieved her pad and was now rewrapping it.

‘What is *wrong* with boys,’ she huffed.

‘Only Professor Einstein could possibly answer a question that complex,’ Audrey replied.

‘Can I help you lift your bag?’ Matthew asked as Esther gathered up the last of her strewn pencils and snapped the lid shut. Margaret felt a small stab of jealousy. Why did Esther have to be so much taller and slimmer than she was?

‘God!’ Esther said. ‘No! You can keep your filthy paws to yourself and get out of our carriage!’ she spat.

‘You are a feisty little suffragette, aren’t you,’ he murmured, his blue eyes going cold. ‘It’d take a braver man than I to marry a shrew like you.’

‘Why would I ever marry?’ she said. ‘Why on earth?’ she called after his retreating back.

Esther returned her bag to its shelf and threw herself into a seat.

‘I’m sorry, Essie,’ Margaret said, shaking away the part of herself that wanted to follow Matthew down the carriage. She came over to give her sister a hug. ‘Those awful boys!’

‘I wish I *was* a witch. None of them would be sitting down to their dinner tonight if I were.’

‘Esther, I think you’d make a wonderful witch,’ Audrey said.

‘Where did you get to?’ Margaret asked.

Audrey waved her hand airily. ‘Never you mind. The important thing is I arrived when I did.’

‘Yes, thank you, Audrey,’ Esther said.

‘Oh, it’s nothing,’ Audrey replied. ‘There is no greater delight in my life than routing a company of rude young men. As my great-aunt Delia was known to say . . .’

Esther rolled her eyes. Audrey was always going on about her great-aunt Delia.

‘Never mind,’ Audrey said, cutting herself off, ‘here’s my station, which unfortunately means you have comprehensively missed yours!’

‘Oh, hells’ bells!’ said Margaret. ‘Come on, Es, I guess we’ll have to walk.’

They jumped off the train, the three of them, and as Audrey headed in the direction of her family’s home in Largs, Margaret wondered if there wasn’t some way her friend could come with her to university. While they were nothing like Margaret’s, Audrey’s grades were acceptable – certainly enough to get her into teaching college or to nursing. But Audrey wouldn’t have it. She would be a shop girl, she said; had said it since they were young girls sat beside one another in their first year of high school, sharing a mixing bowl in domestic science class. University was bourgeois, and the only life for her was one of class war and revolution. Audrey might be glamorous, Margaret thought, but she was also very strange.

‘Do you think we’ll be late for tea?’ Esther said.

‘Probably,’ said Margaret. ‘Come on, let’s run.’

*

Phyllis O'Donnell – who went by Phyl – smelled smoke when she opened her front gate, wrinkled her nose and wished for the five thousandth time she didn't have to live next to the Vacuum Oil Factory. But this time it wasn't the factory, it was her house. When she shoved open the door she saw her mother, frantic, in the front room, pouring cups of water onto their smoking mattress.

'Mum!' she yelled, 'what's going on?'

'Get more water!' her mother cried.

Phyl dived into the cupboard looking for something a bit bigger than a cup and pulled out the mixing bowl. She ran out to the stand-pipe and filled it, and – slopping half of it over her feet as she ran back in – tipped it onto the mattress. It made no difference at all.

'Shit,' she said, and her mother was so distressed she didn't even notice. She ran outside and filled the bowl again. By the time she returned the mattress was properly aflame. The bowl of water damped it for a second, but it flared right back up.

'We need to get it outside,' she said. 'Quick!'

'Phyllis, it's on fire!' her mother said.

'I can see that. Quick, grab the other end.'

Phyl worked her hands under the flaming end of the mattress. The kitchen, which was also the dining room, living room and bedroom she shared with her mother, was becoming unbearably smoky. She flung open the front door and tried to drag the mattress outside. Her mother gathered her wits and pushed from the other end. They tipped the mattress into the street and watched as the flames took hold. From the corner of her eye, Phyl noticed a strip of wallpaper above the door had caught fire, perhaps brushed by the mattress on its way out. She ran inside, dampened a tea towel and used it to smother the flames.

She carried a kitchen chair into the street. 'Sit down, Mum,' she said. She lit herself a cigarette from the now smouldering tea

towel, then threw the towel onto the burning mattress. She sat on the edge of the gutter and watched the flames.

‘I don’t know where we’ll sleep tonight,’ her mother said.

‘We’ll think of something.’

A man poked his head out of the factory. ‘You ladies need any help?’

‘You could put that out if you wanted,’ Phyl answered.

There were some shouts from inside the building and a few minutes later four men came out carrying buckets of sand that they tipped on the flames.

‘Anything else?’ the man said.

‘Nah, nothing else. Unless you’ve got a spare beer we could have.’

The man didn’t answer.

Another man piped up. ‘If you don’t want that,’ he said, ‘my fighting dogs could put it to good use. Great exercise for them, tearing that thing apart.’

‘It’s yours,’ Mrs O’Donnell said.

The man persuaded the others to drag the mattress into the factory. As the door was closing he rushed back and pressed a couple of coins into the girl’s hand. ‘From my dogs,’ he said. ‘It’ll bring them luck.’

Phyl laughed – it made no sense – but thanked him anyway.

‘What happened?’ Phyl asked once the chair and her mother were back inside. She put the coins in her mother’s pocket.

‘I suppose a coal fell out of the stove when I wasn’t watching,’ her mother said. ‘I just don’t know. I’m sorry, Phyllis.’

‘Never mind. You know Dad and Uncle Pip will make us have their bed. I’ll have a think about where we can find another one,’ she said. ‘I’m off to meet Doug for a bit, but I’ll be home later.’ She kissed her mother, grabbed a book and left.

*

Phyl sat on a bench by the river, smoking a cigarette and reading PC Wren while she waited for her friend Doug Harris. Maybe she should join the French Foreign Legion. She could pass for a man. She'd cut her hair off and wear her uniform a size too big. She pressed down on her breasts with her hands to see how flat they'd go, and thought she'd definitely be able to get away with it. She could visit Algeria and Libya, see the mighty deserts. She could write columns about the desert for the English papers, perhaps be known as 'O'Donnell of Arabia'.

'What are you reading, Phyl?' Doug sat down beside her on the bench and pulled out a cigarette of his own.

'*Beau Ideal*,' she told him. She'd known Doug since they were kids, their lives intertwined by parents, school, and the small scandals and wars of neighbourhood childhood. This year, their last year of school, they were in English class together.

'Any good?'

'Only just started it,' she said.

'I did love that *Beau Geste*,' he said. 'Didn't you? Made me want to travel to Arabia, see the deserts. Do the decent thing. Maybe make a name for myself.'

Phyl nodded. 'I was just thinking how good "O'Donnell of Arabia" would sound.'

'Yeah, but you couldn't, obviously,' Doug said.

She looked Doug up and down, his weedy arms, his shoulders half the size of her own, his skin pinkened by the sun. 'Not like you, Doug, you fine specimen. Want an arm wrestle?'

His freckly face blushed, but he ignored her. 'I'm not making much headway with the John Donne,' he said. 'Do you know what he's on about? I expect it will be in the exam.'

‘Yeats too,’ Phyl agreed. ‘Donne’s not so hard. If you want I can come by your place later and we can read it together.’

‘Oh, do you have time?’ Doug’s face switched from anticipation to anxiety and back again. ‘I wouldn’t want to put you out.’

‘Of course,’ she said. ‘I’ll come over around tea time.’

They had an unspoken agreement – Doug’s mother cooked dinner for Phyl, and Phyl helped with Doug’s homework. No one mentioned how much easier it made life for Phyl’s mother, having one less person to feed of an evening.

‘Phyl, you’re a lifesaver,’ he said, and for a moment it looked like he would kiss her cheek, but instead he patted the cover of her novel. ‘See you then.’

She knew Doug was sweet on her and she sometimes thought she should be colder to him, put him out of his misery. But he was her best friend, or the closest thing she had to one. She didn’t particularly get on with any of the girls in her leaving class. And none of the other girls from the factory families liked her much either. Or maybe she didn’t like them. She wasn’t sure which had come first.

The sooner she got out of this backward little town, she thought, the better.

*

In the room she shared with Margaret, Esther packed her bag for school on Monday morning. She thought about what had happened on the train ride home on Friday and wondered if she would be ashamed or embarrassed tomorrow in the classroom.

I don’t see why I should be, she thought. It’s perfectly normal to have a period. It’s perfectly normal to use a dressing to soak up the blood. What would they have me do? Let it run down my leg?

She laughed aloud, blushed, and smothered her giggling. After all, mother bled, and Aunt Annie too. Nellie Melba. Princess Mary. Joan Blondell. Esther thought about Matthew Sands thinking about Joan Blondell. She knew he must: all the boys loved her in the movies. So what does he think about her body, she wondered. Does he think she's Bakelite down there? He probably does. Boys are idiots.

She knew Margaret had a pash for Matt Sands, but Margaret always had a pash for some idiot boy. None of them ever liked her back. It was a shame, of course – poor Maggie and her ever-aching heart. But how much worse would it be if one of them had returned her feelings? How much worse if Maggie and some boy had started stepping out together? Margaret's mind would turn to sludge. She'd think about nothing else but the texture of her cheeks – dewy enough? – or unravelling the words her man had said as they'd parted ways at the pier last night – did he intend to propose? No, much better that she think about quadratic equations and the processes of sedimentation and metamorphosis. Margaret was well on her way to securing her spot at the top of the class and privately Esther expected Margaret would go on from Adelaide Tech to become the world's most famous lady palaeontologist. If not her sister, who else would discover Australia's first dinosaur skeleton? When she did, Esther would write an opera to celebrate the discovery. Perhaps TS Eliot could pen the libretto. Esther jotted a quick reminder to write to Mr Eliot on the matter. Then the two of them – Esther and Margaret, not Mr Eliot, who would no doubt come over like an idiot the first time one of them had their period, so better he stay home – would travel the world, Esther playing first cello in the orchestra that performed her opera, then Margaret displaying and explaining the fossils she had found. Or maybe fossils first, opera second? Esther was undecided. She wrote herself another note: 'learn to fly'. It would be

more convenient and a good deal more fun if they made their tour by aeroplane than if it were done by boat.

‘Esther, can you move your things off my bed please,’ Margaret said.

Esther ignored her and continued work on her plan.

‘Esther! I have my leaving exams this week and I need my sleep!’

‘Sorry, Maggie.’ Esther tucked her tabby kitten, Aurore, under her arm, put her notes away and finished packing her bag. She slid the bag under her bed, put Aurore on her pillow and went to the bathroom to wash her face and hands. Margaret and Audrey would finish school in the next few weeks, then there would be Christmas holidays, then Esther’s final year. Margaret would go to university next year. And the year after that, Esther would probably join the conservatorium in Melbourne; maybe Margaret would be at Melbourne University and they could take lodgings together. Esther was excited about the future.

*

When Phyl left domestic science class on Monday morning, Doug was waiting for her.

‘Thanks for your help last night,’ he said. ‘I feel like I’m ready for this week now. Listen, Phyllis,’ he got a frightened look in his eyes, ‘the thing is,’ and he paused. A blush began creeping up his neck and he fiddled with his frayed, tight shirt collar. He only called her Phyllis when he was feeling particularly serious. She prayed for some kind of distraction – a fire alarm perhaps – but then realised it was time to deal with this once and for all.

‘Do you want to go for a walk in the gardens?’ she asked. Give the poor bloke a chance for a bit of pride-patching privacy after she broke the bad news.

‘Well, no,’ he said, ‘I think maybe it’s best if I say it here. The thing is, mother’s asked me not to spend so much time with you anymore.’

‘I’m sorry?’ Phyl said. This wasn’t at all what she’d been expecting.

‘She says . . . well . . . she thinks it’s better that way.’

Phyl stared at him. She knew it wasn’t Doug’s fault, but still. The spineless coward!

‘Is this about my father?’ she said. ‘Is that what this is?’

‘She just thinks, maybe, I . . . well, yes.’

‘That social-climbing hussy!’ Phyl spat. ‘That two-faced minx! And what did you say, Doug Harris? What did you say? Did you stick up for me? Did you tell her you can choose your own friends?’

People were staring now, but Phyl didn’t care. She knew none of them gave a fig about her anyway. She cared even less for their opinions.

‘For God’s sake, Doug; you’re nearly eighteen years old! Don’t you get to live your own life? You’ve been in love with me for months – years, even!’ The blush was almost purple now. ‘Yes, of course I knew. How could I not have noticed? And you’re going to throw that away because of your social-climbing hussy of a mother? Because she doesn’t want you associating with a drunkard’s daughter, in case somebody says something at Bible study? You’re just going to give me up?’

‘You knew?’ he said, almost tearful. ‘You knew and you never said anything?’

‘Thank God I didn’t, Doug! Imagine if I’d saddled myself with a spineless boy who’d dump me the first time his mother snapped her fingers? Imagine if I’d given my heart to a childish cad like that?’

Phyl felt a brief prickle of shame – she had never intended to

return his feelings, of course she hadn't – she wasn't in the least bit interested in him or any other boy – but damn him. He wouldn't even be completing leaving if it weren't for her. They'd have held him back last year if not for all the help she'd given him.

'How convenient she should choose now,' Phyl went on. 'How convenient, now that you no longer need my help to pass your classes. She knew I was doing most of your homework, didn't she? Of course she did.'

Phyl paused to draw breath. That little Beasley girl was staring at her, her face plastered in the widest, most delighted grin.

'Fine, Doug,' she muttered. 'Fine. Fifteen years of friendship and you're just going to throw it in the shitter.'

There was an audible gasp from the group of girls in the corridor pretending not to listen, and Doug whispered, 'Phyl! Please! Not here!'

'Oh, I see why you didn't want to talk this over in the Gardens. You thought if we were at school I wouldn't make a scene, didn't you? Poor calculating, Doug. No wonder you're failing maths.' Phyl suddenly ran out of energy. She thought for a second she would burst into tears. Her best friend. Doug moved to put an arm around her, saying, 'I'm sorry, Phyl, I never meant to . . . ' and she got her second wind. 'Don't you touch me, Doug Harris,' she said, cold and low. 'Get your hands off me and get out of my sight.'

'But I . . . ' he stuttered.

'Go!' she said, and he fled down the stairs to the street. She perched on the edge of a window to regain her composure, staring fixedly into the middle distance and trying not to cry, pointedly ignoring the stares of the whispering girls peering out from the surrounding classrooms.

'Shove over,' a voice said, and there was the Beasley girl, trying

to fit her bottom on the windowsill next to Phyl's. 'That was brilliant,' she said. 'I'm Esther Beasley.'

'I know who you are.' She knew Esther's older sister Margaret, a serious girl, low to the ground, studious and a little sanctimonious. They'd never really spoken. She'd certainly never spoken to Esther, who was widely regarded as an utter fruitcake; eccentric and tempestuously tempered, with strange dress sense and an awkward manner. Next to her, Phyl seemed positively civilised.

'Now listen,' Esther continued, 'I have a proposition for you. In fact, let me rephrase that: I am begging you. Come away with us this summer.'

'Do what?' Phyl realised right away this must be some kind of elaborate joke. She'd had enough. She wasn't going to be condescended to by some middle-class nutcase.

'Come away with us,' the girl insisted. 'Come to the hills. Come to Belair. You must! We take a house – well, it's my Uncle Henry's house, but he never uses it anymore, he has an aquarium show you see, and they travel. Anyway, we spend the fortnight at his house in Belair, Margaret and Audrey and I. And mother, of course. But without you – well, if you won't come I can't see that there's any point at all continuing with our plans. You simply must.'

Phyl actually believed the girl was in earnest. Her eyes had taken on an evangelical shine.

'I've never seen such a magnificent display,' Esther said. She pressed Phyl's hand beneath hers, trapping it. 'Please say you'll come.'

Phyl felt the rage boiling up in her again, wanted to slap this stupid girl. She took a deep breath. Exams were mostly done. School was nearly done. Now would be a bad time to get expelled.

'Thank you for your kind thoughts,' she said, and she smiled banally. She withdrew her hand. 'But I am otherwise occupied and

will be unable to join you on your holiday this year. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm afraid I need to visit the ladies.'

Phyl did no such thing, instead taking the stairs down to North Terrace. She leaned for a moment against the cool blue stone of the Tech. She closed her eyes and breathed in, out. Her whole life stretched ahead of her. She hadn't told anyone but she had decided: she was going to be a reporter. She would travel to England, she thought, after a year or two working for the *Advertiser*. She picked up her bag and walked towards the river. Yes, a year or two on the *Advertiser*, then to London for a while, then the Empire. She would report from India and Burma and Ceylon. She would spend her life on ships and in jungles, with distant tribes never before visited by a white man, let alone a white woman. Sometimes a blurry figure moved beside her – it was Mae West, who'd been travelling incognito as first mate from the ship. They might marry – some ancient jungle ceremony. She sat down in the grass with her back against a tree and unwrapped the sandwiches she'd packed herself this morning – fritz and sauce. They were warm, the edges of the bread gone crispy, but they were still delicious. Phyl promised herself fifteen more minutes of peace before bookkeeping class.

*

Margaret was packing her books into her satchel. Out of the corner of her eye she could see Audrey in the doorway of the geography classroom, gesturing for her to hurry up. 'The train,' Audrey mouthed, but Margaret ignored her. She could hear Miss Foster calling her name.

'Margaret,' the teacher said, 'would you mind staying back a moment?'

Margaret gestured at Audrey in a way she hoped said 'yes, just

a minute' and took the chair her teacher pulled out for her. Audrey tapped her elegant little wristwatch dramatically, shrugged, and disappeared.

'This essay is extraordinary,' Miss Foster said. 'I'd like to recommend it for the school prize, if you don't mind of course.'

Margaret didn't mind. But wasn't Miles Rose in line for the school geography prize?

'Mr Rose's work has been very good this year,' Miss Foster said, 'but yours is exceptional. I shouldn't be surprised, given your record to date. But this really is a level above. Am I right in thinking you'll want to attend university next year?'

Margaret was definitely applying for university, but she didn't want to look arrogant. 'Do you think I should?' she asked. 'I had been considering an Arts-Science degree.'

'If I were you, I should apply for Adelaide, and perhaps consider Sydney and Melbourne,' Miss Foster said. 'I would be happy to write you a letter of recommendation.'

A letter of recommendation from her geography teacher would certainly help, once she added it to the recommendations from the mathematics teacher and Mr Lester, the head of history.

'I hope your parents are proud,' Miss Foster said.

Margaret nodded. She'd overheard mother telling Aunt Annie how proud father was of her results this year; even better than last year's, he'd said, as if such a thing were possible. When father had returned from his most recent voyage, a month earlier, he'd brought her a traditional map of the stars, painted on bark by a tribe in the South Seas. A prize, he'd told her, for her brilliant work in science.

'Some of the girls are held back by their fathers, I'm sorry to say,' Miss Foster said. 'They don't want them studying geography or mathematics. A waste of time, when they'll be marrying and

having children as soon as they finish school. But your family doesn't feel that way?'

'No, Miss Foster,' Margaret said, but felt a little lurch in her stomach. She had been putting off discussing university with her parents. But really, she reassured herself, what was the need? 'My father loves having a daughter who's good at school,' she said, as much for her own benefit as Miss Foster's.

'Well, that's wonderful,' the teacher said. 'I'm sure you'll go on to great things.'

Margaret smiled at her teacher and thought of all the great things she intended. Discoveries in astrophysics. Uncovering a new civilisation as an archaeologist. A painting in the National Gallery in London. A handsome, clever husband with ambitions to match her own. And back at home, mother and father beaming with pride. She would have her first child at thirty-two, and maybe a second when she was thirty-four; by that time she would have established her place in academia, and her husband would be earning enough to pay for a nanny for each of the babies. Her mother would have a grandchild to cuddle. Perhaps even a little grandson – her father loved his girls, but she thought he might like a little boy to play with as well.

Audrey was back in the doorway, gesturing at her to hurry up.

'Thank you, Miss Foster,' Margaret said. 'See you tomorrow!' She strode out the door towards her bright future.

*

Audrey was in a rush because she had important things to attend to. She waved Margaret and Esther goodbye at Peterhead Station, watched as Largs disappeared behind her, and finally alighted at Taperoo.

Fort Largs beckoned. Her father had been having difficulties with

an investigator at the police station there. The man had a bee in his bonnet about communists and was determined to pin charges, no matter how flimsy, on members of South Australia's unions. Ernest Macquarie was in his sights. She'd heard father complaining to mother about the irritation of the ongoing investigation, of how there was little he could do without making the situation worse. 'I'll just have to sit it out,' he'd said to Audrey's mother. 'Unless he's planning to fabricate evidence, nothing will come of it. We just have to be patient.'

The officer was, of course, planning to fabricate evidence. It happened all the time and it had happened to Ernest at least twice since he became a union leader. Audrey took it personally. Aged seven, Audrey had used her magic to shape Ernest's dissatisfaction with his grinding factory work into piercing ambition; thanks to that ambition, he was now Adelaide's foremost unionist. Audrey wasn't going to have her efforts ruined by this upstart copper.

Outside the station she rubbed her eyes until they were swollen and red. She checked the pocket of her school tunic – she still had the tiny vial that held the dream she'd prepared last night. At the front desk she asked to see Inspector Rainey and when the man appeared she burst into howls and wails, begging that he please stop harassing her poor, pitiful father. As she'd hoped, he ushered her away from the station's public areas and sat her in his office, leaving her alone while he hunted down a glass of water. It took only a moment while he was gone – she poured the vial into the still warm cup of tea on the inspector's desk and, when he returned, she watched him drink.

Waiting at Taperoo for the train back to Largs, she knew her outburst of hysterics would do little to change the man's mind. The dream, though: she had high hopes for that. More than ten years of practising the skills she'd learned from her great-aunt meant

Audrey was now an accomplished witch. The nightmares she made upended emotions, addled minds, planted paralysing fears, stoked terrifying desires. Like her aunt, who had used witchcraft to enflame the suffragist impulses of Adelaide's young women forty years ago, Audrey deployed dreams in the service of revolution. It wasn't a showy power and – since her aunt's death more than three years ago – it wasn't one that anyone else knew about. If they did, Audrey sometimes wondered, would they take her more seriously?

Audrey was eighteen years old. She had her father's dark hair and eyes and her mother's hauteur and people had begun talking about how she'd likely marry well. When she informed them that marriage was a corrupt bourgeois institution, they laughed indulgently and told her she was too young to understand how the world worked. By the time Rosa Luxemburg was eighteen, Audrey reminded herself, she had organised a general strike in Poland and was on the run from the police.

Well, she thought, she didn't need other people's thanks or even their respect. She had work to do and she wasn't going to wait until she was thirty, or whatever the age was when one understood the world. She climbed aboard the train, hoping to be home in time for tea.

A note on history and sources

A History of Dreams was inspired by *We Were Going to be Different*, an oral history of a group of South Australian women written by Anne Hirst/Rawson, my mother. The group, which included my grandmother, Nancy Bradley/Hirst, and her older sister, Jean Bradley/Edwards, were known as the Kosmopolitan Klub. They adopted aristocratic names, organised tennis parties and dramatic productions, travelled around South Australia together and vowed never to marry (a vow almost all of them broke). The group remained friends and met regularly from the time they were in high school until their deaths. Nancy and Jean were also the granddaughters of George Hills, who featured in my earlier novel, *From the Wreck*.

Many of the statements made by the poets at the Grote Street salon (including ‘the chief business of women must be maternity. Women must become repossessed of the sense of race-motherhood . . . Find your highest duty and pleasure in the only way you can:

bringing up large numbers of efficient citizens’) are taken from William Baylebridge’s *National Notes*, originally published in 1913 and republished in 1939 as part of his collection, *This Vital Flesh*, which won the 1940 Australian Literature Society Gold Medal. It was more recently republished (2010) on the ‘Australian Nationalist Ideological, Historical and Legal Archive’, a far-right extremist website. Thank you to David Bird’s *Nazi Dreamtime: Australian Enthusiasts for Hitler’s Germany*, published by Anthem Press, for important historical material and inspiration.

At the salons, Phyl reads from the letters of Rosa Luxemburg, a revolutionary who was active in Poland and Germany in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. She was summarily executed by German paramilitary soldiers in 1919 when she was forty-seven years old.

A History of Dreams takes place on the lands of the Kurna people. During the first years of white colonisation, most Kurna people were killed or displaced from their land, and within a few decades there was little or no Kurna presence in the place now known as Adelaide. A vagrants’ law instituted in the 1870s made it illegal for Kurna people to even camp in Adelaide’s Botanic Park, where they had, until then, occasionally visited.

The Sym Choon family arrived in Adelaide from Guandong province in 1890, shortly before the introduction of the 1901 *Immigration Restriction Act*, which prevented non-white people immigrating to Australia and which was the basis of the White Australia Policy. As a teenager, Gladys Sym Choon opened the China Gift Store (now called Miss Gladys Sym Choon) on Rundle Street, importing items from all over Asia, including the fireworks Phyl bought as a child and the beautiful fan Audrey longs for. Every time she returned to Australia from buying trips, Ms Sym Choon would – as a Chinese woman – be fingerprinted, have her

photograph taken and be subjected to a dictation test.

Works quoted in *A History of Dreams* are *Today is rebels' day* (Lesbia Harford, 1 May 1918), *I was sad* (Lesbia Harford, 16 July 1917) and *An Aboriginal mother's lament* (Charles Harpur, 1853).



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Girls rule the world!

In the 1930s in Adelaide, sisters Margaret and Esther Beasley and their friend Phyllis O'Donnell are learning to be witches. Their guide is Audrey Macquarie, a glamorous, Communist schoolmate who was taught the art of changing dreams by her suffragette great-aunt, Delia. This subtle magic, known only to spinsters, has been passed from aunt to niece for generations. Now this group of young women are using it to power their own small revolution, undermining a system that wants them married, uneducated and at home.

As Europe begins falling to fascism, these women – the Semaphore Supper Club – stumble on a nest of Nazi sympathisers in the poetry salons of Adelaide. The poets' political connections help them rise in power, until the Club finds they aren't just fighting chauvinist writers but have taken on Australia's new authoritarian government. As the government discovers it too can harness dreams, Margaret, Esther, Phyl and Audrey face an overwhelming force they cannot defeat. Each of them must decide whether – and how – to continue the struggle in the face of almost certain failure.

The History of Dreams explores female friendship, the power of finding a vocation, and the importance of joy in a time of political darkness. It asks what our responsibilities are when faced with an unjust government, particularly when we have the privilege to look the other way.

