SOUTH GATE ROAD

There is a photo of my grandfather, George Albert Green, standing on the tennis court, dressed in white and squinting at the sun. Beside him, slightly blurred and smiling, is his younger brother William. They hold racquets by their side with familiar ease, feet planted firmly on the ground. Shadows play across their untroubled faces. Boughs of flowering crepe myrtle cloud the sky behind their heads. It is just before the Second World War.

George Albert had a wife and four daughters. I know they were there when this photo was taken, somewhere outside the frame. Perhaps they sat beside the court, under parasols, sipping iced tea, laughing in the sharp, scented air. Maybe they had singing lessons ,or a piano teacher who called once a week or an active social life after church on Sundays.

And William? He left the area in 1938, shortly after The Accident . I like to think of him striding off to a new life. The truth is, apart from one or two letters posted on the road, there are only empty spaces in the album to mark his place in our family.

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South Gate Road is not properly counted as part of the town yet not quite far enough out to be anywhere else. It's a fair distance from the river, stretching briefly along a ridge that falls away to a wooded gully. Summerland Drive runs past the top of the road, leading to the sawmill in one direction and winding out to the next town miles the other way.

Three houses stand on South Gate Road, letterboxes anonymous by neat front fences. There's no need for numbers. The postie has known each of the households since they first appeared, one by one, like hardy weeds in foreign soil; Mrs Miles, Mrs Reynard, Mrs Moffat.

Ivy Reynard's house is furthest from the road. She settled in not long after Annie and Poppy Miles. Even though Ivy isn't family the children call her Aunty, and have the run of the place.

The bush pushes up close around the low wire fence. Three fibro rooms with a verandah out the front and a wash shed out the back. On the roof of the shed half

a dozen Queensland Blues lie ripening in the sun - strung out like a grey green necklace on the corrugated iron.

Ivy has two young sons. She had a husband called Johnno once. He travelled a lot in the way of his work. Nobody's quite sure what that work was any more. As he hasn't been home for several years nobody likes to ask.

"She's a good sort to have for a neighbour," says Annie, "she keeps herself to herself and that."

Over the years Ivy's boys grow strong and free and the tiny yard is filled with the tangle of sturdy brown limbs, shouts, laughter and water bombs. On his sixteenth birthday one of the boys received a chemistry kit, unannounced, in the mail. For weeks the front verandah is filled with eye watering smells. The boys lie belly down on the lino, clinking tubes together, inventing exotic odours. Rotten egg gas and formic acid waft into the neighbours houses, settling in darkened cupboards, under beds, behind the ice chest.

None of this bothers Ivy. Not Johnno, not the pumpkins, not the riotous smelly sons. She laughs through a veil of smoke, hair in rollers, cigarette burning.

"Those boys," she says, waving one thin arm around the kitchen, "will eat me out of house and home."

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On the morning of the accident all four girls had felt uneasy.

"There's angels in my hair," the youngest said. "They're singing songs for Daddy."

Word came through mid morning that William was found. Alive, stranded on the dark green bank, covered in river weed. The water, rank and greedy, hung on to his boots and coat, nibbled his sweet white toes.

All along the valley, people would recall it as the worst storm in white memory. And the clearest morning after.

Parts of the boat appeared at intervals for weeks after. A rudder here, some tackle there and once, black, buoyant and single, George Albert's rubber boot. No body was ever found.

The girls never saw their father again.

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Annie Miles did not come to South Gate Road as a bride. She had lived in the area before - right in town - but it wasn't her home.

Annie's folk came from further up the coast, in the green hinterland near the Mission. Later, when her children were old enough to ask, she told them she was an orphan and an only child, divesting herself of a family as swift and clean as a snake sheds her skin.

Each morning Annie pulls on her jumpers and skirts and pads past the outhouse to the woodshed. She squats, feet apart, bundling wood chips into the cradle of her apron. The smell of sawdust rises through the damp and the gully behind is drowned in mist. Disembodied tree tops loom above the vegie garden, their trunks a shroud of white.

In this garden Poppy grows corn and tomato and pumpkin and green runner beans. There's no food in flowers, he would say, spitting at the soil.

They built this house together with off-cuts from the mill, iron scrap poached from the railways. Once, in the early days, a sister of his had called at dusk, restrained and nervous, leaving a large plush rug and six silver cake forks from the Old House. She never came again.

Now the rug sprawls beaten and frayed across the boards of the lounge room floor.

In the cool of the kitchen the woodchips are still damp and slow to light. The ash bin beside the sink is full, an enamel kettle waits on the stove top. From the front room of the house Annie hears the sound of children waking.

The back gate squeaks and clicks and Poppy appears at the kitchen door, a billy of warm milk swinging from one hand. Across the gully comes the lowing of Ivy's poddy, lonesome and sickly, calling for its mother.

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The Moffats are a fishing family. They have six children, four dogs and two boats when they take the house between Annie and Ivy.

"I don't mind having black fellas and that next door," Annie says, "as long as they don't start tea leavin'."

Most week days the Moffat men head off to the coast before sun up to fish the river's mouth. Some times, if the catch has been better than usual, their house fills up with more children and dogs and assorted relatives from all over. The front yard disappears under a spread of utes and vans and beat up old Holdens. On Sundays, regardless of the weather, the whole family spends the day at church. Not in town but further out at the Settlement, away from the dour Presbyterians and foot-washing Baptists.

Every time Mrs Moffat has a baby another room is thrown up against the house and painted blue.

"Looks like a bloody piccaninny motel," says Poppy.
"They're hard workers but," says Annie.

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Around the time Ivy's boys drift to the city, looking for work, a man moves in. Aunty Ivy introduces him to Annie and Mrs Moffat as Bert. He's dark haired and stocky and laughs almost as much as Ivy.

Most nights Bert swings his ute into South Gate Road, toots the horn and ambles into Ivy's with two bottles of chilled dinner ale in a brown paper bag.

From their front room the Moffat children watch and giggle. Some nights the older boys play at being Bert. They mimic his bow legged walk, hoisting empty milk bottles under their arms, imaginary cigarettes behind their ears. They swagger and swing around to terrorise the younger ones, tickling and screaming and leaping from bunk to bunk.

"You boys are gonna hurt someone," yells their father from out the back. "Someone's gonna get hurt."

Bert stays on. After a time the kids don't even notice him any more. They have other things to do.

The older boys leave their night time games behind, rising early in the mist to join the men. Some of the younger ones stay at school - one leaves for the city and ends up doing time for d&d with assault. The family takes turns to go and visit. Nine hours on the mail train, dressed in their town clothes, feeling uneasy. Mrs Moffat tells Ivy that coming home to South Gate Road is the best part of the trip.

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As the weeks wore on George Albert's estate was no closer to being settled. Seven years, his wife was told. It was the missing body that was the problem. As delicately as possible, the lawyers explained that without a corpse there could be no claim. The family would, of course, see that she and the girls weren't left wanting or beholding to strangers.

The tennis courts were covered over. The callers, so gracious at first, slowly faded then disappeared altogether. Finally, even their dark ally the river refused to throw up any more clues.

The hired help had to be laid off. Annie, never a favourite, was one of the first to be called before the Missus. Standing in the parlour of the Old House, her Sunday best dyed black and itching, Annie had hung her head to hear the news. Eyes raised through her lashes, she watched the other woman's face for a sign , some signal . There was nothing.

Annie stepped out of the parlour, light with relief. Her only regret was that she might never see the four girls again. They'd been good company - pretty and fun, the eldest barely younger than herself.

Of their mother's plight, improperly widowed with four fatherless daughters to raise, she gave not a tinker's damn.

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The years rolled away on the edge of town.

Each spring brought sweet corn from Poppy's garden to all three houses. Salted and boiled and dripping in butter. In the good times not all the Moffats catch made it to the co-op. There would be mullet and jewies and leather jackets by turn on the tables of South Gate Road. Rituals of season played out in the gap between the bush and the town folk, bracing the lives of these three households comfortably together.

It was us grandchildren who had christened him Poppy.

Aunty Ivy might have known, but being a good neighbour, would never have asked.

Mrs Moffat had heard rumours years before. So long ago that any connection never crossed her mind.

Annie always said it hadn't been a bad life after all, with the travel and that. Though easier for her than for him she thought

And when they were alone, she still called him George Albert, just as she'd done since the night they left.

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