Gayla Reid / MOIRA

Susanna held Moira's hand at parties and introduced her, saying, "I want you to meet Moira. Moira is taking the Church of Rome apart brick by brick."

(This was in New Haven, in the Sixties. Moira was doing her doctorate; she was writing her thesis on Auden.)

Moira, hearing Susanna's introduction, would see in her mind the bricks of the convent school she had attended back home and the bricks of the big cathedral beside it. Together, the convent and cathedral took up an entire town block.

And Moira would be daunted by the task ahead.

While building the cathedral tower a man had fallen to his death. He had gone straight to heaven, the nuns said, because his work was an act of faith.

When I became part of Moira's care team I signed up for early mornings.

Early mornings are her best time, Inez says.

We sit in the garden, in the sunshine. The garden is at the back of her home in North Sydney, the home she shares with her lover, Inez.

Moira has her cushions, she has her hat. I bring her pills, something to drink.

We have three garden chairs: one for her, one for me, and one for her massive tabby tomcat Mad Max.

Moira needs her pain killers every four hours. But at the top of that time, in hours one and two, she's relaxed.

The Cootamundra wattle is out, a nervy gold-and-black shivering behind the garage.

"Good job we're not allergic," Moira says. "You and me."

She touches my arm.

There's something perhaps I should mention: If I become aware of myself, standing in the supermarket in front of the grapefruit, let's say, I am puzzled to find myself there.

I am picking out fruit, and I know this must be part of a plan: put the grapefruit into the bag, take them to the check-out, carry them home. Eat them.

So that when Moira touches me, I am taken by surprise.

When my mother was in hospital, I was in Sydney and she was in Adelaide. I could not get away.

My son was an infant in my arms.

I did go down to see mum, but only twice. "Couldn't take the time, I see," Mum said. "Too busy with your own concerns."

I don't know what pain killers they gave them then, but whatever they were, they weren't enough.

Moira's my boss. Was my boss. We teach English at the TAFE, the College of Technical and Further Education; she's the department head.

It's not as though I knew her well. We were work friends.

Just after the diagnosis, she was still feeling quite well, still coming in to work, cracking jokes, chairing meetings.

She asked me herself if I wanted to be part of her care team, when the time came.

"You do wonder," she said, "what's going to happen next."

We sit in the garden and Moira tells me stories. How she went back to the town where she grew up and found that the school had been closed down.

"The bricks were all still there but the nuns had gone," Moira says.

In her garden the red-whiskered bul-buls are singing. We listen to their jaunty, falling whistle.

She'd lost touch with Susanna.

The last time Moira saw Susanna, Susanna was living in upstate New York with a woman who had three full-sized poodles. This

woman, who was a therapist in demand, left the housework and the dogs to Susanna.

"I always knew she'd made a mess of things," Moira says.

I imagine Susanna. She is being hustled across a park by large excited dogs. She has their leashes in a tangle.

"Susanna was the love of my life," Moira adds. "It was quite a long time ago."

They were both teaching assistants, Moira and Susanna. That was how they met.

"I was just terrible," Moira says. "I'd have the students sit round in a circle and I'd stare at them and ask, What do you think the poet means when he says, *We must love one another or die*"?

Those of us who are on Moira's care team had an initial meeting at her house. Convened by Inez. The front room was crowded — about twenty people. Women, mostly. The neighbours from both sides: the Chowdhrys and old Mrs. Morrison.

Moira was there, in the best chair. And Inez, of course, bossing us around: sit here, sit there, bring another chair from the kitchen.

Inez has that frizzy hair that sticks out all round.

I know what slot I fall into: From the TAFE. Straight.

Inez made us have a round of sorts, to say who we were and why we thought we wanted to do this.

"It will take a lot of emotional energy," Inez said. "It's a big commitment."

As if we didn't know that.

I explained about my mother.

Mrs. Chowdhry said, in an emphatic, clear voice: "We want to help because it's Moira." Mr. Chowdhry and the two embarrassed big sons nodded.

Mrs. Morrison said, simply, "We love you, Moira."

Inez looked a bit pissed off at that. As if she wanted dibs on all of the loving herself.

It is in fiction that I meet women I understand. They are floating on the ceiling or drifting about the sky while the weather passes

through them.

In the real world, however, things are not like this. There is talk instead of self-esteem, high and low.

A crowd scene in a sauna: some of the women have thighs that make a tiny sucking sound as they get up from the bench and run, with gleaming breasts, into the cold showers. Those are the ones who have high self-esteem.

Long before she met Susanna, when she was a young woman of twenty-two, Moira was engaged.

At that time Moira worked in the library in Armidale, in northern New South Wales. The library had been built in honour of those who had been killed in World War II.

Each work-day morning Moira left her flat and rode her bike down the hill to work. She picked up the books that had tumbled through the after-hours slot. Then she turned a page in the book of remembrance. The book sat in the foyer on a little podium, inside a glass case.

Once in a while she would turn to the page that had her father's name on it.

Captain John Halverson, Tarakan, 1945.

"Where the hell is Tarakan?" I ask Inez.

"Telling you that story, is she?" says Inez.

Someone from the night shift has left cheese on a plate by the sink, attracting a multitude of small brown ants.

Inez runs the tap and washes the ants down.

Now I know for a fact that Moira would never do a thing like that. When ants walked all over the sink at work Moira would knock her knuckles on the counter, address them: "Come along chaps. Time, gentlemen, time."

She'd wait until the ants had hurried off through their crack in the tiles.

"What sort of a night did she have?" I ask Inez.

"Not so good," Inez says.

Moira and Inez have been together for nine years. They'd been

going to break up, before the diagnosis. Then they re-negotiated.

"She has someone else," Moira says.

Moira pulls her hat down over her face.

"You do know that, don't you?" Moira adds.

I live with my son. I haven't had anyone since — as my own mother would have put it — Bully was a pup.

I am one of those women couples speculate about.

What does she do?

Probably perfectly happy on her own.

Probably.

Moira tells me about her mother. Moira's mother fell in love with a Methodist, a shocking thing.

Her parents disapproved. They beseeched, they prayed.

His parents went one better — disowned him completely.

They were married, Moira's mother and the disowned Methodist, in the Catholic church registry. No nuptial mass, no nuptial blessing, no flowers, no wedding music.

"In hugger-mugger," Moira says. "Such a begrudged, half-hearted ceremony."

But in the snaps of the wedding her mother and father look — despite his uniform and her street clothes — ecstatic, triumphant. (This in an era when, in the face of the wedding photographer, restraint was customary.)

Moira sent me into her study to find the album for her. She showed me these pictures, proof.

After her father was killed by a sniper at Tarakan in Borneo, Moira tells me, her mother gave up.

"She signed off," Moira says.

Her mother took a job cooking and cleaning at the local Catholic boys' school where her brother was a Brother.

"There was no need for her to bury herself like that," says Moira.

"You mustn't do that," she adds. "You mustn't give up."

Moira's theory: Her mother, having had a brief period of defiant physical love, felt deeply punished, rebuked, by her husband's death.

Moira's mother went daily to mass in the boys' school chapel. It had a side alcove built especially for the maids. The alcove faced the altar at right angles, so that the boys couldn't see them, the women.

"She had my father's picture on the dressing table," Moira says. "In his army uniform. With his hat band riding on his chin."

Having said that, Moira, without warning, begins to weep.

It happens. She'll be going along, telling me her stories, doing fine, and then it's as if she has stepped on a trap-door, fallen through.

At such times, I take her hand. "Moira," I say, "Moira. It's all right, Moira." Although it isn't.

Young Moira rode her bike to St. Angela's, away on the other side of town.

Her mother's piety was well-known to the nuns, and her father's unfortunate religion had been cancelled out by the happy certainty of his death. Moira had no difficulty getting someone to walk beside her when they were being marched in a crocodile over to the cathedral, which was often.

But in high school Moira developed a crush on the baddest of the Bad Girls.

Bad Girls came from Sydney. They were sent away to the country, to boarding school, to get straightened out.

This Bad Girl had hung around milk bars with bodgies, gone for rides on their motor bikes. She wore a medallion around her neck, not of the Virgin Mary but of James Dean. She chewed gum and giggled during the rosary.

Sometimes Bad Girl stood by the coal shed, waiting for Moira. They would go inside and smooch. "Or whatever we called it then," Moira says.

"I got less daring as time went on," she says.

"But I shouldn't be talking all the time," Moira says. "Tell me about yourself."

Of course, there is Martin.

My son, Martin, is eighteen.

Martin sits in his room and listens to jazz on winter Sunday afternoons. The fog rolls in from the ocean and you admit that, for you, it's

not likely to ever happen again — the passion, the overwhelming happiness.

"An eighteen-year old shouldn't be tuned in to that," I tell Moira.

"Maybe he doesn't hear what you do," she says. "Maybe he hears something quite different."

"What about lovers?" Moira asks.

I was afraid she would.

The palliative care nurses come.

One of them talks non-stop about pain management, then says, "My husband has lupus. Unfortunately."

Another dips her head and blushes at the posters on the bedroom wall.

The third smiles too much. "What do you bet she takes a swig of that liquid morphine before she comes in," Moira says.

They keep a logbook about what they call TLCs.

"Doesn't it just make you want to throw up?" Moira says.

Moira, an undergraduate at university, went to the Newman Society barbecue and got herself a boyfriend.

Charred chops, endless beer, and dreadful drinking songs.

She sings them for me, bits she can remember: "Oh I do want to be a Roman Catholic/Oh I do want to join the Church of Rome/Oh I do want to be a lacky of the priests/And get as drunk as blazes on the major feasts."

She's really getting into this when Inez comes striding across the lawn, to say bye bye, she's off to work.

Inez is often jumping into her car and driving away. Inez is a lawyer; she specializes in international law. She has a new lover, in Germany. They get together when Inez is in Brussels or at the Hague.

"Her name is Inge," Moira tells me.

"Inez and Inge," I say.

It sounds like a porn movie, but I don't say that. I suppose it's none of my business, even though she's talking to me about it.

We both watch the car pull out of the driveway; a quick toot of the horn, and off down the street.

I tell Moira what I read in the papers.

They did this survey about being in love. Ten per cent said they had never been in love. Ten per cent said they had been in love but had found it too painful.

Moira lies back on the cushions and I brush her hair. Her hair is thick, salt-and-black pepper. Irish hair.

I look down at her face, at the lines around her eyes.

She's losing a lot of weight and her body is smaller, more bony.

The doctors are cagey.

She could go on for years, they say. You never know.

The others in the care team will have to go back to their work, their families, their own lives.

I will stay on, combing Moira's hair in the garden.

"Love is so terribly important," I tell Martin. "All kinds. You have to be willing to take risks, to go for it."

Martin looks at me, briefly wary.

"If you don't you'll regret it later," I say.

Martin is sitting at the breakfast table, eating. His silky young skin stretches over growing bones; daily, he is more fresh, more handsome, more like his father must have been at his age.

"Does she look any different, Mum?" Martin asks.

"No, love," I say. To reassure.

But Moira makes terrible, out-of-fashion jokes. "Eat your heart out, Bobby Sands," she says.

This is how it will be: I am strolling on a beach with her.

We have walked down through the tough, delicate bush, moving quietly, aware of small eyes taking note.

Her arm is in mine because she is still weak. What a break, she says — leaning on me — what luck, what a bonus, what a marvellous encore.

Inez will be off on one of her trips.

So Moira had this boyfriend named Michael. The son of a doctor. Who sat beside her on the bus during Newman Society outings. Kissed

her, she claims, during the singing of *Michael, Row the Boat Ashore.*

"All very wet," Moira says.

He wanted to marry her, did Michael.

I'll take him home to my mother, decided Moira. And that will be that.

Her mother, slouching around with the other school maids on Sunday afternoons. Her mother, in her wool socks, drinking tea and looking at magazines.

For afternoon tea, her mother made up some pink icing and stuck it between wholemeal biscuits.

On the washing line, the maids' underwear flapped, large and dangerous and far too real.

They sat on packing cases in the sun and studied the floor plans in *House and Gardens.* "Look at this," her mother said, "it isn't fair. Master bedroom, master bedroom. Why should the son always get the biggest room?"

But that wasn't that. The doctor's son went ahead and bought the engagement ring anyway.

Moira wore it to her part-time job in the library.

The Anglican bishop, who had come in for his weekly supply of westerns, admired it.

Moira, in a wide Fifties skirt and twin-set with a Peter Pan collar, holding out her engagement ring finger to the bishop.

"Three guesses what I did," Moira says.

"Don't need them," I say, pleased with myself.

He was a lecturer at the university, from England.

He came to the library and sat in the periodicals section and stared at Moira when she took the books off the trolley and reached up to put them in the shelves.

It was a seduction based entirely on words, says Moira. She sends me into her study in search of the book, claims to be able to find the exact passage.

"Here it is," she says, and reads: " '. . . she received the maximum of unspeakable communication in touch, dark, subtle, positively silent,

a magnificent gift and give again, a perfect acceptance and yielding, a mystery, the reality of that which can never be known, vital, sensual reality that can never be transmuted into mind content, but remains outside, living body of darkness and silence and subtlety, the mystic body of reality. She had her desire fulfilled.' "

Moira laughs. She re-reads the last sentence.

I don't know if I should laugh or not.

I don't feel like laughing.

I reach right back and tell Moira about Martin's father, how he left me when I began to show with Martin.

"Perhaps he was the love of my life," I say.

I tell her about another man, from, well, quite a few years ago.

His interminable marriage.

Inez is furious. She paces up and down the kitchen and cannot calm down.

"Who the fuck helped themselves to Moira's tarts?" she yells.

Someone on the night shift has eaten them.

Jam tarts are the only food that attracts Moira these days. (Mostly she just drinks Sustagen; she has trouble keeping things down.)

Inez buys these tarts in a cakeshop in the Strand Arcade. She calls them linzer torte.

"What creature would do a thing like that?" demands Inez. "This bloody well takes the cake," she says, unaware.

Moira, in the living room on cushions, laughs. Rings her bell.

Someone on the team has given her a little brass bell so that she can let us know if she needs us, if we happen to be out of the room.

"Did some knave stole those tarts all away?" Moira asks. (She's in good form this morning.)

Inez bursts into tears.

"Come here, my little jam tart," Moira says to Inez.

Inez puts her face into Moira's neck and they murmur together.

Inez begins to lick Moira's ear.

We've finished with the doctor's son and the university lecturer.

At last, we are up to Susanna.

But before she can tell me all about Susanna, Moira has a setback.

I arrive for my morning shift and Inez stands in the doorway, her arms hanging down, hands slack.

Last night Moira was in a sort of coma.

"We thought this might be it," Inez says.

Moira isn't the same after that.

Her energy is down; she doesn't want to go out into the garden in the morning any more.

Instead of talking with Moira, I do the washing.

Moira now has prodigious night sweats. The sheets and her nightgown have to be changed three or four times each night.

When I go in and out of her room, Moira smiles at me but in an unfocussed, polite way.

As if I were some stranger.

One morning I go in to see her and she gestures to me to come close. (Inez is in the living room, talking on the phone.) Moira reaches up and takes both my hands.

"I want you to do something for me," she whispers. "I need you to get in touch with Susanna."

She lies back on the cushions. Forces herself to go on.

"Tell Susanna I have to see her," she urges. "Find her. Make her come."

I wait until Inez goes out to work so I can search through Moira's study for her old address books. Eventually I find Susanna's name, and a bunch of crossed-out addresses.

I take all the address books home and carry them into the house as if they were fragile, contraband.

I dial the numbers, overseas, to the States, to Canada.

People with strange accents come on the line and can't understand what I'm saying.

I have to repeat myself.

You must have the wrong number.

No, sorry.

Lady, are you a nut or what? Like I told you before. She ain't here, period.

After work, I go into the city to the GPO and look in all the phone books. I call the library and talk to the reference librarian.

I call information for the major cities on the northeast coast of the United States, of Canada. Then I call the numbers.

I make a list of the names of these cities. There are 287 cities on my list.

Piece by piece by piece, I am going to solve this puzzle. I am going to find Susanna.

I will find Susanna for you.

I will bring her to you.

I whisper into the bathroom mirror, making it fog over.

One day there is a new roster on the refrigerator and my name isn't on it. There must be some mistake.

Right away I go into the bedroom, but Moira is curled up under the quilt, asleep. In the crook of her legs, Mad Max is licking his bum.

So I ask the woman who's going off shift. Like me, she's from the TAFE; straight. I know her quite well.

She says, "They're going to move Moira's bed into the living room. Put their mattresses down so they can sleep around her, like a laager. That way, if someone who's watching her needs help, with moving her or something, they'll be right there."

"So what's this list for?" I ask.

"It's the list for sleeping over."

"Why aren't I on the list for sleeping over?"

She looks at me in a shrewd way.

"I could do it, Martin's old enough," I protest.

She says, "Well who would you want around? Wouldn't you want your old lovers? They're the ones I'd want, for sure."

She laughs.

"Old lovers," I say, as if I do not understand.

This woman has been married to her husband forever. Every time I see him he has his head behind a newspaper. The sports section.

What could she possibly know about old lovers?

But it was me Moira asked to find Susanna.

I think constantly of Susanna. Where is she? What is she doing right now?

Susanna is walking along a city street, or eating a piece of bread, or opening a window.

(Behind her, in an unkempt apartment, the phone rings and rings.)

Susanna, not thinking of Moira.

Her head full of her own life, somewhere.

"What are you up to, Mum?" Martin asks.

He used to call me by my name when he was younger. Now he calls me Mum.

I'm cleaning out the spare room. For Susanna. Vacuuming, dusting, airing the room, putting out potpourri in a dark blue bowl. My cheeks are warm, my hands supple.

"She's coming," I tell him. "That friend of Moira's."

"But Mum," he says.

"But Mum nothing," I say. "She's coming."

Martin is helping me. We sit at the dining-room table, going through the lists.

"That just about wraps up Massachusetts, Mum," Martin says.

When Susanna comes, she will see how Martin is. How casual and generous in his young beauty.

Susanna will be the right age to appreciate Martin, my son.

I think I may have found her number. It was amazing luck, I was down to the 67th city on the list. I dialled this number in Toronto and there was a taped answer.

The voice sounded exactly right.

I left a message for her to call me as soon as possible.

She's the one.

I believe she's the one. I really believe that.

She'll come right away. I'll meet her at the airport, bring her to Moira.

For a break — because she'll need a break — I'll take her up to

Dee Why and she can be impressed by the waves and sand. And the beach will have the clarity of very early spring, before the sun washes everything out.

For light relief I'll explain to Susanna about the battle for the beaches. (What do we want? No more pooh! When do we want it? Now!)

She will know that Moira and I have a special connection; I won't need to explain.

But I'll tell her when she asks. About Moira's comfort with me, her frankness.

We will walk along the beach, Susanna and I, and we'll both be thinking about that.

"Inez," I say, pleased to have caught her in time. "I've got to talk to you." For once, with Inez I feel confident, in charge. We are standing in the driveway. (Ms Lawyer is off to the city, again.)

"It's about Susanna."

As I say this, Inez looks, briefly, as if she is falling through space.

Then she pulls herself together.

"Don't tell me," she says, intensely irritated. "Not you too."

I stare at her.

"I suppose Moira's been asking you to help her find Susanna."

Has she been eavesdropping?

Does she know I went through Moira's things in her study?

"She's asked us," says Inez, slowly, emphatically.

"All of us. Ages ago."

I don't believe it.

"We've tried and tried. We've been driving Telecom crazy. But we've had to face it, we just can't find her."

"I guess you were her last resort," she says.

Then she started to laugh.

She turned around and walked back into the house. Went to the kitchen, where the night shift, the sleep-overs, were making breakfast.

I go out to the laundry. Take out a load of washing someone has left there. Put in a new load.

Measure the laundry soap, set the dial, make the wash turn and

tumble. See, I am quite capable of doing these things.

Take out Moira's sheets and the T-shirts she wears as nighties.

Hang them on the line where the sun shines, as it has to.

Out on the street, people are walking along. They are going to catch the train to work.

She would have told the others her stories, too. All of them.

Ages ago. Different bits for different people.

For me, early life and men. Auden, Lawrence.

From where I am, I can hear them.

Someone has just quipped "desperately seeking Susanna," and they all laugh.

It's laughter that says, this is totally crazy; this is serious.

It's laughter that says, we're deep into it here, my friends. And if it's a miracle you're waiting for, well don't count on it, matey, but one might show up, you never know, it just might.

You hear a lot of this laughter around Moira's house these days.

Listen to it, coming from the kitchen, now.