

Keeping Place

A short story by Linda Davies

Margie, Diana and I sat with our legs dangling over the edge of the veranda. The sun-warmed concrete felt good under our backsides. We clicked our rubber thongs against our heels and licked sticky vanilla ice-cream from our fingers, trying to catch the drips before they disappeared into the porous concrete for the ants. Looking through the railings we inhaled the freshly trimmed lawn below. From our vantage point we could see down the hill towards the beach: bobbing human dots in the distance playing in the waves, tree-covered headland, the Bluff, rising up with a white lighthouse at its pinnacle, its wide red vertical stripes from top to bottom making it look like a skinny circus tent. Sucking on our ice-cream sticks we watched the occasional car pass by, pulling the sticks out of our mouths occasionally to point out something of interest: people and cars loading onto the Empire Princess with her pin-head portholes and mustard yellow skirt, surfers at the mouth of the Mersey River and the movement of curtains at spunky Tony Ridgeon's house over the road. We called out a respectful 'Hi Mrs. Anderson,' as Margie's neighbour picked a bowlful of ripe raspberries from the prickly stalks hanging off her trellised fence.

The even tones of the cricket commentators hummed from inside the house with the occasional eruption of 'What a catch!' excitement from Tony Greig and Richie Benaud as Lillee and Marsh teamed up for another wicket. At regular intervals, the fridge door opened and closed, the jug whistled and clicked off, the flick-flick-flicker of lighters sparked cigarettes. While Dad and Uncle George watched the action, Mum and Auntie Lorna talked about dingoes and the Chamberlain case.

My cousin Margie was eleven, the same age as me and she was skinny with shoulder-length curly blonde hair that always did its own thing. She went brown 'like the boongs' Uncle George would say with a twinkle in his eye. We didn't know what 'the boongs' were but decided they must have been very brown. Margie always wore a badge that said *I survived Catholic school* even though she still had Grade Six to get through before she'd be allowed to attend a school which didn't include Babushka doll robed nuns and Religious Studies. My sister, Diana, was three years younger than us and always tagged along. If we wanted to do anything, anywhere, we had to keep her with us, so we were a trio for many summers. Her constant presence was annoying sometimes but she was eager to be included in our games and so performed many helpful tasks such as guinea pig escape spotter for our races and Professional Laughter whenever we recorded Knock-Knock jokes on Margie's cassette recorder. We felt responsible for her because she was the youngest and didn't have anyone else to play with. My auburn hair was cut in the space helmet style of the time, and not surprisingly 'Space Helmet' was one of my nicknames at school while I had that haircut. Mum always said 'What doesn't kill you makes you stronger'. I figured I would grow up to be *very* strong. Margie and I were carefree about everything then. The summer seemed to be a year long. We spent our evenings on the bunk beds in her room, swapping *Nancy Drew* mysteries, repeating sketches from *The Goodies* by heart, talking about boys, flicking through issues of *Smash Hits* to pull out the posters and Blu-Tack them to her walls. Talking about what we'd do when we grew up. Margie wanted to run a hotel and I wanted to be a teacher although I would only teach older kids our age as I didn't want to clean up vomit or have to deal with little kids who wet themselves.

The lounge-room's bamboo-print curtains were drawn to keep out the heat of the day and the sunlight off the telly. This resulted in a hovering grey cigarette-smoke haze which meant we had to take turns to hold our breath to run through it to get our supplies out of the fridge. We'd brave the lounge, tip-toe running past the TV with its silver antennae reaching out to us like robot arms, so as not to interrupt the view or sound of the telecast, to get another ice-cream, fill up our mugs with Milo and a bit of milk, scooping the chocolate mixture off the milk's surface with a teaspoon. On one such mission Uncle George caught me.

'Hey, Loops-a-Doops, what's this?' He was pointing to his chin but indicating mine with his arched bushy black eyebrows and a nod of the head. I could feel the burning blush flowering on my face and I put my finger-tip over the tender pimple eruption on my chin. He gently teased, 'You want to get some Gentian Violet on that, it'll fix you right up.'

'No, thanks.' I mumbled sheepishly and slunk out of the room to check my reflection. I looked in the mirror. Solution? Just don't look.

We pulled on our shorts and t-shirts over our blue Speedos, slipped our thongs on our feet without breaking our stride, hung our towels around our necks and headed downstairs.

'Going to the beach!' we chorused.

'Righto...'

Rolling our bikes out of their cool haven next to the eight-ball table in the downstairs rumpus room, we clambered on and headed towards the beach. Margaret first, Diana second and me last in our free-wheeling convoy. We gathered speed down the hill and left the house behind, grinning into the wind, tossing our hair out behind us like whipping ribbons, chrome spokes shining in the sun, legs pumping, we called out to each other, showing off, jumping our bikes up onto the cracked footpaths when a car came along, leaning into the corners, calling out 'hello' to people in their gardens, walking their dogs or collecting their mail. A woman with long dark brown hair walked towards the Bluff. As we rode towards her I noticed she had jeans on; I thought she must have been sweating marbles. Her shoulders were hunched and her arms folded over her chest. The woman stared straight ahead like the look Mum gets when she thinks she's left the iron on.

Breathless and snorting with laughter at our own antics we skidded to a halt with a small fanfare of gravel and leaned our bikes up against the sea wall. We tip-toed as fast as we could across the hot sand, sidestepping sand castles, drying seaweed and little mounds of crushed shell fragments until we found 'our spot'. Having acclimatised a little, we laid out our towels, breathing a sigh of relief to have a layer of towelling between us and the heated grains. Quickly disposing of shorts and t-shirts we ran down to the wavelets licking the shore, leaped over them running until we were too deep in to run anymore. We flopped into the salty water, splashing each other in flurry and then calming down enough to check out who else was at the beach. Margie said 'Hi' to a few of her school mates in the water and I nodded acknowledgement as she explained our presence.

After an hour or so of swimming about and pretending to be sharks with each other we dragged ourselves out of the water and trudged back to our towels, collapsing with a slumping sigh to let the sun and warm summer breeze dry the salty droplets clinging to our skin. Wet ropes of hair hung around our faces as we lay, talking and watching the surf then changing position 180 degrees to watch everyone lining up for the snack van, parked at the sea wall. Once dried, with only crusted sand and shell fragments to brush off, we pulled on our clothes, swung our towels around our necks and wandered up to the snack van for a small white paper bag of too-hot-for-your-mouth salty chips each, paid for with our precious pocket money. Margie and I covered

Diana's shortfall after she lost forty cents out of her pocket somewhere. She'd pay us back by being our slave for the rest of the day: fetching ice-creams at home, racking up balls for the eight-ball table and some other appropriate slave duties that we hadn't thought up yet. While our chips were cooling off a bit we went to lay around a rockpool, poking small brown crabs and barnacles with twigs, half-looking for a golf ball-sized blue-ringed octopus but not really wanting to find one: 'Look at one of those the wrong way and you'll be dead in five minutes!' imprinted in our brains from the last visit.

We wandered up the winding sandy dirt path up the Bluff towards the lighthouse, stopping to look at some Aboriginal rock carvings. We traced their perfect spiral curves with our fingers in the smooth furrows and made up stories about how they were made and what they meant. All we knew about them was that they were part of the Tiagarra Aboriginal carvings and Tiagarra meant 'keeping place'. A mystery we hoped to solve on a different day. As we looked out to Bass Strait, the ocean punctuated by frothy white-capped swell, seagulls swirling and cackling overhead, Margie and I planned the guinea-pig race track we would set up when we got home. We flicked our left-over chips to the seagulls and tried to dish them out equally so that each bird had an equal portion. Extra portions were flung towards any one-legged birds as we felt they deserved compensation for having a fish chomp off a limb.

After fifteen minutes of easy walking we reached the imposing lighthouse, walking around the bleached cement path encircling the base. We were still a convoy; one behind the other, each with one hand raking along its smooth rendered white and red concrete skin, dropping our hands so as not to accidentally scrape a knock on the red wooden door. We sat down at a wooden picnic table, with our backs to the lighthouse, in a clearing to the right of the structure to look out at the yachts on the ocean and chat. Suddenly, there was a deep thud behind us. It was like someone dropping a full basket of wet washing onto the cement from the back veranda at home. Immediately, everything was quiet. Even the gulls quit squawking for a few minutes. Turning to the trees and the lighthouse about twenty metres behind us, we couldn't see anyone. We caught each other's eyes and started giggling; too many Nancy Drew stories, we laughed. Diana didn't look so sure but she laughed along and begged for one more circuit of the lighthouse anyway.

As we rounded the base of the lighthouse again we saw the dirty soles of her splayed out bare feet. Her pastel pink toe-nails were chipped. I thought she was sunbathing at first, as many people did all over the slopes and clearings of the Bluff. Maybe she was one of those spacey Don College girls, getting a grass-level view of the lighthouse and its carnival clothing. We stopped and whispered to each other if we should just turn around and go back, we didn't want to get yelled at by some cranky woman for disturbing her. Then curiosity's magnet drew us towards her. Who sun-baked with jeans and a t-shirt on? I started to feel sick in my stomach and I felt my heart beating bass drums. She lay on her back in the grass, her feet closest to the lighthouse base. Legs and arms resting in the pose of those Egyptian figures we studied at school. She was looking at us with her brown eyes and her bloodied mouth open. It was *her*. She was crying dribbles of blood and spreading from underneath her long brown hair she was bleeding feathers into the grass.

I don't know how long we stood there gawping, silent and still, but I became aware of Diana restless beside me, I looked down and she had shiny trails of tears making clean streaks down her face, eyes wide, lip trembling, chin crumpling. I grabbed her close to me turning her away from the woman while Margie and I still craned forward to look, like if we kept looking long enough she might suddenly get up and run off or she might disappear altogether. We looked up to the

balcony of the lighthouse above us, where she must have fallen or jumped from. What should we do? Margie and I looked around for someone, any adult, to come and take control. Not a person in sight.

‘Do you reckon she’s dead?’

Sucking in air, ‘Mmm, dunno.’

‘Excuse me...Miss?’ I said tentatively. Not really wanting a response which was lucky because there wasn’t one.

‘She doesn’t look like she’s breathing, look at her chest, it’s not going up and down.’ We edged closer to see if we could see any sign of life from her. Nothing. She wasn’t sweating marbles now. Only her hair looked alive, tendrils shifting an inch or two over the ground in the breeze that seemed to creep up over the cliff top to examine us all. Margie was the fastest runner so we agreed she would run down to the snack van and tell them, while Diana and I would stay where we were. It seemed like the right thing to do. Margie dropped her towel, and with her chest already heaving, she sprinted away, her hair a wild storm behind her and even after we couldn’t see her anymore we could hear her click-clacking rubber thongs disappearing into the scrubby trees. Diana was still crying and sniffing, wiping her face on the hem of her t-shirt. I lowered my head and took a deep breath, pulling out a small packet of rainbow-coloured jellybeans from my shorts that I’d been hoarding, gave her a hug and then placed the jellybeans into her hands.

‘I know it’s horrible, but we can’t do anything now until Margie brings help so you sit here next to me, close so I can feel you, you face that way,’ I pointed in the direction that Margie had run ‘...and watch for when she gets back with help. I’ll face this way.’ I gestured with my hand towards the smashed woman still staring.

We sat in silence in the sunlight, shoulders and hips touching, facing in opposite directions. I didn’t shield my freckled face from the sun; I just closed my eyes and saw the warm red-orange membrane of my eyelids. I felt the tickle of blades of grass touching my feet over the soles of my thongs, the breeze lifting the hair from my face. I willed time to turn itself inside out and undo what we had seen, suck all the blood back inside her, brush the small clods of dirt from her feet and hands, make the woman levitate straight up in the air back to the balcony, stand up, smooth her hair and then laugh at the joke she’d played on us. I wanted her to reappear smiling from the cheery door of the lighthouse and walk off down the hill to buy us all an ice-cream. I exhaled hard, slumped my shoulders and blinked my eyes open.

‘Don’t look,’ I whispered to Diana as my movement made her turn towards me. I was looking enough for all of us. The woman was still there. Looking at us. Hypnotised.

I could hear the jingle of keys behind me now. ‘Here she is,’ said Diana, relieved. Margie was carrying her thongs in her hand and walking barefoot after the run downhill. Her eyes were red and puffy. With her, she had two older surfer guys and the lady who had served us at the snack van. We stood up and gathered our things together.

‘Come here, girls,’ the snack van lady said and folded all three of us into her white serving apron. Standing in the shadow of the lighthouse now, feeling its fingers of cool shadow close around us, making the hairs on our arms stand up with our goose-bumps, we asked for our parents. The surfers crouched over the woman, talking to each other, walking around the lighthouse, and looking up at the white iron balcony, her springboard.

Back at the house, the cricket was still on the TV, but the volume was down low. Mum, Dad, Auntie Lorna and Uncle George were talking to two policemen in the lounge behind the dividing vinyl concertina door. We were in the living room on the other side of the divider straining to

listen and eating freshly made sausage rolls, dipping them in tomato sauce, letting them heat us from the inside out. Standing up at the window we could see our bikes sticking out of the boot of the police car, tied down with occie straps. We delegated Diana, still our slave after the hot chip purchases, to take our empty plates through the lounge to the kitchen and report back to us with lemonades and any overheard conversation. She pulled back the divider, carving through the cigarette smoke's sudden silence. She returned with only lemonades. Auntie Lorna quickly followed, poking her head around the corner and asked if we wanted to go to the cinema and the roller-skating rink the next day. We nodded together.

In the early evening, the three of us sat with our legs dangling over the edge of the veranda, the sun-warmed concrete felt like home under our backsides again. The soles of our rubber thongs hung loose from our heels. We licked sticky vanilla ice-cream from our fingers in silence, letting the drips fall on the concrete to feed the ants. I looked down through the railings at the neatly trimmed lawn below and it immediately imprinted the dark red feathers of blood on the inside of my eyelids. My chest felt like an invisible accordionist was trying to squeeze a note out of me, but my lungs were protesting. My ice-cream now lay on the veranda and slowly melted globules onto the concrete. The ants went crazy. Diana's arm snaked its way around my waist. She and Margie were quivery and crying too. We wiped our eyes, noses and wet cheeks with our palms and then wiped the residue down our thighs and sat for a while longer. Down the hill, the Bluff seemed like a squatting stranger while Bass Strait bubbled froth in the distance. The Empire Princess left a plume of charcoal smoke as she sailed towards the mainland, surfers 'hanging five' on her wake. The white and red lighthouse at the top of the Bluff was keeping its place near the cliff edge.

'Want to go downstairs and play eight-ball?'

'Yep.'