

CENTRAL QUARTET 3

**Getting
Somewhere**

JENNY PAUSACKER

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To Robyn Arianrhod, mathematician, friend and allround inspiration, who supplied maths examples as fast as I asked for them and collaborated with me on the writing of the sixth chapter.

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JANUARY

Night time in the city. The darkness keeps shifting and changing, like currents underwater. Black grained with grey, blue grained with silver. Streetlamps shine through the plane trees, turning the leaves into a festival of handshaped flags. You jump puddles of light and shade.

All along the street the narrow front yards are bushy with shadows. Some of the houses are dark and in some there is only a glimmer of grey behind the blinds but the house on the corner spills out light and music and voices. You do what everyone does when they walk past a lighted window: you slow down to look inside.

And at the moment you start to turn your head, somebody moves to the left and somebody else moves to the right and you find yourself staring straight through the party at a young woman who's leaning against the opposite wall, arms folded across her chest. She has moody eyes and short dark hair that wisps out around the edges, as if it's charged with static electricity. Even though she isn't talking to anyone, she seems to be concentrating hard. Her shoulders are tense, her eyebrows are slightly raised.

As you pause to watch her, she glances up and peers out into the night, frowning to herself. So you turn away and keep on walking, past the next side street and around the corner. The main road is a neon highway to nowhere in particular and when you look up, the sky is dotted with small, pale stars.

Dinah Carr propped herself against the lounge room wall and surveyed the party.

Things seemed to be hotting up at last. A bunch of Kingston Hall types were slopping hummus onto chunks of Turkish bread and boasting about the marks they'd scored in their final exams. A bunch of Central Secondary College types were dancing to a Silicon Fish tape in the room across the hall, laughing and yelling to each other and spilling their drinks. She could've easily stepped forward and joined the first lot or stepped sideways and joined the second lot. But she didn't feel like moving.

It wasn't as though she'd been hiding in a corner all night. As matter of fact, she felt like she'd been listening to other people non-stop, up until about ten minutes ago. She'd started by talking to Clair Maloney, her sister's best friend from Central.

'Oh Dinah, I still can't believe it. Everyone else seems so cool about the whole business of leaving school but I keep wanting to stop people in the street and say, "Hi, my name's Clair, I've just moved out from home and I'm going to be an artist, isn't that amazing?'"

Clair was small, slight, red-haired, freckled and speedy. She painted bright, crowded pictures that left Dinah feeling breathless but Clair didn't seem to know how good they were.

'Thanks, Dinah. I'm glad somebody likes my stuff. Whenever I try to talk about it at home, Mum just goes, "Well, Clair, if that's what you want" and Dad goes, "At least we've got three kids with decent jobs, so I suppose we can afford one no-hoper.'"

Dinah nodded and looked sympathetic and wished she could think of something helpful to say.

Then, after she and Clair had finished chopping cheese into cubes and arranging plates of food on the lounge room table, she'd had a long chat with Cameron Sutcliff, her sister's boyfriend.

'Listen, Dinah, do you think I'm doing the right thing, enrolling at the Film School? Stacy and I have been together for two years now. Are you sure it's a smart idea to risk all of that by racing off to study in Sydney?'

There were never any problems about giving Cam advice. He went on asking questions until he'd forced you into having an opinion.

'So you reckon Stace and I could just as easily wreck everything by spending too much time together? All the same, there are plenty of good film courses in Melbourne, aren't there? I mean, I could stay here and cash in on the publicity I got for my street kids video, right? But are you sure I'd be able to learn properly if I was being treated like Wonderboy from day one? Mightn't I be better off going some place where nobody knows me? Okay, Dinah, thanks a lot. You've talked me back into the idea of going to Sydney.'

After that, it had been a relief to be cornered by Leon Georgiadis, Clair's boyfriend. Leon wasn't looking for advice or reassurance. Leon had his future all mapped out.

'For starters, a combined law and economics degree at Melbourne Uni. Join the Labor Party, develop my contacts in the Greek community. Score a job as adviser to a state politician, which should lead on to becoming adviser to one of the federal pollies. Next step: preselection for an unwinnable seat and, if I do a good job, preselection for a safe Labor seat. Then it's off to Canberra to learn the ropes, a stint as treasurer and in twenty years from now, I could be the guy in charge.'

But even Leon had turned out to have a secret worry

'What if I don't get into law/economics in the first place?'

and even Leon had turned out to be grateful for a bit of encouragement.

'You really mean that? Thanks, mate. I'll remember you when I'm running the country, okay?'

So there you are, Dinah told herself. No one can accuse me of sitting back and sulking. I've done my best, haven't I? I've been a regular party girl. Happy new year, Leon. Happy new year, Cam. Happy new year, Clair. I'm sure you're all going to be very happy in your brilliant new careers.

She slid further down the wall, folding her arms across her chest in a secret hug. What next? Eating or dancing? Kingston Hall types or Central types? As she scanned the room, searching for some clue that would help her to make up her mind, a shadow flickered across the window. A quick flash of darkness that triggered another kind of darkness inside her.

And suddenly the party seemed like a scene out of a late night movie on TV with the sound turned down. The Kingston Hall types opened and shut their mouths but she couldn't make out any of the words. The Central types waved their arms around like bad actors trying to pretend they were having fun. Enough is enough, Dinah thought. I'm getting out of here.

She straightened her back. Slid one foot sideways, brought up the other foot to join it. Edged gradually towards the door. The minute she was out in the hall, she spun around and raced to the back bedroom where she'd left her jacket. When she turned, Stacy was waiting for her.

Oh, shit, Dinah thought. How did she know I was planning to escape? More of the old ESP, I suppose.

Stacy took a step forward, blocking the exit. Her eyes, black as espresso coffee, fixed Dinah with a reproachful gaze. She grabbed two handfuls of her dark, gleaming hair and pushed them behind her ears, which was always a sign that she meant business.

'Don't tell me you're leaving already,' she said. 'I haven't even had a proper talk with you yet.'

'I talked to you yesterday,' Dinah reminded her. 'Nothing much has changed since

then. Unless you've developed a sudden urge to fill me in on all your last minute doubts about the drama course,' she added, remembering Clair and Cam and Leon.

Stacy blinked in surprise. 'Me? What are you talking about, Dinah? I was incredibly lucky to get into that course. I can't see myself backing out now. Besides, acting's the only thing I've ever wanted to do.'

Dinah thought about Clair and Cam and Leon again. Then she thought about Stacy. 'Right,' she said. 'No last minute doubts. Of course. Stupid me.'

They tilted their heads back at an identical angle and stared at each other. Stacy's feet, in their scuffed silver slippers, seemed to float a centimetre above the bare boards. Stacy's skin gleamed creamy in the half-light. Stacy's mouth rounded into a smile. Dinah felt as though she was looking into a mirror: a magic mirror that showed her the way she ought to be. Thinner, brighter, happier, enjoying the party without having to force herself. She reached out and stroked the curve of her twin's cheek.

'All right,' Stacy said. 'You can go, if that's what you really want, but I'll be in touch. Soon.'

She held her hands up and waited till Dinah reluctantly followed suit. Stacy's palms slapped against hers, beating out the rhythm of a childhood counting game, and they chanted together.

'Alla-lalla-samma-sinn.

Twin-twin-twin.

Twin-twin-twin.'

While they were still laughing, someone yelled, 'Hey, Stace, where do you keep your bottle opener?' Stacy started to swing away, stopped in mid-turn. 'Wait here and I'll get Cam to give you a lift,' she commanded and then she was gone.

'No thanks,' Dinah said to the empty hall. 'I'd rather walk.'

Past the next side street and around the corner, into the main road. Dinah automatically crossed over and took the inside track of the footpath, facing the oncoming cars. 'No point making it easy for some maniac to pull up beside you and drag you into his car.' That was the sort of thing parents told you these days, instead of all that old stuff about keeping your feet dry and making sure you had a clean hanky.

She thrust her hands deep into her jacket pockets and strode along, looking around her. The night blazed. Rows of street lamps, scrawled neon signs, the bright dots of car headlights reflecting splashily onto the road and a golden haze in the sky above the city centre. Night time's supposed to be dark, Dinah thought. But it isn't, not always.

At that hour in the morning the streets were usually empty but tonight people were still heading home from their New Year parties. Cars swept past, honking cheerfully. A weatherbeaten drunk leaned against the bluestone doorway of the old post office and a young guy in a baseball t-shirt came strolling towards her, aimless and casual. He

thinks he's king of the night, Dinah thought with momentary resentment. No one ever warned *him* to watch out for maniacs.

She was still annoyed when she came to the next turnoff, so she went where her feet happened to take her, even though it meant that she wasn't following the safety drill any more. But this street wasn't lined with cafes and garages and supermarkets and houses. It was a factory street, enormous slabs of brick or cement boxing her in from either side. By the time she was halfway down it, Dinah's skin felt cold in the warm night air and she was starting to turn her resentment onto Stacy instead.

This is all her fault. What makes some idiot who needs a bottle opener more important than your own twin sister? She shouldn't have let me walk home on my own. She should've stopped me.

Blank walls towered over her. Heavy shadows tripped her. There was nowhere to run. No all-night Road Pantry. No front doors with brass knockers and friendly carriage lamps and a car parked outside to show that somebody was at home. Dinah squared her shoulders and tried to walk like the baseball boy, arms curved caveman-style, legs swinging stiff from the hips. She fished out her keyring and tucked the keys into the slots between her fingers, turning her fist into a makeshift weapon. And then she laughed at herself and said, 'Hey, I've walked home at night a dozen times before and nothing ever happened to me.'

Five minutes later an old Kingswood cruised up from behind her, tooted and pulled in towards the curb.

Fear hit every bit of her body at once. Her brain went into overload, her stomach griped and the cartilage in her knees melted into a watery jelly. Dinah stumbled and steadied herself. Breathed a sigh of relief as the car coasted on. Sucked her breath in again sharply as it stopped and waited half a block further on.

- Don't panic, Dinah. There's bound to be a reasonable explanation. The driver could be party-hopping. Or visiting friends.

- Oh, sure. Everyone has a few friends who live in the showrooms of furniture factories, right? I've heard of warehouse parties but I never heard of furniture factory parties before.

Well, there was one reliable way of testing whether the driver was a potential maniac or just going about his own business. Dinah stepped off the curb and walked on a diagonal across the road, aimless and casual like the baseball boy. She refused to turn her head but her eyes kept flickering sideways, alert for any sudden movement.

So she knew the exact moment when the driver opened the car door and came loping in her direction. A maniac, she thought fatalistically as he waved his long arms and called out to her. His voice was a blur but there was something in the tone that seemed vaguely familiar. Wondering whether she was going to regret it, Dinah slowed down, clutched her keyring and turned.

At first she thought it was Cam (thank you, Stacy) but Cam didn't have close-cropped sandy hair and he was nowhere near as tall. This guy was made to play basketball, with the same lanky, graceful moves as the players on TV. Large hands and a long, smooth face, an incongruously small snub nose and round, amused eyes.

'Hey, I know you,' Dinah said. 'You work at the garage on the corner, opposite our house.'

The tall guy looked down at his feet. 'Sorry if I scared you. I stopped to ask whether you wanted a lift and then I realised you didn't know who I was, so I thought I'd better come over and explain.'

'Okay, now you've explained.'

He nodded and thought for a moment. 'Okay, now do you want a lift?'

Dinah would have liked to say no but her heart was still pumping at twice its usual speed and the street ahead of her looked shadowier than ever. Without bothering to answer, she swung around and marched towards the Kingswood.

'My name's Kyle Donnell,' the tall guy told her across the roof of the car. He added something else as well but Dinah was struggling with the heavy door and couldn't hear him.

'What did you say?' she demanded after she'd fastened her seat belt.

'Oh, nothing important. Just asked where your sister was tonight.'

At least he's noticed that there's two of us, Dinah thought as he started the car. Some of the neighbours haven't even got that far. But he could've picked a better question.

'Stacy moved out today,' she snapped. 'Into a house with three other students.'

'That's right, I'd forgotten. She's a year ahead of you, isn't she? How did that come about?'

Dinah sighed and started to explain, in a flat, bored voice that made it clear she'd been through this a hundred times before. Starting school. Bringing home one kid's disease after another. Mumps, chicken pox, the works. Their parents dashing from her to Stacy and back again, muttering, 'Double trouble.' And then one day she woke up feverish and vomiting and next minute she was being rushed to hospital with meningitis.

'It was horrible,' she remembered. 'I ached all over. My neck was so stiff I could hardly turn my head and I cried every time the nurses opened the curtains, because I couldn't stand the sunlight. Even after I was allowed to come home, I had to stay in bed for ages and ages. And by the time I was better, I'd missed so much school that they decided I'd better repeat year six.'

'Must've been tough on you,' Kyle commented. 'Not just having meningitis, I mean, but being stuck behind your sister for the next five years.'

She hesitated. 'Yeah, I missed her at first, of course. But you can get used to anything.'

'Well, it'll be different for you this year, at any rate. No more Stacy, right? The new kids at Central won't even know you've got a twin.'

Dinah squinted down the empty road in front of them as if she was peering into the future. A brief twinge of panic and then she said, 'No, someone'll tell them, for sure. The teachers are always carrying on about it. "Oh, you're Stacy's twin - you're bound to be good at languages." "Oh, you're Stacy's twin - I'll get you to read the main part in the play." "Oh, you're Stacy's twin - I would've expected you to contribute more in class."'

She was trying to make a joke of it but she could hear her voice starting to rise again, just like when she'd been talking about the meningitis. She waited uneasily through another of Kyle's thoughtful pauses.

'So Stacy's the smart one,' he summed up. 'What about you?'

'I'm the dumb one, if that's what you mean.'

'Wait a minute, Dinah. You've got me wrong there. I was just thinking about the way families tend to put everyone into neat little boxes. Like, my older sister's the smart one, I'm the practical one and my younger brother's the cute one. And you?'

She considered the question from every angle that she could think of. 'I don't know,' she said finally. 'I honestly don't know.'

They drove on in silence, Kyle still thoughtful and Dinah frowning to herself. Something was bothering her but she had to puzzle for a while before she worked out what it was. For once, she was answering all the questions and someone else was listening. Usually it was the other way around.

'You're a - a motor mechanic, aren't you?' she asked abruptly, shifting to the attack position.

'More of a panel beater, actually. Got anything against panel beaters?'

'No way. Especially not after spending the night with Stacy and her mates.' He glanced sideways, waiting for an explanation, and she found herself bursting out, 'They're so glamorous that it's scary. I mean, they all want to be artists and actors and film directors and politicians. Famous before they're thirty.'

Kyle grinned at her. 'Don't worry, they won't all make it. Look at me. When I was a kid, I was dead set on being a racing car driver but I'm happy fixing cars, just the same. It's good to have a dream or two - they keep you going and all - but you need to know your limits.'

'Fair enough. Still, Stace *is* pretty smart. So are her mates.'

'Yeah, well, it'd be a bit sad if all the smart people went into the glamour jobs, and there weren't any smart nurses or hairdressers or panel beaters or whatever.'

Dinah looked at him in surprise. 'I suppose it would,' she agreed. 'Never thought of it that way before.'

She would've liked to go on talking but the Kingswood was already pulling up outside her house, so she turned away and started fumbling with the door handle. Kyle said

something she didn't quite catch, something that ended with 'later', and because she'd decided that he wasn't too bad after all, she swung back and gave him her flashiest modelled-on-Stacy smile.

'I'll see you around,' she said. 'Thanks for the lift.'

Then she ran up the steps and let herself into the house.

Inside Dinah checked for phone messages and then propped herself against the wall, contemplating Kyle. That was an interesting experience, she thought. A definite change from Stacy's party, with everyone asking her for advice the whole time. Everyone except Stacy, at any rate. And it would've been nice if Stace had seemed a bit more interested especially on the night when they were separated for the first time ever.

She scowled and headed on to the lounge room where her parents and their friends were still sitting in exactly the same positions as when she'd left them. Going round the circle from left to right: Robbie Carr, Vanessa Coventry, Elaine Carr, Lina Velevska. Her father in his inevitable tracksuit pants, her mother dressed like an aging hippy and Vanessa like a designer hippy, while Lina sat cross-legged on the floor in black tights and a long cotton jumper with parrots flying up from the hem.

She was still studying them when Lina looked up and waved. 'Dinah, I'm glad you're back,' she called. 'They've been reminiscing about the seventies all night. Maybe now we can talk about something else, for a change.'

Dinah knew how she felt. Elaine and Robbie and Vanessa had met in London twenty years ago and Vanessa had talked the other two into coming to Australia and setting up a left-wing bookshop with Vanessa's money, Elaine's business training and Robbie's encyclopedia-size knowledge of books. The bookshop had gone mainstream since then and Robbie had become a primary teacher but the three of them still raved on about the early days whenever they got the chance.

'Sorry, Lina, I keep forgetting you're almost ten years younger than the rest of us,' Robbie said, as though it was a compliment. 'We'll try to switch over to something more modern. What'll it be? The Internet? Virtual reality? The latest rap clip?'

Lina laughed and shook her head. 'Wait a minute,' Elaine said, holding up her hand like a traffic cop. 'You can't change the subject yet. I was in the middle of a story.'

Dinah took a second look at her mother. She must've had three glasses of champagne tonight, instead of the usual two, because her cheeks were pink, her eyes were bright and she was leaning forward imperiously in her chair. You hardly noticed that she was little and mouse-grey and dumpy, with the chalk white skin that Dad called typically English. It's not fair, Dinah thought. If Stacy and I are supposed to be identical, how come I scored more of Mum's genes?

Vanessa Coventry lifted her champagne glass. 'Go on, Laney. Finish your story.'

'Thank you, Ness. At least someone appreciates me round here. Well, as I was

saying, the right-wing women were setting up Women Who Want to be Women, to put the Women's Liberation Movement in its place, and we were all very curious about their plans. So a bunch of us decided to attend their first meeting - in disguise. We took off our cheesecloth shirts and our long Indian dresses -'

'Or our army shirts,' Ness cut in, waving her glass around. 'With dozens of feminist badges pinned down the front.'

'And we put on our most respectable clothes, the ones we used to wear to interviews at the dole office. Ness had a powder blue suit with a big collar and four tiny pockets - yes, you did, Ness; don't try to deny it - and I wore a purple corduroy Laura Ashley smock. But on the way to the meeting I started to wonder whether the smock was too hippy-looking and I went into Coles and bought a twenty cent wedding ring and a little cushion to stuff down my front, so it'd look as though I was wearing a maternity dress.' She smiled at Dinah and added, 'I used to remember that sometimes, when I was pregnant with you two.'

'Wish I could've been there,' Robbie grumbled. 'You women had all the fun.'

Elaine looked him up and down. 'Sorry, but we couldn't possibly have disguised you as a Woman Who Wanted to be a Woman.'

He folded his arms across his barrel chest and tugged at the end of his black beard. The beard was shorter than it used to be, neatly trimmed to follow the line of his jaw, and although his hair bushed out around his head, it was nowhere near as wild as in the old photos. Dinah noticed for the first time that there were scribbles of white in among the black curls.

'Anyway, you had your own fun,' Elaine continued. 'What about the time you and your Maoist mates gatecrashed the Melbourne Club, after that anti-Vietnam War demonstration? At the WWW meeting we just listened to a lot of boring speeches but you had a stoush with the head waiter and got your picture on the front page of the morning paper.'

Robbie's hands spread wide in an extravagant gesture of apology. 'Storming the Melbourne Club was a spontaneous political act, Elaine. It's not my fault that they didn't allow women in, even as protesters.'

They raised their glasses to each other and went on sparring and joking. Nobody would have guessed that they'd been divorced for the past seven years. My parents are strange, Dinah thought for the hundredth time. But a good kind of strange.

'Seriously, though,' Robbie said to Lina in one of his sudden changes of direction, 'the seventies had a lot going for them. I know we sometimes sound as though we're living in the past, but at least in those days people wanted to *do* something. Whereas now the government's taking the education system apart and no one even seems to care.'

'It's not just the education system,' Ness said. Her long narrow face was

expressionless but her voice crackled with anger. 'It's everywhere, Robbie. The fact is, people have stopped thinking about how to make the world a better place. Nowadays they only think in terms of money.'

'Well, so do we,' Elaine pointed out. 'We might've started with a dream but we ended up with a nice, profitable chain of bookshops - branches in some of the classiest suburbs of Melbourne. Face it, Ness, we're not the same as we were in the seventies either.'

Dinah grinned to herself. She liked watching Ness and her dad get carried away by their own words but she liked watching her mum bring them down to reality as well. 'So what sort of dreams did you have, back when you were young?' she asked while there was a gap in the conversation. 'Did you want to become famous, and all that?'

'It was different then,' Ness informed her. 'Like Andy Warhol said, everyone could be famous for fifteen minutes. Robbie was famous for the Melbourne Club episode, I was famous for organising the Radical Literature Conference and Elaine - well, you know about the famous photo of her at the childcare demo, with the two of you in your stroller waving mini-placards. That was the only kind of fame we were interested in, though.'

Robbie Carr shifted in his canvas chair. He twisted around and stared out through the glass doors, into the shadows of the night garden.

'Speak for yourself, Ness,' he said. 'I had the occasional dream of becoming a famous writer, before I turned into a bookshop assistant and a father and a teacher. Actually, I still think about it from time to time. I wouldn't mind having a crack at a novel about my childhood, except that I'd probably have to go back to England to write it.'

'Oh, you can't do that,' Elaine said straight away. 'Remember how much we hated England when we went back in 1983? You kept saying the soul had gone out of the place.'

'That's right. So I did.'

He shrugged and went on staring at the night. Dinah hitched herself onto the arm of the sofa and peered over his shoulder, almost convinced that she'd be able to see the shape of his dreams in the leafy shadows. Behind them, her mum fidgeted restlessly. Ness cleared her throat, preparing to change the subject, but Lina beat her to it.

'Well, I'll never be famous,' she said. 'No one ever gets famous for gardening and tapestries and making stained glass panels for their kitchen window.'

Robbie roused himself and smiled at her. 'Don't worry, Lina. You can always write your memoirs and become famous for spilling all the gossip about the rest of us.' Then he glanced across at Dinah and added in his parent voice, 'But why do we keep talking as if the most important thing in life was to be rich and famous? I like Mao's line better. "From each according to his ability; to each according to his need."'

'Mao didn't say that,' Ness contradicted him. 'It was Karl Marx.'

They started to argue halfheartedly, too lazy to get up and check the books on the

shelves behind them. Dinah had heard it all before. She stood up and did her foot-sliding trick, behind the sofa, round the TV set and out into the corridor, before they'd even noticed that she was gone. She hesitated briefly, then ran up the stairs to the little room that had been built on at the back of the house.

As she walked in, she saw Stacy walking towards her. For the space of a heartbeat Dinah really believed that her twin had left the party and come home to her old room but a second later she realised she was smiling at the wardrobe mirror. She stretched out her hand and touched the cheek of her shadowy reflection.

Then she switched on the bedside lamp and gazed around the room. Stacy's faded Cool Fools posters on the wall. Stacy's bald teddy bear lolling drunkenly on the bed. Stacy's Narnia books and Sweet Dream romances leaning towards each other across the gaps in the bookshelf. Dinah picked up the bear and carried it over to the window seat. No doubt about it, this was the best room in the house. Nothing but the best for Stacy.

She pulled her knees to her chest and buried her head in the hollow between them. Hidden in her temporary cave, Dinah found herself envying everyone simultaneously. Clair and Cam and Leon for being brilliant. Mum and Dad and Ness for having something they believed in. Even Lina, because she was happy with her garden and her tapestry, and Kyle, because he didn't seem to mind being ordinary.

And Stacy, of course. Always Stacy.

After a while she used her clenched fists to wipe the damp patches under her eyes. This is a bad way to start the new year, she thought. So she sat up, dried her hands on her t-shirt and leaned out of the window. A clatter of conversation rose from the lounge room below; the steady thud of a drum kit echoed from a party half a block away. Dinah listened to the competing sounds and sighed. Other people's rhythms, not hers.

But then, underneath the clatter and the drums, she began to hear the beat of her heart in the hot night, bringing it all together.

FEBRUARY

Dinah is dreaming. She's in an army barracks, twenty beds side by side in a long dormitory, and she can't get to sleep because alarm bells are ringing all down the corridors. She lifts her head from the pillow and checks the other recruits but they're all curled up under their olive green blankets, snoozing peacefully. Dinah hates the lot of them. She throws off the blanket and stumbles out of the dormitory. Tries to hide in a broom cupboard, tries to hide under a desk in an office, tries to hide behind an enormous cannon on the ramparts but no matter where she goes, she can still hear those bloody bells, clanging and jangling through her head.

Finally she manages to lift her sleep-heavy hand and thump the alarm clock. As she rolls over, tugging at the sheet, her eyes open for a second and she sees a square of daylight. Window. Morning. She flings the sheet away and leaps out of bed like a hurdler, instant action, in case she's tempted to slide back into sleep again. Then she hesitates beside the bed, groaning and blinking and staring around, her brain fogged with dreams.

Dinah still misses Stacy at the start of every day. Stacy is the morning twin. She used to shake Dinah awake and bully her out of bed, pour milk onto her muesli, warn her five minutes before it was time to leave and chatter at her all the way to school. And later on, when they got home, Dinah would remind Stacy about her homework, prod her away from the TV and check on her every half hour, because Dinah is the evening twin.

She gropes her way into the shower, into her clothes and into the kitchen, where she

stands in front of the open fridge, trying to remember what she's doing there. Oh yeah. The milk. Of course.

'Dinah, thank goodness! I was afraid you'd slept through the alarm again,' Elaine gasps, hurrying past. 'Oh God, I'm late and I'm supposed to be opening the shop this morning. See you at dinner time - your turn to cook.' The front door slams behind her.

Dinah chews her muesli, slow and regular, and gazes out through the glass doors into the garden. Ivy on the back wall, a skinny gum tree, sunshine. She's just starting to enjoy herself when she reaches for her coffee and catches sight of the watch on her wrist. After that, it's a frantic hunt for shoes, pens, money and backpack. Out the door, in again for her calculator and then she's off to school.

She weaves through the lanes behind her house, crosses the main road and wanders along from shop to shop. Most of them are still shut but as she passes the Italian sandwich bar, she looks in and spots a young guy in a ripped t-shirt, his arms lying limp on the table top, his head slumped heavily on his arms, while a cup of cappuccino curdles in front of him. Dinah recognises him. His name's Gavin Petty and he used to go to Central, a year ahead of Stacy and two years ahead of Dinah. She sees him on her way home nearly every day, hanging out with his mates at the games arcade, but she's never noticed him around this early before.

As she heads on towards Central, the image of Gavin stays with her. So what's his story? she wonders. It's easy enough to invent a few explanations. Maybe Gavin's dole cheque arrived yesterday and he's on his way home from an all-night binge. Maybe he's bracing himself for his five hundredth job interview.

Or maybe his parents kicked him out this morning and he's trying to think of somewhere he can go.

Dinah's stomach muscles clench, as though she's dropping downwards in a lift. Oh hell, she thinks. What's the matter with me lately? How come I've spent so much time brooding about fame and success and brilliant careers, when heaps of the kids around here can't get a job at all?

Once started, the questions spiral on. Where does she fit into all of this, anyway? She doesn't expect to be brilliant like Stacy but she doesn't expect to be unemployed like Gavin either. Somewhere at the back of her mind she's always assumed that Stacy will have the pick of the glamour jobs and she'll take whatever is left over. But what makes her so sure that there'll be any leftovers? Who says she won't end up hiding in a sandwich bar, with a cold cappuccino in front of her and her head buried in her arms?

Stop it, Dinah tells herself. You know you shouldn't try to think this early in the morning, especially not about anything serious. Your brain's not ready for it yet. Better to save the worries till later, on the way home.

Central Secondary College was built in the seventies. Huge slabs of grey concrete

shunted together, with stairs at awkward angles and windows in unexpected places. During the holidays someone tried to cheer it up by painting the railings and door frames in bright primary colours but the paint is already flaking.

Dinah pushes into the crowd that's milling across the asphalt yard. She keeps glancing from side to side, just in case one of her classmates calls out to her and she doesn't notice. But nobody's in any great hurry to say hello to her this morning. It's the second week of first term. Most of the kids at Central have finished catching up on each other's holiday news and now they're starting to sort themselves into their groups for the year.

A bunch of year twelve girls sit huddled over a copy of *Girl* magazine and a bunch of year twelve guys are kicking a football around the yard. The school magazine crowd slouch together in a quiet corner, dressed in black, and the sporting crowd jostle past them, dressed in tracksuits or stretch lycra. Alex Monroe, the computer buff from Dinah's maths class, has unexpectedly teamed up with Josie di Santo and her loudmouth friends, while last year's loners - Marielle Smith, Sang Nguyen and Bocca Watts - have banded together and look defiantly proud of themselves.

Dinah knows that she ought to make a move towards one of the groups but she can't manage to work up enough interest. She always used to sit with Stacy's friends at lunchtime. She listened to their jokes, gossiped about their teachers and heard all about their classmates' problems. She knew what was happening in the entire school, not just in one part of it.

After that, it seems like a bit of a comedown to hang around with the kids in her own year.

Dinah's first class is English with Miss Vincini. She sits in the front row as usual and when she raises her hand to answer a question, Miss Vincini nods and says, 'Yes, Stacy?'

Dinah decides to let it pass but Bocca Watts yells out, 'She's not Stacy' and Josie di Santo chips in, 'She's Dinah, miss. Stacy's twin.'

'I'm aware of that,' Miss Vincini snaps. 'It was a perfectly natural mistake.'

But Dinah is convinced she looks disappointed.

Two more teachers call her Stacy after that, one in Legal Studies and one on yard duty. Then, as Dinah is crossing the foyer on her way to Maths Methods, Mr Hansen cuts her out of the crowd. Mr Hansen is her Further Maths teacher. He's also one of the school heart throbs, with his hollow cheeks and his intellectual glasses, and Dinah is pleased to be seen talking with him.

'Dinah Carr!' he exclaims and she feels even more pleased. 'I'm looking for someone who'll volunteer to be the student representative on the school council and I thought you

might be interested.' While she's still trying to figure out why he thinks she would make a good impression on the school council, he adds, 'After all, Stacy was the student rep last year.'

Dinah stares at him for ten long seconds. 'Yes, Mr Hansen,' she says in the end, 'but I'm not Stacy.'

Maths Methods is the last period for the day. Dinah's favourite subject, which isn't saying much. As she spreads her maths books out across her front row desk, she realises that Ms Lee is watching her. She looks up and deliberately meets the teachers eye.

'I've taught you before, haven't I?' says Ms Lee. 'In year seven, right?'

Here we go again, thinks Dinah. She's tired of cooperating with all this nostalgia for Stacy, so she just says, 'No.'

'Listen, I'm sure I have,' Ms Lee insists. 'It took me a while to place you - year seven's a long time ago - but now I can remember you quite clearly.'

Dinah makes a noise midway between a sigh and a yawn. 'You're probably thinking of my sister Stacy. We're identical twins.'

She expects to receive a lecture about rudeness but to her surprise Ms Lee gives her a broad, eye-crinkling smile instead.

'Well, that's a relief,' she says. 'After your performance in year seven, I couldn't help wondering why on earth you were still doing maths. But if you're not you - I mean, if you're not the girl I was teaching then - that makes a big difference.'

By now Dinah's laughing along with the teacher. She likes Ms Lee and her tangled sentences. She likes being reminded that Stacy's terrible at maths and when she glances across and sees a girl hesitating in the doorway, she likes her too.

The girl in the doorway is tall and round and solid. Most of the tall girls at Central let their bodies droop forward apologetically but this girl carries herself like an actor, shoulders back, head held high. Her skin is creamy underneath, with an overlay of warm brown, and her dark eyes seem to be absorbing everything in the room at once. An easy person to like at first sight.

'Is this Maths Methods?' she asks in a rush and Ms Lee nods. 'Okay, I'm Tammy Wilson. I missed out on the first week here, 'cause I was at Jarrah.'

A ripple of interest, starting at Josie di Santo and eddying around the room. Everyone knows about Jarrah Secondary College - it's been on the TV news for a week now. Jarrah used to have a special program for Aboriginal students. Some of the teachers tried to keep it going after the school was closed but the Director of Education sent the police in a few days ago to change the locks.

A couple of guys start to nudge and snicker in the second row. Although Dinah can't hear them properly, she knows they're whispering about Tammy. Normally she'd just be

embarrassed but now her eyes go straight to the tall girl and her hand touches the empty desk next to hers. Tammy hesitates again, dark eyes alert and wary, and then she comes over to sit beside Dinah.

They swap a couple of sentences, mostly about finding the right page in the maths book. It's all fairly ordinary, the sort of thing anyone would say to a new kid, but Dinah goes on feeling bold and confident. So, when Ms Lee starts talking about applications of trigonometric functions, she cuts in and informs the class that you can use sine functions to model the height of the sea's tides.

Ms Lee says, 'Good one, Dinah,' and even Josie looks faintly impressed. But Alex Monroe says, 'No, that's not right. I read in this article that the tides are caused by the sun and other things, not just by the moon. So you can't just use a sine graph effect. That'd be way too simple.'

Straight away Dinah's brain fills up with fog. She can't remember what she was saying a minute ago and she can't take in what Smart Alex is saying now. Fog, fog and more fog. When Ms Lee tries to prod her into arguing back, she bends over her folder and pretends she can't hear. It's not hard to do: she's had a lot of practice.

Dinah keeps her head down for the rest of the class. As soon as the siren sounds, she plans to get out fast, so she can start forgetting how she made a fool of herself. Then at the last minute she remembers Tammy. She turns around and sees her barging through the crooked rows of desks, headed towards Alex.

'That article you were talking about,' she says, 'where can I find it?'

Alex looks startled. He starts to write the title on a piece of scrap paper and then halfway through he finds himself offering to bring the magazine in tomorrow. Tammy gives him a split-second smile and comes back to collect her folders.

'Hey, you're brave,' Dinah says spontaneously.

'You reckon? I've done tougher things than that in my time.'

'Well, I wouldn't dare ask Smart Alex for help, that's for sure.'

'Why bother? You're smarter than he is. I mean, you were right about the sine functions. Ms Lee said so, didn't she?'

'I don't know,' Dinah admits. 'I kind of switched off after Alex interrupted.'

'Yeah, you do that a lot, eh? I suppose you can afford to, seeing you're ace at maths already. It's hard going for me, but. I didn't get taught real well, not till I went to Jarrah, so I have to concentrate all the time.'

Dinah gasps for breath. Partly because she's being towed down the corridor at top speed but mostly because of the speed of the conversation. Tammy goes straight to the point, every time. She has only known Dinah for half an hour and yet she's already telling her things that nobody was supposed to notice. It makes her feel bold again, bold enough to say, 'So why are you doing maths then, if you feel that way about it?'

'Cause I need to. My auntie's planning to start a craft shop in the city, selling stuff

made by Kooris here in Victoria. She reckons it's time we set up our own businesses. Plus it's a good way to remind you gubbahs that indigenous people are all over the place, not just in Central Australia. If it works out okay, she'll be looking for someone to do the books. Me, for instance.'

'It's nice of you to help your aunt out,' Dinah says. 'But what do you really want to do?'

Tammy's head flicks back. 'That's what I want,' she says.

They have reached the lockers by now. Dinah fumbles for her key and Tammy pauses to read the label on her locker. 'Dinah,' she says, trying it out. 'Never heard that one before.'

'It comes from *Alice in Wonderland*. I was named after Alice's cat.'

She pulls a face and Tammy grins. 'Hey, I was named after Tammy Wynette - the one that sang "Stand By Your Man". Reckon I'd rather be a cat.'

'You'd probably agree with my twin, then. She thinks kids ought to be called Baby A and Baby B and Baby C until they're old enough to choose their own names. Mind you, she was christened Eustacia, after a character in *Jude the Obscure* — this obscure novel by Thomas Hardy that's one of Dad's favourites. She shortened her name to Stacy, though, which is a major improvement.'

Damn, thinks Dinah as she listens to herself babbling. What made me drag Stacy into this? Like Kyle said on New Year's Eve, Tammy wouldn't have even known I had a twin if I'd kept my mouth shut. Why did I have to spoil it?

But Tammy doesn't ask where her twin is now or tell her that it must be great to be a twin. She just says, 'Listen, I gotta go. See you tomorrow, Baby D.'

On her way home Dinah passes the games arcade. A concrete tunnel lined with machines, revving and pinging and rat-tat-tatting, while their screens flash up ninja warriors and enemy spaceships hurtling through empty space. Gavin Petty is standing beside one of the racing car machines along with four other guys in checked flannelette shirts and jeans, all yelling encouragement to the guy who's playing. You'd never guess he was the same person as that defeated kid in the sandwich bar that morning.

Seeing Gavin reminds Dinah that there's something she was planning to think about. But she can't quite remember the details and besides, she has a whole lot more to think about now. Tammy, for example. Dinah can tell that she likes the tall girl a lot because she's starting to worry about her already. She's afraid that Tammy might be making a martyr of herself, studying maths for her aunt's sake, not for her own sake.

Although maybe Tammy believes in the same things as her aunt. If that's the case, then Dinah ought to understand. After all, her parents are exactly the same. Her mum went into the bookshop and her dad went into primary teaching because they believed it was the best way for them to spread their ideas around.

And now Robbie's talking about taking time off to write a novel. So Tammy can always try something different later on, if she feels like it.

Dinah crosses the main road and heads into the network of back lanes. Her feet start to drag: she's feeling envious again. I wish I wanted to change the world, like Mum and Dad and Tammy, she thinks. In fact, I wish I wanted to do anything at all.

She trudges around the corner and climbs the steps to her house. *You're ace at maths already*, Tammy tells her as she opens the door. And Ms Lee said she was right about the sine functions, except that she wasn't listening.

An hour later Dinah is slicing vegetables for a stir fry. The house is quiet and her thoughts gradually expand to fill the silence. Gavin and Tammy, Smart Alex and Ms Lee. She turns them this way and that in her mind, examining them like factors in an equation, while strips of green pepper peel slowly away from her knife.

Then there's a muffled sound from behind her and she spins around, to find Elaine dumping her overstuffed handbag on the bench. 'What?' she says and Elaine grimaces.

'Sorry, I didn't mean to talk to your back. I was just asking how your day went.'

'Oh, not bad.' She stares down at the knife blade in her clenched fist and adds, 'No, actually it was terrible. The teachers kept raving on about Stacy in almost every class. I'm never going to live her down. She's better at everything and it all comes easy to her.'

Elaine filches a slice of green pepper, nibbles it slowly. 'Give yourself some credit,' she says, sitting down beside Dinah. 'You've had a lot to overcome, you know, much more than Stacy. Being part-deaf *isn't* easy and you've been coping with that ever since you had meningitis.'

For a moment Dinah feels tempted. No need to compare herself to Stacy, because she's got an excuse. A note from her mum, to say that she ought to be given special consideration because she can only hear two-thirds of what other people hear.

Then she shrugs and says, 'Big deal. I'm still going to be judged by the same standards as Stace. And anyway, look at Cam. He may be asthmatic but that hasn't stopped him from being an A-grade achiever. I used to feel sorry for him, having to stay home from school all the time, but then I found out that's when he dreamed up the idea for his first film.'

'All right, let's forget the fact that you have to concentrate twice as hard as Stacy. How about the areas where you're way ahead of her? Mathematics, for one.'

Dinah nearly says, 'Maths? Who cares about maths?' but just in time she remembers that she wouldn't be studying maths this year if Elaine hadn't kept on encouraging her. She picks up a red pepper, smooths her thumb across its shiny skin and says, 'So, okay, tell me about it. Why isn't Stace any good at maths?'

'Well, she could've done better, if she'd stuck at it, but she didn't have a natural flair. It's like the way some people can pick up languages quickly and others can't. Maths is a

language too, in a sense, and -'

'Hang on a minute, I don't get it. Maths is figures. Symbols. The total reverse to a language.'

'But the symbols don't make sense unless you put them in the proper order. There's no point saying $1 + 1 = 5$; you have to say $1 + 1 = 2$. And there's no point saying "I blue the sky"; you have to say, "I colour the sky blue".'

Dinah chuckles. 'Why can't you say "I blue the sky"? Sounds good.'

'Sounds like a line from one of Robbie's poems,' Elaine admits. 'Still, the main reason we use language is to communicate, which is why most people tend to stick to the standard grammar. Spoken language communicates one sort of thing and the language of maths communicates another sort of thing.'

Dinah stares down at the glossy red pepper. She cores it neatly and draws the knife slowly down its skin, dividing it into four equal parts. Maths is a language, she thinks. My language. A special private code that Stacy can't crack.

'Mum,' she says in a rush, 'what if I decided to really work at maths this year?'

Her heart is pounding but when she glances up, she realises that Elaine has been saying something too, in an equal rush. First they laugh and then they gesture at each other politely, like people trapped in a revolving door.

- *After you.*

- *No, after you.*

Dinah wins in the end, because she's not entirely sure that she wants her mum to know about her decision just yet. And besides, Elaine is obviously pretty keen to ask her own question.

'Since we're talking about your father,' she begins, even though they've only mentioned Robbie in passing, 'what do you think about this latest plan? Will he really go chasing off to England or is it just another one of his crazy daydreams?'

'I don't know. He seems fairly keen ... but he seemed keen about the herb farm at Daylesford and the restaurant at Apollo Bay too.'

'Exactly. Every time he gets pissed off with teaching he invents some new fantasy to keep himself happy till things improve again. It'd be a shame if he took this particular fantasy too seriously, though. Why would he want to throw in a job he enjoys, just to write the five thousandth novel about a sensitive young man growing up?'

Dinah can't help laughing, although she's glad that Robbie isn't there to hear them. We shouldn't really send Dad up like that, she thinks. At least he has a few dreams left. I don't know whether Mum has any at all, not even the standard fantasies about winning the lottery or Prince Charming on a white charger.

There's an easy way to test that out. 'Oh well,' she says, elaborately casual, 'if Dad goes overseas, you might actually get involved with somebody else.'

'Dinah, for heavens sake! You sound just like my mother. Every time I talk to her on

the phone, she wants to know when I'm going to get over Robbie and find another man. Anyone'd think it was a crime to stay friendly with your ex-husband.'

'Relax, Mum. I'm not saying you and Dad should've gone around badmouthing each other, even if it *is* more normal. Still, you do see a lot of each other, all the same.'

'I didn't stop liking him, just because our marriage stopped working,' Elaine snaps. Then she sighs and adds, 'Oh dear, I'm getting defensive, aren't I? Listen, Dinah, you could be right. I sometimes wonder whether I keep losing interest in the blokes I meet because I'm always secretly comparing them to Robbie. But I promise I'm not still pining for him seven years later.'

Shadows are edging across the kitchen floor by now and outside the window trees and bushes merge into a lavender-grey dusk. Dinah focuses on the last fiery trail of the sunset. Never heard Mum talk like that about Dad before, she thinks. I'll have to come up with some more questions.

They chop carrots and mushrooms in companionable silence for a while, until the front door bangs and footsteps come hurrying down the hall. Dinah can tell that it's Stacy by the thud of her bag in the lounge room, the clatter as she kicks off her sandals and the blare of music when she turns on the TV in passing. She flicks the switch by the kitchen door and Dinah and Elaine blink at each other in the sudden yellow light.

'How come you're sitting here in the dark?' Stacy demands. 'And why are you looking so serious?'

Dinah hesitates, giving their mother a chance to reply. 'We're trying to work out whether Dad'll shift back to England,' she says finally.

'Hey, don't bother. He'll never go. He just likes talking about it.'

Elaine nods and smiles but Dinah feels a twinge of disappointment. She wonders why - after all, she'd definitely miss Robbie if he went away. There's no time to analyse the twinge properly, however, because Stacy has already started to tell them all her news.

'So we packed Cam's car and waved him off to Sydney - I've written him two letters in the past two days - and after that Clair and Leon and I went to a party that was full of dorks, except for this guy called Bailey. He's going to be one of the tutors in my drama course, would you believe. He's amazingly tall and amazingly thin and he spent half the night warning me that I'd probably crack up halfway through the year, unless I was incredibly mature for my age. So I go, "Don't worry, Bailey. I'm *incredibly* incredibly mature."'

She strikes a mature pose, one hand on her hip, the other flourishing an imaginary cigarette holder. Elaine and Dinah laugh and applaud.

'And I've got my room organised at last,' she goes on, hardly pausing for breath. 'You have to come and see it, Twin. But I'll stay for dinner first. It's Leon's turn to cook and he hasn't quite got the hang of it yet.'

'I can't go over to your place tonight,' Dinah protests. 'What about my homework?'

'You can't have much homework this early in the year. I'll make Leon drive you back afterwards - that ought to give you plenty of time.'

'Oh, all right. I suppose I might as well.'

Dinah goes to the freezer and takes out an extra chicken breast for the stir fry. So much for working on my maths, she thinks.

But the following day she comes home from Central and goes straight to the upstairs room at the back of the house. She stands at each of the windows in turn: the window that looks out across the back yards, the window that looks out onto the street and the window that faces the mossy slate tiles of the house next door. There's a cardboard box on the end of the bed. Dinah picks it up and starts to pack Stacy's books into it.

For the next hour and a half she heaves and carries. Boxes of books, armloads of clothes, rolls of posters. Before long Stacy's leftover belongings are packed away neatly in Dinah's cupboard and drawers and Dinah's belongings are jumbled together in a heap at the centre of Stacy's room.

She finds her maths books and stacks them together on the top shelf of the bookcase. Maths is a language, she reminds herself. A language that nobody speaks. A language that's always written down. A language that you can't misunderstand because someone's talking too softly or talking too fast or standing on the wrong side of you. A language that anyone can use, even a person who's lost most of the hearing in her right ear.

She's heading towards the window seat for a rest when she stops herself halfway across the room. If she sits down now, she'll never get the room in order before Elaine arrives home. So instead she turns and goes to prop her elbows on the sill of the opposite window, the window that looks out onto the street.

A factory on the corner, two cramped cottages and then the yellow brick front of Canfield's Automotive Workshop. Kyle comes out of the door in his grease-stained overalls, walking with his springy basketballer's stride. He stands in the sun on the footpath; he yawns and stretches.

Between the moment when he tips his head back and the moment when his long arms reach up to the sun, Dinah falls in love.

MARCH

Heavy streaks of pink exploding from a gold corona. Thick, velvety red; clots of white; peach-coloured swirls; falling petals of pale lemon-yellow, tinged with rose at the base. Behind the mass of colour, a line of tall grey bars: the palings in a suburban fence. A man beside the fence, middle-aged, in baggy Sunday clothes, turning his hose onto the display of roses. Above him, a gum tree hanging bunches of leaves across the sky and a small brown child stretched full length along one of its springy branches, watching.

‘So what do you think of it?’ asked Clair.

Dinah took another look at the painting. She couldn’t see why Clair was so keen to get her opinion when she didn’t know the first thing about art but if she was prepared to ask, Dinah was prepared to have a try.

‘I like it. The perspective’s kind of weird - I mean, the roses are enormous and yet the guy’s fairly tiny, much smaller than that Koori kid in the tree. But somehow it all seems to fit together.’

‘Good, I was hoping somebody would get the point. Leon doesn’t like it at all. Do you?’ she said to the doorway.

Leon hesitated for a calculated second. He ran one hand through his sleek dark hair and then crossed over to drape his arm around Clair, who wriggled away from him and went on staring at the painting.

‘It’s not that I dislike it, Clair,’ he explained. ‘I just think you need to consider your market a bit more carefully. I mean, who’s going to buy that?’

He pointed at the painting and Dinah followed the line of his hand, deep into the centre of the exploding roses. 'I would,' she said, surprising herself.

Leon smiled. 'No offence, Dinah, but you don't exactly have the kind of money it takes to invest in original artwork. Besides, nobody'll even get the chance to see Clair's stuff unless she can place it with a gallery first. And gallery owners want to see work that's on the cutting edge, not pictures of Frank Maloney watering his garden.'

'Hang on, what's wrong with Clair's painting?'

'The size, for one thing. All the paintings at the really classy galleries are at least five times as big as this.'

'Foyer art,' Clair said unexpectedly and Leon frowned at her back.

'You can be as sarcastic as you like but just remember how much those guys are making. Still, you're only a beginner. It might make more sense to cash in on one of the hot new trends. Far as I can tell, post-regionalism seems to be the way to go.'

'What's that?' Dinah asked, to make sure she'd heard him properly. Leon swung towards her immediately, steadying himself on the back of a chair like a lecturer resting on his lectern.

'Well, regional art's basically Sunday painters taking their sketchpads out into the bush,' he began. 'Amateurs, who do it for fun. Australian painters moved away from that years ago and established a seriously international style. But then Aboriginal artists gave the whole thing a new twist and people started looking at, like, the meaning of landscape. Gum trees combined with social comment. Whitefellas' songlines. In short, post-regionalism.'

Dinah propped herself against the wall next to the painting and struggled with a yawn. Listening to Leon always took a lot of concentration. You couldn't drift off, because he watched you the whole time he was speaking.

'I didn't realise you were so keen on art,' she commented during a pause and Leon shrugged.

'Hey, Clair and I do the galleries most weekends. I like to know about everything - you never know when it'll come in handy. I mean, look at the message the prime minister put across, being photographed with that Aboriginal painting in the middle of the land rights debate. Maybe some day I'll be able to score a few political points that way myself.'

'When you're the prime minister of Australia?' Dinah joked.

He nodded. 'Mind you, there's politics in the art world as well,' he said in Clair's direction. 'That's why you need to tie yourself into one of the trends - it's like signing up with one of the major political parties.'

Dinah looked round in surprise. She'd almost forgotten that there was anyone else in the room with them. While Leon paced this way and that, Clair had stayed standing in front of her painting, so still and concentrated that she seemed to have sidestepped into

another dimension.

Now she moved forward and picked at one of the roses with her fingernail. 'But trends change,' she said over her shoulder. 'What am I supposed to do - keep changing along with the fashions?'

Leon's face went blank. His hand lifted automatically and ran through his hair. Classic, Dinah noted. That's what he always does when he's not sure what to say. If he's not careful, some comedy team'll be parodying his hand-through-hair routine twenty years from now.

'Okay,' he agreed finally. 'I can see it wouldn't look too good if you kept chopping and changing all the time. Maybe it'd be better to wait and see whether post-regionalism's going to be a stayer. What do you reckon, Dinah?'

Dinah felt as though she'd answered enough questions for the moment. She squinted sideways at Clair's painting and spotted another rose bush. Its white flowers were splotched with red and a small figure was examining them gravely: a young girl dressed in striped stockings, a neat blue dress and a white pinafore.

'Oh, Clair,' she exclaimed, 'it's Alice! You put her into your picture and I didn't even notice. But there she is. Alice in Wonderland.'

Alice. The original wide-eyed innocent, wandering through a strange land full of even stranger people - dangerous Duchesses, melancholy Mock Turtles, rampant Red Queens. That's what I feel like right now.

Ever since I made up my mind to get serious about maths, the whole world looks different. From black and white to technicolour, in one go. Everyone's still the same but I'm seeing things in them that I never saw before. I can't look at Clair without wondering what it's like to be so focussed. I can't look at Leon without asking myself whether I want to be that ambitious.

They're larger than life - or at least, they're larger than my life used to be.

'I don't think she heard me properly,' Leon whispered behind her. He was standing to the left of Dinah, so she could hear him perfectly well, but it suited her to pretend that she couldn't. She gazed at the painting for a while longer, thinking Alice thoughts, and when she turned, Leon and Clair were wrapped around each other, their mouths pressed together and their eyes halfclosed. Dinah nodded to herself and walked quietly towards the door.

She padded down the corridor and went to check her twin's room, although really it was just a formality - she would've known if Stacy was somewhere in the house. It's a bit of a worry, Dinah thought, standing in the empty bedroom. Especially since Stacy made such a big point of inviting me to tea. And especially since we haven't been getting on all that well for the last month or so. I just hope she's not trying to teach me a lesson by turning up late.

She sighed. Shoved her hands into her pockets and slouched out to the small back yard. A full moon hung on the horizon, shiny as a brand new ten cent piece, and the air

smelt of smoke and leaves. She paused in the middle of the lawn, between a tumbledown shed and the waterfall branches of a peppercorn tree, feeling for the invisible cord that connected her to her twin.

As far as she could tell, Stacy was basically all right: no accidents, no major crisis. But there was something going on, all the same, because the invisible cord was vibrating at high speed. Dinah fidgeted and rubbed at her midriff. You'd better go back inside, she told herself. That way, you can hang around and catch Stacy the minute she gets home.

She stood on tiptoe to take a last look at the moon. As she turned away, a voice said, 'Stacy? No, hold on, it's Dinah, isn't it?'

Dinah jumped backwards, then peered at the shady patch underneath the peppercorn tree until it took on a human shape.

'Rhett?' she said, impressed.

Rhett Foley was the fourth person in Stacy's household, along with Clair and Leon. He wasn't one of the old gang from Central Secondary College: he'd been recruited by Cam, who'd met up with him at Kingston Hall. Dinah had only talked to him a few times but he hadn't struck her as the kind of guy who would be likely to spot the differences between her and Stacy. Although he was doing a creative writing course, come to think of it, so maybe he was planning to write a story about twins.

'Listen, have you got a minute?' he asked. 'I need a bit of advice about some stuff that's been bothering me.'

Of course, thought Dinah. Advice. I should've guessed. But she wanted to know why on earth Rhett had picked her to confide in, so she nodded.

He moved out into the open and perched on the back of a flaking garden seat. In the half light his face was like an old black and white photo, full of interesting shadows and hollows. 'There's something I haven't told the others,' he began. 'It's about this mate of mine called Manny Theostratis — you might've met him at the New Year party.'

Dinah shook her head. If Rhett had been keeping an eye on her, he should've noticed that she never talked to people she didn't know. Unlike Stacy.

'Well, it doesn't matter. The thing is, Manny's been unemployed for about five years now. He's a terrific guy but he's lost a lot of confidence in himself, not that he had all that much to start with. Anyway, last year one of our friends was fairly badly injured in an accident and Manny spent a whole lot of time looking after him. I've been trying to persuade him to think about training as a nurse, only he reckons he wouldn't be able to handle it.'

'Here, wait a second. You're not leading up to the idea of getting me to talk to this guy, are you? Because I wouldn't have a clue what to say.'

Rhett flashed her an apologetic smile. 'Sorry, I'd better get to the point. I asked Manny what he *would* be able to handle and somehow we dreamed up this scheme of

travelling around Australia, picking up work as we go. It'd be a month before we set off, because we want to save up a bit of money first, and I'm not sure whether I ought to tell the others straight away or wait till when we're going to leave. You know them better than I do. What do you think?'

By now Dinah was hooked. 'I think Manny's bloody lucky to have such a good friend,' she said. 'But what about you? It's a big decision. Are you sure you want to drop out of your course, just so you can help this guy?'

He laughed. 'Don't worry, I'm not the unselfish type. This suits me, just as much as it suits Manny. My stepfather's been telling me for ages that there's no point in signing up for a writing course if you don't have much to write about. But after I've gone fruitpicking in country towns, worked as a waiter in the Sydney cafe scene, driven up north past the cattle stations and hung out at the beach markets in Darwin - hey, I reckon I'll be able to write about anything.'

Dinah had been watching him while he talked. His words conjured up images of the main road a few blocks away, stretching out beyond the borders of the city, leading to places she'd never been.

'It sounds fantastic,' she sighed. 'A really great idea.'

'Thanks, mate. You still haven't answered my question, though.'

'Oh, right. I almost forgot.'

She paused for a moment, biting her lip. On one side of her brain she still felt that she wasn't equipped to go round handing out advice. But from the other side the whole situation seemed pretty clear.

'Tell them straight away. Let them know the date when you'll be leaving. That'll give them time to look around and decide who they want to have as the fourth person for the household.'

She stopped short, alarmed by how definite she'd sounded. Rhett groaned and smacked his forehead.

'Of course! It's obvious once you put it into words.' He grinned at her and added, 'That's a compliment, y'know, not a putdown. I've been hassling myself for days and getting nowhere but you solved the problem in ten seconds flat. Nice going, Dinah.'

He looked straight at her and let his smile grow wider. At any other time Dinah would've settled back to enjoy the sense of being admired by somebody she admired. But right then the heavy thud of a bag was echoing through the kitchen window. Voices cut sharply across each other and the invisible cord began to tighten, dragging her towards the door.

'Oh shit,' she said as she swung away. 'Gotta go. I think Stace is back.'

The air around Stacy shimmered with tension. Her hair fluffed out like the fur on an angry cat and her fingers drummed a marching beat on the kitchen table.

'Hi,' Dinah said. 'What's the matter?'

Stacy's eyes met hers, lethal as two dark laser beams. 'It's Bailey,' she snapped, as if Dinah should've known already. 'The guy I met at that party, the one who was supposed to be a tutor in my course. I kept wondering why I hadn't seen him around college and now I know. He's been sacked!'

'Are you sure?' Clair asked and Stacy turned the laser-look onto her.

'Of course I'm sure. I went to the pub this afternoon with some of the other students and Bailey was there, so we heard the whole story directly from him. It's so *unfair*. All he wanted was to go to this conference at the end of the year - a drama conference in California; he would've been working with some top people - and they turned that into an excuse for giving him the boot. It wasn't the real reason, though. Bailey reckons they're frightened of him, because his ideas are too advanced for them.'

While Stacy raged, Dinah found herself studying the sharp set of her jaw, the row of puckers above her eyebrows. Normally things went the way Stacy wanted. She had forgotten what her twin looked like when she came across something that didn't make sense to her.

'We have to do something about it - the sort of thing students used to do in Mum and Dad's day. Petitions. A deputation to the dean. We could even have a demonstration or a sit-in - refuse to move until they give Bailey his job back.'

Clair and Dinah nodded obediently. Behind them, Leon reached over to open the door of the oven and thick meat-and-spice smells came curling through the kitchen.

'Hold on, Stace,' he said. 'You better check the facts before you get too carried away. Are you sure this guy's actually been fired? Did he have tenure or was he on contract?'

'What difference does it make?' Stacy demanded, but Leon waited patiently, the oven mitt dangling from his hand, until she finally muttered, 'Contract, I think.'

'Uh-huh. So was his contract cut short or did the administration simply decide not to renew it?'

Stacy leapt up and marched to the far end of the kitchen, almost colliding with Rhett, who had been watching from the door. 'Okay, okay,' she said, spinning around. 'I suppose Bailey wasn't exactly sacked — it's just that he expected them to take him on again and they didn't. But I still reckon it was unfair and I still reckon we ought to do something. You understand that sort of stuff, Leon. I was hoping you'd be able to tell me how to go about it.'

'I would, if I thought this Bailey character had a case. But as far as I can see, he doesn't.'

'No, he can't force the college to hire him,' Rhett agreed. 'Not unless he can prove he's been discriminated against. And if he was planning to disappear overseas at a critical point in the year, I can understand -'

'Oh, get stuffed!' Stacy yelled. 'This is depressing enough without you guys ganging up on me. How come you're siding with the college instead of Bailey? Can't you even see why I want to help him?'

Leon lifted two casserole dishes out of the oven, a large one and then a small one, settling them carefully on the bread board to make sure they didn't scorch the table top. He straightened up and ran his hand through his hair.

'It's not in your own best interests, Stace,' he pointed out. 'You keep telling us how they don't usually take school leavers in the drama course. So you've got to show them you can hack the pace. It wouldn't look too good making a big fuss, especially if you're actually in the wrong.'

He reached for the serving spoon, obviously convinced that the discussion was over, and started to explain how his mother had invented a special vegetarian moussaka recipe, just for Clair. Clair gave him a quick smile, followed by a wary glance at Stacy, and Rhett cut in hastily with a long story about a mate of his who'd had problems enrolling for the final year of VCE because he was paraplegic. Halfway through the story, Stacy snatched up her plate and stalked out of the kitchen.

Dinah could feel the invisible cord twanging insistently but the others were her friends too. So instead of following Stacy, she forced herself to listen to the rest of Rhett's story, complimented Leon on his moussaka and searched around for something to say to Clair. Normally she found Clair easy to talk to but now, remembering her stillness in front of the exploding roses, Dinah felt unexpectedly nervous.

'Do you reckon you might try a different style of painting next time?' she asked in the end. 'Some of that post-regional stuff?'

She waited anxiously but to her relief, Clair reverted to her usual breathless chatter. 'Oh, I couldn't,' she said. 'I just paint the way it comes; I wouldn't know how to do anything else. It doesn't really matter, though - I think Leon's way too pessimistic about the art scene. There's this guy, Paul Anastasiou, in the final year of my course - he just did an entire series of backyard paintings and he got the biggest write up of anyone in the student show.'

'Anastasiou's Greek,' Leon called from the pantry. 'He can paint his own back yard and call it multiculturalism. It's different for you, Clair. You need -'

Rhett shoved his knife and fork together with a clatter. 'If you're starting another round of the Great Art Debate, I'm off. See you later, Dinah - and thanks again.'

He stood up and Dinah found herself scrambling to her feet as well, muttering, 'Might just go and see how Stacy is.' Clair and Leon didn't bother to answer. They were gazing at each other from opposite ends of the room, connected by an invisible cord of their own. Clair, so focused in front of her painting and so scattered when she was away from it. Leon, who had such an overflow of confidence that he tried to organise everyone else as efficiently as he organised himself.

Two very different people, but somehow that didn't seem to stop them from being crazy about each other.

Stacy was sprawled across her bed, eating moussaka and turning the pages of a play script. She looked up as Dinah came in.

'Sorry I stormed out like that but Leon was getting on my nerves. He's so incredibly bossy sometimes. I don't know how Clair can stand it.'

Dinah collapsed onto the bed beside her, grinning with relief. 'You're not still mad at us for what we said about Bailey then?'

'No, not really. I mean, he brought it on himself, in a way. The head of department warned him that he couldn't take leave at the end of the year but Bailey was holding out for what he wanted.'

'Oh yeah? You didn't mention that piece of information before. In other words, Leon was right all along.'

'I suppose so. But he was right in an *irritating* sort of way. Besides, the whole thing sounded different when Bailey was talking about it. He made it seem like - oh, I don't know - an issue of free speech and all that. It's hard to explain.'

She rolled onto her stomach and stared down at the script, although Dinah could tell from her eyes that she wasn't reading a word. The silence stretched out between them, longer and longer and longer, until she was scared that it might snap at any second.

'Stace, are you still angry with me?' she blurted out.

'What do you mean? Why the fuck would I be angry?'

'Because of the room.' She cleared her throat and added, 'Because of me moving into your room.'

Stacy pushed herself upright and sat cross-legged on the bed, face to face with Dinah. 'Well,' she said, 'you could've asked.'

'What would you've said if I had?'

'I would've said yes, of course.'

'Okay then, what's the problem?'

'The problem is, you *didn't* ask. You just went ahead, as if my opinion didn't matter.'

'Well, you didn't ask me about moving out of home, either. You just rocked up one afternoon and told us that you'd be leaving in three weeks. How do you think that made me feel?'

Stacy pressed her lips together. 'I get it,' she said after a while. 'This is revenge, right?'

'Not exactly. I mean, I really wanted that room. But yeah, there could've been a bit of revenge in it as well.'

They scowled at each other, then burst out laughing so hard that the mattress rocked beneath them. Stacy pitched forward, grabbing at Dinah's shoulder, and they

tumbled together onto the pile of pillows. That's the good side of being a twin, Dinah thought between giggles. It's not that we never fight: it's just that we tend to race through it at twice the usual speed. Which probably explains why I get on so well with Tammy too, because she's got that same sort of quickness about her.

Stacy poked her in the ribs. 'Dinah, you're vaguing out,' she said. 'What were you thinking about?'

'Oh, nothing. Just somebody I know.'

'Somebody secret, hmm? Have you fallen in love again?'

She blushed. 'Maybe I have. That's not what I was thinking about, though.'

'Details, details. The point is, I guessed right. Come on, Twin, tell me everything. It's not another one of your hopeless crushes, is it?'

'Don't think so. I mean, Kyle's practically the boy next door. He works at Canfield's, across the road. I can see the place from your - from my window.'

Stacy nodded. 'Yeah, I remember him. A tall, skinny guy, not one of those Mr Hansen clones you usually fall for. Sounds like a positive sign, Twin. What've you done about him so far?'

Dinah stiffened and tried to edge away. 'I've spoken to him,' she said defensively. 'Quite a few times, as a matter of fact. I even had a fairly long conversation with him once, about having dreams and knowing your limits.'

'Oh wow, that's so romantic,' Stacy mocked. 'Honestly, Dinah, you're hopeless where guys are concerned. Don't you remember any of the stuff I've told you? When you fancy a guy, you've got to go for it. You can't just hang around, keeping your fingers crossed and waiting for him to notice you.'

'What do you reckon I ought to do, then? Ask Kyle out or something?'

'Not straight away. After all, he might say no and then you've blown the whole deal. Just take things slowly. Find out what you both like doing and then drop a few hints about doing it together. And flirt a bit, for fuck's sake. Don't just encourage him to talk about himself the entire time or you'll end up making friends with him. The way you did with Leon, remember.'

Dinah remembered. Two years ago: eyes like Kalamata olives and a profile like an old Greek coin, suddenly vivid in a Central foyer crowd. She'd asked around till she discovered Leon's name, found out as much as she could about him, started a conversation in the foyer, continued it over several lunchtimes. And then watched him fall for Stacy and after that, once it became obvious that Stacy was only interested in Cam, switch to Clair, Stacy's best friend.

Never again, she thought. What's the point, when any guy who's attracted to me is only going to be even more attracted to Stacy? I wish I'd kept my mouth shut about Kyle.

The invisible cord twitched. Dinah glanced up and saw straight away that her twin

had been reading her mood. Not all the details, thank heavens, but enough to make her look concerned and sympathetic.

'Relax, Dinah,' she said. 'This time everything's going to turn out fine. I'll expect a progress report next week, okay? And now you can tell me the rest of the news. Any other hot gossip from Central?'

'Not really. I've been working on my calculus, that's all.'

She held her breath but Stacy's eyes glazed over, the way they always did at any mention of maths. So at least there was one area of her life that was completely Stacy-free, although she still wished she'd kept her mouth shut about Kyle.

Stacy shunted herself higher on the pillows. 'All right then,' she said, 'I'll fill you in on what's been happening to me. Better make yourself comfortable, Twin. We've got a lot to catch up on.'

She launched into a detailed account of the past two weeks, skipping from the classes to the teachers or the students and then back again. Dinah listened intently at first, memorising names and course units, but after a while her eyes began to blur and she found herself picturing the calculus problem that was waiting on her desk at home. $x = 250e^{-kt}$, she thought. I'm pretty sure of that. Except what's the next step? $-kt = \ln(x/250)$?

Her stomach clenched. She pushed her sleeve back casually and glanced down at her watch, wondering when she'd be able to leave, wondering whether she could fit in an hour's maths before bedtime. And wondering, at the same time, why she bothered.

Maths has changed, now I've decided I'm actually going to try and get somewhere with it. It's not as much fun as before - feels like I've got Smart Alex peering over my shoulder all the time. Sometimes I'd like to give the whole thing a miss. But if I'm no good at maths, then what good am I?

There's people, of course. Rhett: he said, 'Nice going, Dinah'. A warm feeling. Warm feelings can wear off pretty quickly, though, and after that you're out in the cold, thinking, 'So what?' The truth is, Rhett just needed advice, the same as everyone else. Like Clair, wanting my opinion about her painting - and even Leon's always going, 'What do you reckon, Dinah?' I don't understand why they keep asking me. I never tell them a thing they couldn't have thought of for themselves.

And they don't take any notice when I've got something really crucial to say. I tried to warn Rhett about being a martyr, just like I tried to warn Tammy, but neither of them seem to care. Martyr. Martyr. Such a sad-sounding word. That's how I feel, a lot of the time: always listening, never getting the chance to talk about myself. I still haven't told anyone about my maths ambitions: the most important thing in my life ...

The sharp, hollow sound was Stacy's fingers, snapping in front of her nose. 'Dinah?' she repeated. 'Dinah, you're not listening.'

How can I? Dinah said silently. I'm part-deaf, remember. I can't hear as well as other

people. The rest of you can dip in and out of conversations, listen to every second sentence and think your own thoughts in between. But I have to concentrate so hard that when I switch off, I switch off completely.

She bundled her thoughts together and shoved them to the back of her brain. 'Sorry, Twin,' she said. 'You were talking about your Movement class, weren't you? Come on, tell me again.'

APRIL

Morning laid soft stripes of sunlight across Dinah's face. Her eyelids quivered, lifted slowly. Blue sky outside the windows, furred with soft white cloud. Sometimes she still forgot she was sleeping in the upstairs room. She opened her eyes, expecting to see the same painted brick wall that she'd seen for years, and then she smiled.

The tufts of the carpet made her feet tingle. She went over to the front window and there was Kyle, leaning against the wall of Canfield's Automotive Workshop with a mug of tea in his hand. Dinah looked down at him, dreamy as a princess in a tower. A special day. She could feel it in the touch of the air.

Christmas morning, she thought. That's what it reminds me of. Not any old Christmas but the Christmases when she and Stacy were little. It always took them ages to go to sleep because they were fizzing with excitement. But when they woke up next morning, at exactly the same moment, they used to stare at each other, solemn and silent, before they let out a yell and fell on the Christmas stockings that were dangling from the ends of their beds.

The memory was so strong that she caught hold of her left wrist and held up her hand to make sure it was adult-sized, not small, chubby and five years old. When she checked the window again, Kyle was gone. Dinah stared at the wall of Canfield's Automotive Workshop for a while, seeing him even more clearly than when he'd been there. Then she swung away, changed into her tracksuit and ran downstairs.

She watched the kettle until it boiled, then stirred milk and sugar into her coffee. The

milk rose straight back to the surface in curdled lumps. Dinah looked at it indignantly but a few seconds later a grin twitched at the corner of her mouth. Of course. The perfect excuse.

She paused on the front step to feel the sun on her face. Waved to Mrs Dawson in the house across the road. Dawdled past Canfield's Automotive Workshop, bought a carton of milk at the corner shop and dawdled home again. But no luck this time. No Kyle.

Back inside she slumped on the couch near the glass doors, swirling her coffee moodily. She'd spoken to Kyle half a dozen times over the term holidays but she still didn't have anything worth reporting to Stacy. No way could she tell Stace about watching Kyle from her window, working out his timetable, planning to stroll past during his lunch break and then chickening out or finding she could only manage a strangled 'Hi'. Stacy would say she was acting like a year seven kid with a crush on the captain of the football team. Hopelessly uncool. A loser.

Hopelessly uncool. A loser. The words kept repeating over and over, like the jingle from a TV commercial, but for once Dinah refused to listen. She let them play until they faded into the background and then she yawned and stretched and slid back into her morning trance. Holidays gave you time to unwind. Time for some good times. She'd had an afternoon with Tammy, visits to Stacy's household, hours of maths and now the Last Day with Dad.

The Last Day: a Carr family ritual. Robbie and Stacy and Dinah always did something special on the Friday before they went back to school. (Sunday didn't count as the Last Day, because it would've been a holiday anyway.) Twelve years of Last Day celebrations, except that now Stacy had college holidays, which ended earlier than school holidays. They'd offered to change the Last Day to suit her but she didn't seem to care, so this year Robbie and Dinah were on their own.

Dinah felt the morning trance starting to splinter at the edges. To keep it intact, she went looking for her maths books and settled herself at the kitchen table with a problem she'd been working on the night before. There were times when she needed to wrestle every new set of symbols into position but today all the elements of the equations seemed to click together like magnets. She was scribbling at top speed when a hand clamped onto her shoulder and a voice said in her ear, 'You're keen.'

She turned to find her father behind her, looking down at the page of letters and numbers. 'Funny, isn't it?' he said. 'You're my kid and yet I can't follow any of that. You've left me way behind.'

Not like Stacy, Dinah thought. Stacy and Robbie always had heaps in common. Novels they'd read, films they'd seen, ideas about how plays ought to be performed. How was she supposed to compete with that?

A crack ran straight down the centre of her morning trance, almost splitting it in two.

No, she thought at the last minute. *No*, and somehow she managed to catch both halves of her sunshine mood and press them together again, so tightly that the crack disappeared. A neat mental trick: Dinah felt proud of herself for accomplishing it.

'Okay, Dad,' she said, 'where are we going today?'

They left the car and walked up a green slope into Royal Park. When Dinah looked back, she could see a row of renovated terraces, small and bright as dolls' houses, and beyond them the blue-grey bowl of the city. But when she looked ahead, there was nothing but grass and sky opening out around them, with a line of treetops closing off the horizon so that they seemed balanced on the edge of the world.

'This was a great idea,' she said. 'I can't believe we used to live near here. All the houses seem to be doctors' surgeries now - or else they've been done up in a way that screams "Money, money, money".'

'Well, it was a student area in the seventies, believe it or not. Nice and handy for the bookshop too. We pushed the two of you up here in your stroller almost every evening after work.'

Dinah scanned the skyline so quickly that the park became a haze of blue and green. 'Oh yes,' she said. 'I remember. Sometimes we could hear the lions roaring in the zoo.'

'That's right. I used to make up twin stories about them. "Once upon a time there were two little girls called Dinah and Stacy who crept into the zoo at night and tamed two of the biggest and fiercest lions with a magic spell that went like this: *Alla-lalla-samma-sinn ...*"' He paused, hitching at his rucksack, and waited for her to join in.

'Forget it,' Dinah said before she could stop herself. 'I'm sick of that old stuff.'

We were a united front back then. The Carr twins. Marching into the playground side by side. Same height, same fluffy dark hair, same round dark eyes. Like two fighter kittens, if you can judge from the photos. Take on one of us and you had to take on the pair.

We played tricks on the teachers. 'I'm not Stacy, miss. She's Stacy.' 'No, miss, that's a fib. She's Stacy.' We ran the whole kindergarten between us and after that we went on to run the whole primary school. We were unstoppable. Full of confidence. No doubts, no fears, no shyness. No need to believe in ourselves, because we believed so strongly in each other.

We bossed the rest of the kids around. We invented new games for them to play - mostly based on Dad's twin stories, come to think of it; And when all the girls in our class fell in love with Yannis Karametsos, we led the pack that chased him into the boys' toilets, yelling our war cry.

'Alla-lalla-samma-sinn.

Twin-twin-twin.

Twin-twin-twin. '

The memory had been as strong as an undertow. Dinah had to flail about wildly to get herself back to land. She glanced at Robbie for reassurance but he was striding ahead of her, his shoulders stiff and straight. Oh hell, she thought. That's my fault, for making rude cracks about the twin song. Better think of a way to make it up to him. A question, maybe. Something personal.

'Listen, are you serious about this idea of going back to England?'

He shrugged. 'I'm not sure whether I can manage it financially. But yes, I'd like to go.'

'Why?'

Another shrug. 'All sorts of reasons.'

Dinah recognised the tactics. Stacy always talked like that when she wanted to be drawn out. 'Okay,' she said, hooking her arm through his, 'tell me one of the reasons.'

'Persistent little blighter, aren't you? Well, to start with, my job's not the same any more. Too many cuts in the education budget - schools don't have as much support staff as before. Which means that I have to overdo it, if I want to do it right.'

'Hang on, Dad. Explain.'

'Well, we don't have specialist teachers for art or music or languages these days, so we all have to work longer and harder to make sure that the kids get the same standard of teaching. Mind you, it's the same everywhere. Most of my mates are staying back late every night and then taking work home at the weekend. It's pretty ironic, when there's so many people who don't have any work at all.'

'Wait a minute,' Dinah cut in. 'You're talking about the state of the world again. I thought we were supposed to be talking about you.'

'You can't draw a line between yourself and the world, you know,' Robbie said and then he laughed and added, 'Oh, all right, I was just getting round to the personal side. The fact is, I've kept hoping that I'd be able to set up some sort of routine where I could work for a living and write in my spare time. It's a nice idea but I don't actually have a lot of spare time these days. So I'm being forced to decide what I really want to do - teach or write - because the way things are, there's no chance of fitting them both in.'

He turned towards her, hands held out as though he was weighing his choices. Dinah looked past him to where a cluster of gum trees were catching the wind in their branches and sighing like the sea. She felt pleased that her dad was confiding in her but at the same time it was a bit unnerving to think of him as a person with problems, just like her.

Although I've known for years that my parents weren't exactly all-powerful, she reminded herself: and straight away she was caught in the backwash of another memory.

It's daytime but the room's dark. Mum pulled the blinds down to keep the light out, because it

hurts my eyes. I'm aching all over. The top sheet on the bed feels hot and heavy and the creases in the bottom sheet dig into me like the tree roots under my sleeping bag that time when we went camping. I whisper 'meningitis', to see whether it makes me feel better, but it's just a word.

Sometimes people hang around and force me to drink huge glasses of flat lemonade that slosh about in my stomach. Sometimes they leave me alone in the dark for hours and hours. And then, when pain's whistling through my head like a dry north wind, Dad comes and tells me twin stories until I wish he'd go away again.

Once, in the middle of the night, I turn on the bedside lamp and sit up and see these little men playing football on my lap. Two teams running this way and that, with goal posts on either side of my hips: I lean on the pillows and watch them for ages. Another time I wake in the dark and for some reason I start counting my hands. One hand curled around my stomach, one hand tucked under my cheek, one hand resting on the edge of the bed. Three hands ... I was dreaming, of course, fever dreams, but it seemed totally real at the time.

I can't even call out to Stacy, because Stacy's sleeping in the spare room. She's always been somewhere nearby and now, suddenly, I'm alone. Nothing but the pain for company, flickering across my skin, pulling at my muscles, drilling into my ears, sinking into my bones and clamping my skull so tightly that I can hardly move. I keep waiting for Mum and Dad to take the pain away. But they can't.

Dinah shook herself, like a dog prancing out of the surf, and looked around. While she was being swept along by the tide of memories, another part of her brain seemed to have guided her under a fence and across a narrow strip of road. Now she was following Robbie into the next quadrant of the park, flat and smooth as a lawn with clumps of trees nodding politely across the open spaces.

She would've expected to be upset by remembering the meningitis time - after all, she didn't think about it very often - but in fact she felt as dreamy and detached as when she'd looked out her window first thing that morning. So that's it, Dinah thought. That's why I felt as though today was special. Not because it was going to be a good luck day and not because the morning was handing Kyle to me like a gift-wrapped present. This is a memory-day. I've got memories sloshing around inside and every now and then they rise up in a tidal wave and almost drown me.

Suddenly she felt jumpy, wondering which bit of her life was going to surface next. To keep the memories away, she put on speed and overtook Robbie. 'Come on,' she said, 'tell me what you decided. Teaching or writing?'

'I'm not sure,' he admitted. 'I mean, I know I keep talking about what's wrong with my job but it's got a lot going for it as well.'

'Like what?'

'Like sixteen years of experience, for starters. And then there's all my reasons for becoming a primary teacher in the first place, which are still true now. I like little kids and

I happen to think that the first five or ten years of people's lives are the most important, as far as their basic values are concerned. So I wanted to be in there with the under-tens, convincing them that there's lots of different ways of being a bloke. A bit of a role model, if you like.'

'Oh yeah? A sensitive new age guy before your time, huh?'

Robbie rolled his eyes. 'Jesus, I don't know what the world's coming to. My own daughter, telling me that those new age types invented the men's movement. Listen, young lady, I was involved in men's discussion groups before you were born.' He grinned and added, 'As a matter of fact, I took up a lot of the group's time freaking out about the whole idea of becoming a father - and that was before I knew I was going to be the father of twins.'

He reached over to ruffle her hair. Dinah dodged away. 'You're getting off the track,' she said. 'This role model business - is that why you're so keen on being a chalkie?'

'Not exactly. I got into teaching because I wanted to make a difference ... but I stayed because I turned out to be bloody good at it. Good with the kids, good at thinking up new approaches, good at teamwork with the rest of the staff. See what I mean? There's a lot of arguments in favour of sticking with education.'

'How about writing, then? Can you think of that many reasons for being a writer?'

'No. Only one.'

'Well, what's that?'

'I want to do it.'

The words dropped like stones into deep water: five distinct, separate sounds. Dinah listened to the echo that followed and then turned to look at her dad. His shoulders lifted in a comedian's shrug but his eyes were steady and earnest.

'I've got twenty short stories and fifty poems in my filing cabinet at home,' he said. 'Three of them have been published, one of them won second prize in a local writing competition and the rest have been knocked back by almost every magazine in the country. That's why Elaine thinks I'm crazy - because I'd be giving up something I can do well in order to try something I haven't been outstandingly successful at. What do you reckon, kiddo? Does it make any sense to you?'

As he looked sideways at Dinah, the memories came and washed her away.

I'd been longing to go back to school but once I got there, I hated it. I was tired all the time; my eyes kept closing; I kept slumping forward onto the desk. There were too many people. They bumped against me in the corridor and they talked so fast that I couldn't keep up with them. Even after I got home, they kept jostling through my dreams at night.

I was put in Stacy's class, to begin with, but the lessons didn't make much sense and after a few weeks they decided to shift me back to the primary school. Stacy and I had always sat in the back row, whispering and passing notes and throwing paper darts at Yannis Karambetsos, so 1

automatically headed for our old seat again. Then the teacher moved me to the front row, because I wasn't paying attention, and I liked it better and I stayed there.

Even in the front row, things weren't the same. I felt as though the volume knob in my head had been shaken loose. One minute people seemed to be talking really loudly and the next minute their voices faded to a whisper. I missed whole chunks of every lesson, which made homework pretty difficult, especially since I didn't have a best friend to help me. I'd never needed a best friend before. Stacy had been my best friend.

One day I mentioned the volume knob to Mum. Back to the doctors, more tests and finally the big announcement: 'Dinah has a partial hearing loss in her right ear.' In one way it was a relief, because I'd been convinced that I'd lost my mind, not my hearing. In another way, though, it was just one more hassle.

I was trying to get to know the other kids in my year. I was trying to learn how to swivel my head so I could keep up with the conversation and I was trying to learn how to fake it when I missed a sentence or two. I was trying to cope with the teachers who ignored my deafness and the teachers who made a special point of being kind to me. I was trying to adjust to getting low marks, instead of high marks. I was trying to pretend I didn't miss Stacy and I was trying to pretend I didn't care that Stacy and Clair were becoming best friends. And I was desperately trying to work out who I was, if I wasn't part of a united front.

In the end, I stopped trying.

The surge of memory dumped her as suddenly as it had swept her up. Jesus, Dinah thought, that was bad. Why do I have to keep remembering all the worst parts of my life? It doesn't seem fair, especially when I've just decided to start trying again.

The currents had carried her a long way this time. Robbie wasn't waiting for her answer any more. He had wedged his rucksack between the roots of a lopsided tree and now he was carefully removing a long package, ornamented with Chinese characters.

'What's that?' she asked, crouching down and peering over his shoulder. He whisked off the plastic wrapping and produced a sheath of textured paper, open at one end and tapering away at the other. The sunlight lacquered an extra gloss onto its pink and gold scales, its intelligent painted eye.

'It's a fish!' Dinah said. 'A kite in the shape of a fish.'

Robbie jumped up, jerking the kite-fish behind him, and ran full pelt across the grass, with the fish bouncing at his back. He swung around and hoisted it up to catch the wind, then watched it flutter to the ground; he capered in frantic circles until Dinah collapsed against the tree trunk, shaking with laughter.

'There's not enough wind,' she called. 'We'd better go back to the other side of the park where there's a bit of a hill.'

He shouted a reply and she cupped her hand behind her ear. 'Well then, we'll have

our picnic first,' he repeated as he came closer. 'I don't intend to go all the way back there for the wind and then come all the way back here for the shelter.'

They settled themselves under the tree, spreading the fish out between them. Robbie produced more packages from the rucksack: orange cheese, spiced olives, rounds of salami, bread that was still warm inside its thick crust.

'All right,' Dinah said with her mouth full, 'tell me about this book of yours.'

'My book. Yes. I suppose you could say it's the story of my life - up until the time I left England, at any rate. That's why I want to go back. I've been thinking about Manchester a lot over the past few months but I'm starting to feel as though I need the actual sights and sounds of the place to help me along. The memory triggers.'

You and me both, Dinah thought. It must be catching. Maybe that explained why she had been having so many memories today. Maybe she'd picked it up from her dad, like a virus or something.

'I don't think my life's been particularly remarkable,' he was saying. 'But the experts always tell you to write about what you know and I assume I know my own life reasonably well. Besides, life stories are always interesting.'

'Not mine,' Dinah complained. 'Not compared to Stacy's.'

Robbie flourished his sandwich. 'Hold it right there,' he ordered. 'I don't agree. It's true that Stace has had a pretty nice life but you've had a lot of interesting difficulties and struggles and -' He broke off and said, 'Sorry, Dinah. I know it's you I'm talking about, not the latest mini-series on TV.'

'Hey, that's cool. It's kind of interesting to look at my life from the outside. Go on, say some more.'

'Well, Stacy's a handy example of the sort of thing I've been mulling over lately. Or Vanessa, to take someone of my own age. They're both very strong-minded; they know what they're good at and they do it very successfully. The way I see it, you can either be like that or else you can be like George Mallory, who said he wanted to climb Mount Everest "because it was there".'

'Uh-huh. So which one are you?'

'I suspect I'm more like George Mallory, at present anyway. I'm not sure whether I could ever be a great writer but I'd like to try, because it's there in my mind and it won't go away, no matter how many sensible arguments I come up with. I've spent a lot of time doing things for other people, Dinah. Now I want to do something for myself.'

He glanced across at her, unexpectedly shy. With a pang of alarm Dinah realised he was asking for her approval but before she could decide how she felt, the memories came crashing down on her again.

We were a united front, Stacy and me. We impressed everybody. When Granny came over from England for a few months, we recited poems for her and sang her songs from the Top Forty,

getting all the words right. When Nanna and Pops came on their visit from England a few years later, we put on a play we'd made up. And in between we charmed all of Mum and Dad's friends with our lookalike talent show. Our twin act.

Then I stopped trying but Stacy went on performing. Stace always seemed to know what was expected of her. She wrote quirky essays, just a bit different from the rest, that were read out by teachers all over the school. She could look at a guy across the schoolyard and ten seconds later he'd be edging over to ask her out. She was the star of the school play and, later on, the star of the youth theatre group. It didn't surprise me when the college decided to let her into the drama course, even though they don't usually take school leavers. After all, how could they possibly resist?

I wasn't neglected or anything. Mum and Dad always spent heaps of time with me, going through my homework, trying to find out whether I was having any problems about being part deaf. They used to be endlessly kind and encouraging about the pass marks on my school reports. But they shone with pride every time they saw Stacy's report cards.

I suppose it would've made sense if I'd started to hate Stace but I didn't. Instead, I listened to her. What Dad said about Stacy having no doubts and difficulties and struggles - that wasn't true. All sorts of things worry her or upset her but most of the time I was the only person who heard about them. When she scored a leading role in the school play, I was the one who convinced her she could do it. And when she had a major fight with the director of the youth theatre group, I was the one who worked out how she could patch things up without losing face.

So, whenever people started raving about how wonderful Stacy was, I always figured that I was entitled to take some of the credit. Reflected glory, maybe. But that's better than no glory at all.

The memories ebbed away, spreading in shallow ripples around her. When her eyes cleared, Dinah discovered that she was staring at her father, who was still watching her from hooded eyes.

'If you want my advice,' she said before she could regret it, 'I reckon you ought to go for it, while you've got the chance.'

Robbie nodded and rolled onto his back. They lay side by side, watching the patterns of the noonday sun through the shifting leaves of the tree. After a while her father propped himself on his elbow.

'That's enough about me,' he said. 'It's time we moved onto you.'

And, much to her surprise, Dinah finds herself telling him, in full detail, about her decision to concentrate on maths. She talks about comparing herself to Gavin Petty and Tammy and Clair and Leon; she talks about seeing maths as a language of its own; she talks about how maths seems a whole lot harder, now that she's made up her mind to try, but how she's determined to keep trying, just the same. She tells him things she's never said out loud before and when she has finished, she looks at him with the same

shyness that he turned on her half an hour before.

Her father smiles. 'I don't know much about maths,' he says. 'But it sounds great. Like you said, go for it!'

Then they pack up the picnic and go back to the little hill at the edge of the park. Dinah paces across the grass, testing the breeze, and they launch the kite onto the wind. The pink and gold fish swims higher and higher until it's tugging at the string and then it twists and turns in the air above them, riding the crests of an invisible sea.

At home Dinah sits in her window seat and looks out across sunset rooftops. She waits for the tide of memories to lift her up and bear her away but nothing happens. The memories have gone. She's left there, stranded, with an ache in her heart and a deflated paper fish flopping on the cushions beside her.

Dad's going to leave, if he can, she thinks.

And I told him it was okay.

And I meant it.

She leans her cheek against her hand and tries to imagine a world without Robbie. He's always been around, even after the divorce. Once the first six months were over, it didn't seem to make that much difference, not as far as she and Stacy were concerned, anyway. He had a key to the house, he came and went and they used his flat as a second base. But if he moves to England, that'll change everything.

Dinah closes her eyes and pictures the main road at the end of her street, stretching out beyond the borders of the city, leading to places she's never been. For a moment she escapes into a fantasy of hitting the road with Rhett and Manny - or better still, with Kyle. Then she sees her father, a small jaunty figure heading off down the highway in her mind, merging into the distance, leaving her behind. She jerks her hand away from her cheek and waves to him.

It seems like a silly, childish sort of gesture.

It seems like the right thing to do.

MAY

Dinah dawdled past Canfield's Automotive Workshop, waved to Mrs Watson and let herself into the house. She'd been expecting to find her mother at home - Elaine usually had Monday off if she'd worked at the bookshop on Saturday - but it was more of a surprise to see Vanessa and Lina there as well. They were sitting together in the back room, Lina stitching at a round embroidery frame, while Ness and Elaine talked in quick, edgy voices, cutting across the ends of each other's sentences.

As Dinah headed for the kitchen, her mother turned and flashed an SOS signal with her eyes. At the same moment the phone rang. Dinah hesitated, shrugged apologetically and went back to the hall. She had to haul on the phone cord and juggle with the receiver in order to reach the doorway where she could keep an eye on Elaine, so it took her a few seconds to work out who she was talking to.

'Dinah, are you listening? I said we've found someone to take Rhett's place in the house.'

'Right,' Dinah said, catching up. 'Who's the new person, Stace?'

'Guess.'

'How can I? I don't know most of your friends from college.'

'Well, you know this one, or at least you've heard enough about him. It's Bailey.'

'Bailey? But I thought he was a tutor - or used to be, at any rate. Doesn't that make him older than the rest of you?'

'He's not that old, only twenty-seven. And anyway, age isn't important. In case

you've forgotten, I spend most of my time these days hanging out with people older than me.'

Dinah craned her neck and saw her mum lean forward, hands clasped together as though she was begging Ness for something. She concentrated hard, trying to work out what they were saying, but of course she couldn't hear anything with her right ear.

'So how do Clair and Leon feel about Bailey?' she asked at random.

'Hey, you're reading my mind again, Twin. As a matter of fact, Leon wasn't too keen on Bailey moving in, because he wanted to ask one of the women in his law course. I had to argue with him for ages.'

'Oh yeah? I'm glad I missed out on that. How did you convince him?'

'I didn't - I convinced Clair instead. I told Leon he was trying to set up a harem. That swung Clair around pretty fast.'

Just as Dinah was about to answer, Elaine sent her an even more urgent signal. Dinah mouthed 'Stacy' at her and then said, 'Hey, not bad' into the phone. She went on listening while her twin told her how Bailey needed to move because his flatmates had been picking on him ever since he became unemployed. She went on watching while her mum shrank further and further into the armchair until she looked like a frightened child.

Two of her most important people, needing her attention at the same time. Dinah felt like she was failing both of them.

Finally Stacy snapped, 'Forget it, I'll talk to you later' and rang off. But by that time Ness was already standing up and Lina was pulling her Red Riding Hood cloak around her shoulders. As they came towards her, Ness turned back and said, 'Don't get into a flap, Elaine. Just think it over.'

Think what over? she wondered but before she had time to ask, Lina produced a floppy parcel and pushed it into her hands.

'Dinah, I was hoping you'd get home from school while we were still here. You know how you lost that purse you bought at Paddington market? Well, I made another one for you - with a wombat on the front, because wombats like night time and can't cope with mornings, just like you.'

Dinah peeled back the rainbow tissue paper and Ness and Elaine crowded in on her, their argument temporarily forgotten. It must be nice to be like Lina, Dinah thought, stroking the wombat's suede fur with her fingertip. No need to take any notice of other people's hassles: she just concentrates on her embroidery and plans the next purse she's going to make or the next jumper she's going to knit.

Then, as Lina tucked her hand through Ness's arm and steered her towards the door, Dinah found herself changing her mind. Maybe it wasn't just a coincidence that Lina had handed over the purse at the last minute. Maybe she'd timed it deliberately, to break the tension and make sure everything ended on a positive note.

'So what was that about?'

Elaine wrinkled her forehead. 'Another of Ness's schemes. She's very steamed up about the way the world's going - well, you heard her on New Year's Eve - so she wants to set up some kind of alternative publishing company. You know the sort of thing — books on how we could change the system so that everybody gets a fair share.'

'Is that all?' Dinah said in relief. 'I thought Ness'd come around to tell you some bad news but that sounds pretty good.'

'Oh yes, it's an excellent idea,' Elaine said. 'And I'm sure Ness'll make a success of it - she always does. But what about me?'

Dinah blinked. 'Shit, Mum. You mean she's planning to close down the bookshops?'

'No, no - she'll need them to finance the publishing venture, during the initial stages at least. I won't be out of a job, far from it. She's giving me a choice. I can either take over the management of the bookshops or else I can move to the publishing company as Ness's second-in-command.'

'Hey, no problems, then. Either way you'll be fine.'

'That's what you think. I happen to see it a bit differently.'

She turned her back on Dinah, bolted into the kitchen and scampered around, slamming four crumpets into the toaster, lining up jars of jam and honey along the bench. In her shaggy brown tracksuit she looked like a worried mother rabbit from a Beatrix Potter book. As she spread butter onto the first crumpet, she said with masochistic satisfaction, 'Well, there goes my diet.'

Out in the sun room they ate steadily through the stack of crumpets. When Elaine finally looked up, she was wearing the calm, responsible face she usually showed to the world.

'Okay,' Dinah said, 'tell me about it.'

She held her breath, waiting to see whether Elaine would start twitching again, but her mum just licked a last smear of honey from her fingers and said, 'All right, here goes. Let's take the publishing company first. It's an exciting idea, I'd be learning a lot of new skills and, best of all, Ness and I would still be partners. We've been working together for almost twenty years now, remember. We're a good team - I know how she operates and I don't think I'd find it easy to work that closely with anyone else.'

'Sounds like the publishing company's the winner then.'

'Not necessarily. You see, if I stay with the bookshops, I'll have to take over Ness's role and that'd be a challenge too. I've always been Ness's second-in-command, backing her up, acting as her sounding board, checking out her plans to make sure that they'd work in practice. Perhaps it's time I stopped being second-in command and found out whether I can run a business on my own.'

Dinah sighed and tugged at each of her fingers in turn, listening for the crack of the

knuckles. This isn't fair, she thought. Normally, when people ask for advice, they give you a hint about what they'd actually like you to say. But I can't figure out what Mum wants at all.

'Why don't you sleep on it, then see how you feel in the morning?' she suggested and Elaine scowled.

'You don't understand, do you? The point is, somewhere along the line I have to *choose*.'

'Well, it's not the first time. I mean, you're thirty-nine, right? You must've made at least thirty-nine thousand choices.'

'Yes, but I never really thought them through. I just went with the flow. Vanessa said, "Let's go to Australia" and I said, "Why not?" Robbie said, "Let's have a baby" and I said, "Why not?" But it's not good enough any more. I want to know *why* I'm doing things.'

'Fair enough. Where does that get you?'

'I'm not sure. That's what I'm trying to work out.'

She shifted forward until she was perched on the edge of her chair and started to go through all the details for the second time. On the one hand, she could stick with what she knew - but did that mean Ness or the bookshops? On the other hand, she could tackle something new - but did that mean the publishing company or being a manager? She argued herself round in a circle and back again, her voice rising, her fingers picking at the furballs on her tracksuit. Dinah listened and nodded and muttered, 'Shut up, Mum' under her breath.

Finally, just before she yelled 'Shut up' out loud, Elaine frowned at her and said, 'I can't sit here chatting all day. I've got to make some phone calls about having the carpets cleaned and getting that old tree in the back yard taken away. I was just getting ready to ring the garden care people when Ness came over.'

She hissed the name out like an angry cat. 'So it's all Ness's fault, is it?' Dinah asked, risking a joke. Her mother gazed at her from slitted eyes and then laughed.

'Well, I'd like to blame her for everything, right now.'

Dinah slid her hand under the table and glanced at her watch. 'Good luck with that,' she said. 'I'll check with you later' and she pushed her chair back and stood up, because it was getting close to the time when she usually dropped in to see Kyle.

She paused inside the doorway of Canfield's Automotive Workshop, blinking at the dimness, sniffing the ripe, sharp smells of oil and paint and petrol. Some dusty sunshine filtered down through the skylights and spread out over the benches, where cans and funnels, drills and paint guns, spanners and screwdrivers crowded together or spilled onto the grease-stained cement of the floor. A row of car seats sat along one wall, surrounded by open cartons of door handles or plastic knobs or perspex lightshields,

and a collection of car doors was propped against the opposite wall. Grimy sheets of heavy plastic hung from the ceiling, marking off the spray painting area, and behind them the walls were spattered with arcs of paint like a dull rainbow.

When she peered past the clutter, she could see Kyle's boss, Mr Armani, prowling round a battered Datsun at the back of the workshop. Kyle was spreading yellow wax across the bonnet of the Honda S800 that they had just finished restoring. He looked up, lifting his spare hand in a wave, and she hurried towards him. Instant lust, she noted. Just as bad as when I walked in here a month ago.

'So,' he said. 'What's new?'

'Nothing much.' *Or nothing that I'm prepared to admit to right now. I shouldn't keep raving on about myself every time I come here. That's guaranteed to turn him right off.*

But Kyle fixed his eyes on her and waited and after a brief struggle, she found herself saying, 'Parents!'

'Oh yeah? Any parent in particular?'

'Mum this time, carrying on about some stupid work stuff, as though I'm supposed to solve all her problems. It's weird, Kyle. My family stayed the same for years and years but ever since Stacy left home there's a new drama every week. Mum's always been pretty sensible, up until now, but for some reason she seems to have lost the plot completely.'

Her words echoed back at her, bouncing off metal and concrete, and she decided that she might've been exaggerating. She started again, doing her best to be fair to Elaine, but within ten seconds she was complaining as hard as before. Kyle polished the Honda and listened, murmuring 'hmm' and 'right' and 'yeah', up until the point where Dinah began to wonder whether he was actually paying attention. She stopped, to test him, and he looked up straight away.

'Hold on, Dines. I thought you liked it when your dad told you his problems. So how come you get mad when it's your mum having hassles?'

'I'd never really talked to Dad like that before,' she said. 'So it had a kind of novelty value. Besides, he was genuinely trying to get somewhere. Mum's just waffling, making excuses for herself. "I can't decide what to do, because I'm so-o-o confused."' "

Kyle laughed and bent forward to wax the mudguard and said something Dinah couldn't hear. 'What's the joke?' she asked, shifting to the far side of the Honda, so she could catch the light on his left profile.

'Just this stuff my mum said once. She reckons the people you get mad at are usually the ones most like you.'

Dinah thought it through. 'No way,' she said. 'I don't waffle.'

'Yes, you do, sometimes. But I like it.'

She smiled and then frowned. 'And I *definitely* don't make excuses for myself.'

'No? What about the time when you decided that maths was too hard and you were

going to hit the road?’

‘Hey, be fair. It was the day after Rhett’s farewell party. Doesn’t count.’

That reminded her of Stacy’s latest piece of news, so she sat on the bumper bar of the Honda and told Kyle everything she could remember about Bailey. Stacy trying to turn Bailey into a cause; Stacy meeting him regularly to console him; Stacy quoting his opinions about anything and everything; Stacy finally asking him to move in.

‘Sounds like a real turkey,’ Kyle commented when she paused for breath. ‘Here, wait a minute, will you? I need to grab a clean rag.’

She watched him walk across to the bench, tracing the shape of his arse through his baggy grey coveralls. Wish I’d invited him to Rhett’s party, she thought. Missed a great chance there. But by the time the idea had occurred to her, she’d already asked Tammy along and she hadn’t been sure that she could manage to cope with looking after two people at once.

Not that it mattered, really. She didn’t need to go to parties with Kyle: it was enough to be able to drop in on him at the workshop, once a week at first and now almost every second day. He’d seemed distant to begin with, almost grumpy compared to the way he’d been on New Year’s Eve, but after a while he’d started to relax. They were becoming friends. Stacy had warned her about that but it was better - way better - than nothing.

Although, come to think of it, she acted differently around Kyle than she did around the rest of her friends. With Stacy and her crowd, she was an admiring audience but whenever she was with Kyle, she turned into a performer. She chattered; she said whatever came into her head; she talked about herself non-stop. She was childish or analytical or demanding or honest or anything else that she happened to feel like being. It was a side of herself she hadn’t seen before.

Or not for a long time, anyway.

Kyle turned and the sight of his comical snub nose made her heart clench in her chest. Dinah drew in a long breath and remembered something else she’d wanted to say.

‘Listen, you were right. Maths *is* hard for me. I’m not crazy about it, the way Dad’s crazy about writing. I’m sticking with it because ... because I’m scared, if that makes any sense.’

Kyle nodded. ‘Makes sense to me,’ he said and then added, ‘Hey, don’t lean on the car. The acid in your fingers eats away at the polish.’

He lugged the can of wax around to the other side of the car and began to explain what he was going to do next: half an hour for the wax to dry, polish it off with a lambswool pad fitted onto a drill and then repeat the whole process four or five times more until the finish was perfect. Dinah leaned against the wall and listened contentedly, smiling contentedly to herself.

Then Mr Armani called out, 'Eh, Kyle, you come and look at this engine, tell me what you think' and this time Kyle didn't say, 'Wait a minute,' so she pushed herself away from the wall and turned to leave. As she headed for the door, a ball of crumpled paper bounced off her shoulder and she swung back to see Kyle grinning at her.

'I've got an idea,' he said. 'Why don't you ask your mum what *she's* scared of? That might help her decide.'

Dinah said, 'Thanks, I'll think about it,' and walked backwards out of the workshop, watching Kyle's mouth in case he had anything else to say.

Outside she lifted her face to the autumn sunlight and crossed the road, kicking through the drifts of brown leaves in the gutter. Time to do my good deed for the day, she thought. I'll go home and listen to Mum again, properly this time. Maybe I can try out Kyle's suggestion and report back tomorrow.

But Elaine was bustling around the kitchen, putting together an elaborate lasagne. 'I'm in a cooking mood,' she announced. 'There's no need to help - you might as well get an early start on your homework.'

'Are you sure? You don't want to go on talking about Ness's scheme?'

'No, it's fine. I've bored you enough about that already. What's the matter, Dinah? I thought you were keen to spend a bit more time on your maths.'

'Yes ... Yes, of course I am.'

Dinah stares at the foolscap page in front of her. It's as empty as her brain. White noise inside her head. The white haze of the page as her eyes go out of focus. She picks up the worksheet and forces herself to read through the problem, one word at a time.

Find the inverse function of:

$$f: R \rightarrow R \text{ where } f(x) = 2e^{3x-1} + 1$$

Sketch the graphs of –

She stops. The words seem meaningless. The worksheet flutters down onto her desk.

But it'll be all right, she thinks. I wasn't expecting to do any work before tea. I just need time to settle. She gets up and looks out of each of her three windows in turn, sees Mrs Watson weeding between clumps of yellow pansies, pale green lichen on the tiles of the next door roof, white sheets fluttering on the line in the back yard of the house behind. Then back to her desk again, back to the problem.

Sketch the graphs of the given function f and its inverse.

Dinah's heart starts thudding. As she tries to make sense of the words, her neck tenses and her shoulders stiffen. She feels as though her head is caught in a metal vice, with two clamps tightening on her temples. Her fingers cramp round her pen. Her brain skids in panic from one thought to the next.

I've wasted too much time. I can't possibly improve enough in the space of a year. I can't possibly catch up with kids like Smart Alex, the studyheads who've been absorbing maths all the way through secondary school. She drops the biro, then picks it up again, thinking: Still, I could try, like Tammy. She's coming from even further back than me and I'd never tell her that she didn't have a hope of catching up. So why am I saying it to myself?

She starts to read the problem for the second time but her brain is full of fog and the fog is full of nagging voices. *Don't fool yourself, Dinah. You're nowhere near as dedicated as Tammy. She wants to help her auntie: her people. You just want to show your parents that you can do as well as Stace. It's pathetic, really. I mean, who's going to be impressed by some middle range mark for VCE maths? Let's be realistic here. You'll never be able to compete with Stacy. Never.*

Dinah pushes away the worksheet and realises that she's breathing as hard as if she's been running. She pushes back her chair, goes to the window seat and kneels on the cushions, staring sightlessly at the washing line.

- This is all Mum's fault. I got caught up in her problems, so I didn't have time to talk myself into the right frame of mind for working.

- Oh yeah? Who do you think you're kidding? You've sat here dozens of times, forcing yourself to study. Face it, Dinah, you don't even like maths any more. So why bother? Why put yourself through all this agony? Give yourself a break - go back to the way you were before and settle for a pass.

- But I wasn't happy before, either.

The voices squabble inside her head, arguing and contradicting each other. Dinah clutches a cushion to her stomach and listens while they tell her all over again that she's not smart like Smart Alex, she's not dedicated like Tammy, she'll never be able to compete with Stacy. It's too much for her. She can't handle it. She needs a nice, clear, simple reason for the state that she's in. Something along the lines of *It's all Mum's fault.*

The cushion falls to the floor. Dinah leans back against the window seat, closes her eyes and sees Elaine's face, pale and round as the moon, with a frown-crease between her eyebrows.

- Oh hell. Why do I want to blame Mum for everything?

In answer she hears Kyle's voice, saying, 'The people you get mad at are the ones who are most like you.' Dinah's eyes open wide. For a moment the voices in her head fall silent and ideas start to click together like the stages of a maths problem.

FORMULATE YOUR PROPOSITION.

Proposition: I get most annoyed at Mum because she's the person who's most like me.

DEFINE YOUR QUANTITIES.

Quantity A: Elaine Carr.

She's got some really good opportunities right now but instead of enjoying them, she's giving herself a hard time, holding herself back.

Quantity B: Dinah Carr.

I'm really annoyed at Mum right now. Does this mean I'm like her? Does this mean that I could be giving myself a hard time and holding myself back, even if I didn't realise I was doing it?

REQUIRED TO PROVE:

that Dinah Carr is (or isn't) holding herself back.

Proof:

1. I don't feel as though I'm holding myself back.
 - a. Well, I don't *want* to hold myself back, anyway.
 - b. And I'm working hard on my maths these days.
2. But the fact is, I stopped trying after the meningitis.
 - a. I settled for getting reflected glory from Stace.
 - b. I did it for years and years.
 - c. That's the same as holding yourself back.
3. Now I've made up my mind to start trying again.
 - a. But I stopped trying for years and years.
 - b. And I've only been trying for a few months.
 - c. So I guess it might take me a bit longer to get the hang of it.

THUS WE HAVE PROVED THE FOLLOWING THEOREM:

Theorem: Dinah Carr stopped trying and now she wants to change - but it might take her a while to get out of the habit of holding herself back.

Dinah contemplates the theorem she has made out of her life. It's clear and logical but she resists it at first because it makes her feel like a bit of a fool, holding herself back all that time. Then she thinks: *Big deal. If I've got the power to hold myself back, I've also got the power to steam ahead. Or at least I hope so.*

I'll try that one out on Kyle, next time I see him.

Normally, whenever Kyle crosses her mind, Dinah has to stop what she's doing and stare out the nearest window and dream about his smooth skin and his big hands and his brown button eyes. Not this time, though. This time she's already scrambling down from the window seat and heading for her desk. Her brain is foggy and the foolscap page melts into a white haze when she tries to focus on it but Dinah straightens her shoulders and clenches her jaw and starts to write.

$$\text{Let } y = 2e^{3x-1} + 1.$$

$$x = 2e^{3y-1} + 1.$$

I'm not a natural studyhead, like Smart Alex.

$$\text{Then } x - 1 = 2e^{3y-1}.$$

I'm not dedicated, like Tammy.

$$\Rightarrow \frac{x-1}{2} = e^{3y-1}$$

I can't compete with Stace.

$$\Rightarrow \log_e \left(\frac{x-1}{2} \right) = 3y - 1$$

$$\Rightarrow 3y = 1 + \log_e \left(\frac{x-1}{2} \right)$$

$$\Rightarrow y = \frac{1}{3} \left(1 + \log_e \left(\frac{x-1}{2} \right) \right)$$

When she went downstairs, Elaine was already sitting at the table, levering slabs of pasta out of a baking tray. 'What've you been working on?' she asked as Dinah sat down beside her.

'Algebra - an inverse problem. The function I got is pretty messy, but. There's this $\log_e \left(\frac{x-1}{2} \right)$ term in it and I've got to sketch its graph.'

She looked hopefully at her mum. 'Uh-huh,' Elaine said, thinking about it. 'If there's a log term, the original function must've been an exponential one, right? As long as you can sketch that okay, the inverse function's just the reflection of the exponential function above the line $x=y$. The interchanging x and y effect, remember.'

'Oh yeah. Thanks. That ought to do it.' Dinah hesitated, thought *Go on, be fair* and added, 'How about you, Mum? Did you get any further with the bookshop stuff - and by the way, when do you have to decide?'

Elaine's eyes shifted from side to side, as though she was checking the exits. 'As a matter of fact,' she confessed, 'Ness gave me till the end of the year.'

'The end of the year? You mean, seven whole months?'

Dinah tipped back her head and started to laugh. She clutched the edge of the table,

caught her breath and laughed even harder, a deep, steady laugh that began in her stomach and worked its way up, loosening every muscle that it passed. Her mother looked offended at first but before long the corners of her mouth started to twitch and she found herself joining in.

‘What are we laughing at?’ she asked after a while.

‘At you, Mum. You sucked me right in. I thought you had to make up your mind by tomorrow, at the latest.’

‘Well, I’d rather know where I stand. I don’t like to have things hanging over me. So - yes, I *would* prefer to make up my mind straight away.’

‘But you don’t have to.’

‘That’s true. I don’t have to.’

Dinah helped herself to an extra serve of salad. For some reason, now that the pressure was off, she suddenly felt full of useful advice.

‘Listen, I know what you ought to do. It’s always scary whenever you take a risk and go for something really different, right? So you just need to figure out which choice scares you the most and that’ll be the right one.’

Elaine ducked her head. ‘Sorry,’ she said, ‘that doesn’t help much. I’m scared both ways. Scared of leaving the bookshop, scared of taking on extra responsibility.’

‘Oh,’ said Dinah. ‘I see what you mean.’

Because it sounds like me. It sounds like my theorem. That’s the reason why I’m feeling so paralysed right now. Because I’m scared of change but I’m even more scared of staying the same for the rest of my life.

She reaches across the table and grabs her mother’s hand. They sit there, shoulders slumped but eyes level, admitting to each other that they’re scared.

JUNE

Dinah sits at her desk in the upstairs room. Her heart thuds. Neck tenses. Shoulders stiffen. Head clamps.

She picks up her biro and watches it shiver in her hand.

Okay, so I'm scared — what else is new? I can use that, can't I? Factor it in. An adrenalin hit, to move my brain along.

And oh God, I'm going to need it, after what I said in class today. Why didn't I keep my big mouth shut? But no such luck: Mr Hansen announces that he's set us some difference equation problems for the next Further Maths work requirement and stupid Dinah has to go and tell the whole class that difference equations are used in chaos theory. Then Mr Hansen goes, 'Where did you find that out, Dinah' and I go, 'Saw it on TV' and Smart Alex yawns and goes, 'Didn't everyone?' and we both start quoting bits of the program, trying like mad to impress Mr Hansen.

Everyone always wants to impress Mr Hansen. Even Smart Alex.

Anyway, Mr Hansen says, 'Hmm, the two of you seem pretty fired up. If you like, I could set you some extra work that relates a bit more closely to chaos theory - but first you'll have to show me that you can complete the work requirement satisfactorily.'

And Smart Alex turns and looks at me. He doesn't say anything but he doesn't need to. His eyes say it for him. His eyes say, 'Forget it, Dinah Carr. Don't bother. You're not even half as good as me.'

I've got to prove that he's wrong.

But it's not going to be easy, given that I think he's right.

I shouldn't have let this happen. I can't possibly take on Smart Alex single-handed. It's like a duel. Or one of those *Rocky* type movies where the little nobody goes up against some major world champ. Although, mind you, in the movies the little nobody always does reasonably well, so why shouldn't I?

Answer: because life's not really like that.

Jesus, I wish my hands would stop shaking. Come on, Dinah, copy out the first question.

Investigate the behaviour, for different choices of x_0 , of the difference equation $x_{n+1} = \text{Sin } x_n$ (Hint: Start with $x_0 = 0$. Then try $x_0 = \pi/2$. Use a calculator to find successive values of $\text{Sin } x_n$.)

There, now it's not a blank sheet any more. Plus Mr Hansen's already given me the first step

$$x_0 = 0$$

and the next step on from that seems fairly logical.

$$x_1 = \text{Sin } x_0 = \text{Sin } 0 = 0$$

$$x_2 = \text{Sin } x_1 = \text{Sin } 0 = 0$$

Wait a minute. What's going on here? Three zeros in a row? In fact, come to think of it, that means there'll be even more zeros on the horizon.

$$x_0 = 0$$

$$x_1 = 0$$

$$x_2 = 0$$

$$x_n = 0$$

$$x_{n+1} = 0$$

Hey, very nice and neat - but so what? This is too simple. I must be doing something wrong. It's stupid. *I'm* stupid. Can't compete with Stacy. Not as dedicated as Tammy. Nowhere near as smart as Smart Alex or all the other studyheads who -

Oh, stop it! I'm bored with all that crap. Gotta move things along a bit. Maybe I ought to take a sideways jump and check out the π part of the problem.

Like so.

$$x_0 = \pi/2$$

$$x_1 = \text{Sin } x_0 = \text{Sin } \pi/2 = 1$$

$$x_2 = \text{Sin } x_1 = \text{Sin } 1 = 0.841471$$

$$x_3 = \text{Sin } x_2 = \text{Sin } 0.841471 = 0.745624$$

$$x_4 = \text{Sin } x_3 = \text{Sin } 0.745624 = 0.678430$$

$$x_5 = \text{Sin } x_4 = \text{Sin } 0.678430 = 0.627572$$

$$x_6 = \text{Sin } x_5 = \text{Sin } 0.627572 = 0.587181$$

$$x_7 = \text{Sin } x_6 = \text{Sin } 0.587181 = 0.554016$$

Look at it go, rolling down like a wave. I just keep thumping the sine button on the calculator and this cascade of decreasing numbers comes pouring out. Where's it going to take me next? Can hardly press the buttons fast enough: it's lucky that my hand's steadier now.

$$x_8 = 0.5261071$$

$$x_9 = 0.5021707$$

$$x_{10} = 0.481330$$

$$x_{11} = 0.462958$$

$$x_{12} = 0.446597$$

$$x_{13} = 0.431898$$

Yes! Sine *is* a wave and I'm surfing it like a pro. After all those graphs of sine functions we did with Ms Lee in Maths Methods, I bet I know what's going to happen next. Just for the record, here's a prediction from Dinah Carr, famous clairvoyant: these numbers are going to go on falling.

$$x_{14} = 0.418596$$

$$x_{15} = 0.4064778$$

$$x_{16} = 0.395377$$

Good, I was right ... but I can do even better than that. There's another question taking shape in my mind and my heart's thumping again, except this time it feels more exciting than scary. I'm positive (oh no that couldn't be right it's stupid I'm stupid SmartAlexwouldlaughhisheadoff: *stop it, Dinah!*) I'm positive that this equation's going to wind up at zero, just like the last one. Is it always going to work out like that, no matter where I start? What if I decided to catch the sine wave while it's rising, instead of when it's falling?

Try it and see.

$$x_0 = \pi/4$$

$$x_1 = \text{Sin } x_0 = \text{Sin } \pi/4 = 0.707107$$

$$x_2 = \text{Sin } x_1 = \text{Sin } 0.707107 = 0.649637$$

$$x_3 = \text{Sin } x_2 = \text{Sin } 0.649637 = 0.604897$$

Nope, it still comes crashing down. You can start anywhere you like but you always end up at zero. I'm sure that's true. It *feels* true. Don't even need to check the calculator any more. I can write it up straight away.

Any given value for x_0 in the difference equation $x_{n+1} = \text{Sin } x_n$ will, in the

end, always lead to the equation $0 = \sin 0$.

$0 = \sin 0$. $\sin 0 = 0$. It's like a poem. A haiku, by one of those Japanese poets who can take an incredibly big landscape (mountains, a lake, moonlight) and an incredibly complicated emotion (first love, heartbreak, isolation) and compress it all into seventeen perfect syllables. That's how $0 = \sin 0$ looks to me. It's so precise. It's so beautiful. It's so -

So pointless. So meaningless. So futile. What am I getting excited about? This is a hell of a lot of effort, just to land up with $0 = \sin 0$. It doesn't mean anything. I can't see where it's supposed to lead me next.

It's stupid.

I'm stupid.

Oh shit, I hate maths. Every time I think I'm riding a wave, I land up on my belly in the shallows with the breath thumped out of me. But I can't give up yet. I can't let Smart Alex beat me. I've got to try again.

$0 = \sin 0$

$\sin 0 = 0$

$0 = \sin 0$

$\sin 0 = 0$

$0 = \text{a great big fat empty circle, as empty as my head.}$

Ah, forget it. I'll start my writing folio assignment for Ms Vincini instead.

Next day. Dinah's back at her desk in the upstairs room. She's reading through the challenging question for her Further Maths work requirement.

- No, she's not. The worksheet's fluttering down onto the floor and Dinah's pacing round the room, aiming kicks at the furniture. ' $0 = \sin 0$,' she says, spitting it out, and then, in a quieter and more meditative voice, ' $0 = \sin 0$.' She bends down to rescue the worksheet and starts reading it again.

Challenging question:

Show how the difference equation $x_{n+1} = \sin x_n$ can be used to solve the equation $x - \sin x = 0$.

All right, what if this is my big chance to do something with $0 = \sin 0$? After all, when $x = 0$, then $0 = \sin 0$ means that $x = \sin x$. And $x = \sin x$ could also be expressed as $x - \sin x = 0$. Ha! I'm onto something here, for sure. (But what?)

I'll test it out on the difference equation. $x_{n+1} = \sin x_n$ can be expressed as $x_{n+1} - \sin x_n = 0$, which is almost like saying that $x - \sin x = 0$.

No, hang on, it's *exactly* like saying that $x - \sin x = 0$, as long as $x = 0$. Perhaps that's the answer, $x - \sin x = 0$, only if $x = 0$.

Hey, that was a cinch: nowhere near as bad as I thought. Maybe Mr Hansen chucked in a simple equation to get us moving. Well, it worked. I'm really revved now. I

got a buzz out of that and I want to do it again, except (quick glance) the next question for the work requirement goes off onto something completely different.

Never mind, I'll invent my own equation.

Huh?

What did I just say?

Oh no, I couldn't.

Oh yes, you could.

Oh no, I –

Shut up, Dinah. Stop arguing with yourself and give it a bash. Why not try a variation on the first question, but with a cosine instead of a sine? Here goes.

Investigate the behaviour, for different choices of x_0 , of the difference equation $x_{n+1} = \text{Cos } x_n$.

Okay, let's start in the old familiar way.

$$x_0 = 0$$

$$x_1 = \text{Cos } 0 = 1$$

$$x_2 = \text{Cos } x_1 = \text{Cos } 1 = 0.540302$$

$$x_3 = \text{Cos } x_2 = \text{Cos } 0.540302 = 0.857552$$

Fantastic! I reckon I might've found that upward wave that I was looking for yesterday. Better surf with it a bit further, though, just to make sure.

$$x_4 = 0.654290$$

$$x_5 = 0.793480$$

Hang on, this is all over the place. There's something the matter with these results. Or else there's something the matter with the entire equation. Yeah, that'd be right, considering I was the one who dreamed it up.

$$x_6 = 0.761369$$

$$x_7 = 0.763960$$

$$x_8 = 0.722104$$

Seriously weird. Look at the way the numbers keep going up and down, with smaller and smaller differences between them. It's a completely different pattern from yesterday. The sine pattern felt like a wave but this cosine pattern feels like a vitamizer whose motor's wearing out.

$$x_9 = 0.750418$$

$$x_{10} = 0.731404$$

$$x_{11} = 0.744237$$

$$x_{12} = 0.735605$$

Up and down, up and down. I'm starting to get a funny feeling about this. What if — I could be wrong — but what if this set of equations doesn't finish at zero, like the last lot

did? Might as well take it a bit further, just to see. After all, I only have to keep hitting the cosine button on my calculator.

$$x_{13} = 0.741425 \quad x_{14} = 0.737507$$

$$x_{15} = 0.740147 \quad x_{16} = 0.738369$$

$$x_{17} = 0.739567 \quad x_{18} = 0.738760$$

$$x_{19} = 0.739304 \quad x_{20} = 0.738938$$

$$x_{21} = 0.739184 \quad x_{22} = 0.739018$$

$$x_{23} = 0.739130 \quad x_{24} = 0.739055$$

This is sooo boring. Give up, Dinah.

No. I won't give up.

$$x_{25} = 0.739106 \quad x_{26} = 0.739071$$

$$x_{27} = 0.739094 \quad x_{28} = 0.739079$$

$$x_{29} = 0.739089 \quad x_{30} = 0.739082$$

$$x_{31} = 0.739087 \quad x_{32} = 0.739084$$

$$x_{33} = 0.739086 \quad x_{34} = 0.739085$$

$$x_{35} = 0.739086 \quad x_{36} = 0.739085$$

$$x_{37} = 0.739085 \quad x_{38} = 0.739085$$

$$x_{39} = 0.739085$$

There! I've come to the end again. The pattern's stopped. And I was right. It didn't finish at zero; it finished at 0.739085. I've done it!

Oh.

Oh wow.

I've solved the problem I set for myself. That's the answer: $x = 0.739085$. I've really done it. I asked myself a real maths question and then answered it. Not one of Mr Hansen or Ms Lee's questions, where you know they've checked it out in advance and made sure it all works perfectly. Not a question out of a book that's already been answered by a million students all round Australia.

No, that was a genuine Dinah Carr question.

With a genuine Dinah Carr answer.

I feel so good.

I feel so clear in my mind, so confident.

I'm an explorer, boldly going where no one else dares to go.

I could move mountains right now, just me and my calculator.

And yet yesterday I gave up. I couldn't keep on trying. I didn't even bother to finish reading the question. Maybe that's part of the whole process, though. Maybe sometimes you just have to stop hassling yourself and take a break and give your subconscious a chance to do a bit of its own work on the problem.

But you have to trust yourself before you can do that.

I think - just maybe - that I might - perhaps - be starting to trust myself a little.

Dinah leans on the window sill, looking out at the lights of the city. Then she goes back to her desk and starts work on the next part of the Further Maths work requirement. Sometimes her pen speeds faster than light across the paper. Sometimes the pen drops from her hand and she frowns at the blank wall.

Next day Dinah waits for Mr Hansen after the Further Maths class.

‘Well?’ he says, raising one eyebrow. ‘Having some trouble with the work requirement?’

Dinah shakes her head. She’s hiding a folder behind her back but before she can hand it over, Smart Alex pushes past and presents his folder to Mr Hansen. So Dinah slaps her own folder on top of it, like the winning trump in a game of cards.

Mr Hansen looks down at the folders. ‘Three days early,’ he comments. ‘You’re serious about this, aren’t you? All right, I’d better bring in some chaos theory equations for the two of you tomorrow.’

And he does.

CHAOS PROJECT

Introduction

As you found in your work requirement, $x = 0$ is the *fixed point* solution of the difference equation $x_{n+1} = \text{Sin } x_n$ because, no matter where you start, the equation always becomes $0 = \text{Sin } 0$.

Chaos occurs when no fixed point can be found — that is, when each starting value for x_0 leads to a different sequence of numbers and when none of those sequences of numbers converges to a fixed point.

This project will give you a chance to understand the chaos phenomenon by investigating the behaviour of a famous difference equation, the Logistic Equation, which is used to model specific types of population shifts. The Logistic Equation is $x_{n+1} = rx_n(1 - x_n)$; it has fixed points for some values of r but it is chaotic for other values of r .

Investigative Exercises

(1) Investigate the behaviour of the Logistic Equation for several values of r that are between 1 and 0. Remember to check different starting values for x_0 .

Hey, no problem. This ought to be a breeze. I just have to tap away on my calculator, jot down the figures and - yep, looks like we’ve got a familiar pattern here. The fixed point’s zero again, same as with good old $x_{n+1} = \text{Sin } x_n$. Next question, please,

Mr H.

(2) Investigate the behaviour of the Logistic Equation for values of r where r is greater than 1 and less than 3.

Yeah, sure. More button tapping, more figures and another familiar pattern: a non-zero fixed point this time, just like my cosine equation. This is taking up a lot of my study time and I can't see any sign of chaos yet. Oh well, I asked for it, so I suppose I'll have to keep going - but it better get good real soon.

(3) Now try $r = 3$ and $r = 3.5$ — and don't forget to go on testing out different values for x_0 .

That's more like it. We must be hitting the serious stuff at last, if he's giving us a specific value for r . Might as well start with $r = 3$, which means the Logistic Equation will be $x_{n+1} = 3x_n(1 - x_n)$. I'll need a value for x_0 too — how about $x_0 = 0.1$? Then away we go.

$$\begin{aligned}x_1 &= 3 \times 0.1 \times 0.9 \\ &= 0.27\end{aligned}$$

$$x_2 = 0.5913$$

$$x_3 = 0.724993$$

$$x_4 = 0.5981346$$

$$x_5 = 0.7211088$$

And we're rocking on the waves again, up and down between 0.72 numbers and 0.59 numbers. Is this what chaos is like? Not settling down to a single final value but always swinging back and forth? It's a bit disappointing - I thought it'd be more ... more chaotic.

$$x_6 = 0.6033327$$

$$x_7 = 0.7179671$$

$$x_8 = 0.6074711$$

$$x_9 = 0.7153498$$

Hang on, now the 0.7 numbers are getting smaller and the 0.59 numbers are getting bigger - in fact, they turned into 0.6 numbers a while ago. Does this mean they're going to meet at a fixed point, after all? And do I have the patience to go on churning out these endless numbers?

Wish I could ask a computer to do it for me instead.

$$x_{10} = 0.6108733$$

$$x_{11} = 0.71312133$$

$$x_{12} = 0.61373790$$

$$x_{13} = 0.71119108$$

Okay, that does it. I'm sick of this. If I can invent my own equation and solve it, I

reckon I know enough about maths to be able to make an intelligent guess. These figures are obviously going to meet at a fixed point, somewhere on the horizon. In other words, there's no chaos here. What the hell is Mr Hansen driving at?

Time to give $r = 3$ the boot and try $r = 3.5$ instead. In which case, the Logistic Equation goes $x_{n+1} = 3.5x_n(1 - x_n)$. and I'll use $x_0 = 0.5$ this time. And hope it leads to something more interesting than the last lot.

$$\begin{aligned}x_1 &= 3.5 \times x_0(1 - x_0) \\ &= 3.5 \times 0.5(1 - 0.5) \\ &= 0.875\end{aligned}$$

$$x_2 = 0.3828125$$

$$x_3 = 0.8269348$$

$$x_4 = 0.5008977$$

$$x_5 = 0.8749972$$

$$x_6 = 0.3828198$$

$$x_7 = 0.8269408$$

Oh yuck, what a mess - although, on second thoughts, those 0.500 numbers kind of jump out at you. They're so close to 0.5, a nice round number. And so unexpected, because they're midway between the 0.3 numbers and the 0.8 numbers. Is this chaos at last?

Or is it still too tidy for that?

$$x_8 = 0.50088414$$

$$x_9 = 0.8749973$$

$$x_{10} = 0.3828197$$

$$x_{11} = 0.8269408$$

$$x_{12} = 0.5008841$$

Hang on, the 0.5 numbers are really closing in on each other. That last 0.5 number and the one before it both round off to 0.5009. No two ways about it, they're heading towards a fixed point ... but where does that leave the 0.3s and the 0.8s? I'll have to take another look at them.

Huh?

What?

That doesn't make sense. x_7 and x_{11} round off to the same value too. I hadn't noticed. I wasn't expecting more than one fixed point. And omigod, look at x_6 and x_{10} — and x_5 and x_9 as well! Have I really got four separate streams here: four fixed points for the one starting value? Not possible. Can't be happening. Nobody warned me. It's not what I was expecting at all. I was supposed to be finding out about chaos, not landing up in some totally bizarre maths mess.

Oh fuck. I hate myself when this sort of thing happens. There go the voices inside my head, starting up right on cue. *Not as smart as Smart Alex, not as -* but hey, I know a good way to stop them. I'll give up. I'll tell Mr Hansen I couldn't handle it, after all. I'll make Smart Alex's day and forget the whole bloody thing.

Dinah slams her maths folder shut. Dinah opens her English folder. She scribbles away until she has finished her writing folio assignment and then, hesitantly, unwillingly, she glances at her watch.

Half past nine, enough time for another hour's work. Her hand hovers over the calculator and then makes a sudden grab. She takes a fresh sheet of paper and writes, 'Let $x_0 = 0.1$ '. Watches four more fixed points emerge from the column of figures. Props her chin on her hands and stares down at the page with unseeing eyes. Goes to bed and dreams about waiting at a bus stop in the rain while buses trundle past without stopping.

Further Maths is the last period before lunch. Dinah hangs around, lining up the corners of her folders, until Smart Alex is headed for the door. She catches Mr Hansen just as he's about to leave.

And that evening she's back at her desk again.

Oh wow. I feel like I'm twelve years old again, when X-Rated came to Australia and Clair's older brother queued all night and got us tickets in the front row and Jasper Jaxxon jumped down from the stage in the middle of the concert, so close that I could've almost touched him.

That's how it was with the chaos equations too. I was so close to the answer. Could've almost touched it.

Better go over it one more time, just to check. Gotta make sure I understood what Mr Hansen told me. That fantastic word, to start with. Bifurcation. (Can't wait to drop it into a conversation with Stace.) Mr Hansen reckons that's the name for what happened to me yesterday - like, bifurcation is when you start off with one fixed point but then, as the value for r increases, the number of fixed points doubles. And doubles again. And again.

I could follow that part of it easily enough. After all, I'd seen it in action. Those first two investigative exercises where the value for r was less than three, both of them coming to a nice, neat fixed point. Then, with $r = 3$, the fixed points doubled, although they were so close that I assumed they were going to meet in the end. And after that, $r = 3.5$ and those four fixed points that freaked me so much, except that, as it turns out, they were part of the pattern all along.

Because, according to Mr Hansen, bifurcation continues steadily on, so that by the time $r = 3.57$, you've already got 256 fixed points. I asked him whether it kept going like that forever and he laughed and told me I'd end up with so many fixed points that the

results would look completely random. He said, 'Try it out on $r = 4$ and see what you get. In fact, choose a pair of slightly different starting values, like $x_0 = 0.2000$ and $x_0 = 0.2001$, and have a look at what happens then.'

So I will.

Dinah settles herself more comfortably in her chair. Dinah lines up her pen, a fresh sheet of paper and the calculator. Dinah says, 'Okay, $r = 4$ and $x_0 = 0.2000$.' The list of numbers grows and grows, zigzagging this way and that, with no discernible pattern. Dinah looks at it and nods.

Then she writes, 'Now let $x_0 = 0.2001$ ' and starts again. More fingerplay on the calculator. More zigzag numbers, jittering down the page.

Two random sets of numbers, each completely different from the other.

And there it is. Chaos. Crazy, beautiful chaos. Living proof that, even when everything seems to be in a mess, there's still a way of fitting it into the pattern. I thought I'd made a serious mistake but I just gave up too quickly, instead of waiting around to see why the maths seemed to be going wrong.

Though I can't have given up altogether, because I went to see Mr Hansen, didn't I?

And my reward's here on the desk in front of me. Two pages of chaotic numbers. Study them again and yep, they really are completely different, just because I changed the starting value by something as small as 0.001. The Butterfly Effect, they called it on that TV program: where a butterfly flaps its wings on one side of the earth and changes the weather on the other side. Small changes, major consequences.

Just like me, over this past week. I started with an ordinary old difference equation and ended up with a mathematical model that can show you how to predict population growth and all sorts of other things. Or, to put it another way, I started by accepting a stupid challenge from Smart Alex and I ended by learning something so crucial that I'm going to write it on a file card and stick it on the wall beside my desk. Every time I turn my head, I'll see it there, saying:

DON'T GIVE UP. DON'T EVER GIVE UP.

I understand now. I understand. Something about the way my mind works. Something about the way maths works.

Something about the way the world works.

Dinah gathers her scraps of paper together, arranges them in order and copies them out neatly. When she has finished, she puts the pages in a folder and checks through them one last time. As she reads, she feels as if she's split down the middle. Half of her is calm, lucid and confident. Half of her is tense, clenched and doubting.

Still, she takes the folder to school with her next day, although she keeps it on the desk beside her, instead of handing it in straight away. At the end of the class, Mr Hansen says, 'By the way, about that chaos project -' and Smart Alex jumps to his feet and says, 'I've done it.'

Dinah hesitates, clutches her folder and says (gulp), 'So have I.'

JULY

Stacy and Cam were cuddling on the couch, Clair and Leon were chasing each other in and out of the kitchen and Dinah huddled beside the radiator, watching all of them.

‘Just a few herbs,’ Leon pleaded. ‘Look, I’ve brought some in from the garden. You could try oregano or mint or fresh parsley - but not all of them at once, okay?’

He flourished a green handful at Clair and she turned on him. ‘Rack off, mate. I’m not interested. Stick that stuff in a jar and use it next time it’s your turn to cook. Personally, I happen to like plain steamed vegies.’

She flounced back into the kitchen and Leon followed her. ‘I was only trying to help,’ he complained to the others as he went.

‘See what I mean?’ Stacy said to Cam. ‘Six months ago that guy didn’t know how to put bread into a toaster and now, all of a sudden, he’s a gourmet chef. Typical Leon, hey?’

They grinned at each other, comfortable as puppies in a basket. Stacy’s black curls tangling with Cam’s silvery fine hair; Stacy’s dark eyes meeting Cam’s rain-grey eyes. I could be looking at myself, Dinah thought. Except that I haven’t got enough room in my life for somebody like Cam. Fact is, I hardly even have time these days for fantasies about Kyle.

She shivered and moved closer to the radiator. Her eyelids started to droop and she slipped into a half-trance, drowsy and disconnected after a day of studying. Fragments of algebra drifted past images of Kyle, framed by the clutter of the workshop. Stacy and Cam whispered together, Clair and Leon bickered in the next room and Dinah smiled.

Then Clair came and hustled them into the kitchen, where she served up mounds of potato and pumpkin and zucchini. As Dinah rescued her knife and fork from underneath her plate, Leon slid a pottery bowl across the table towards her.

'Gremolata,' he whispered. 'Parsley and garlic and lemon rind, all chopped up finely. It's mostly used in osso bucco but I thought it might jazz up steamed vegetables, as well.'

Dinah glanced sideways at Clair, who laughed. 'I give up,' she said. 'Once Leon gets his mind set on something, he's unstoppable. Go on, Dinah, try his bloody gremolata.'

She helped herself while Leon watched benignly. 'So, Dinah, how are you coping with the final year of VCE?' he asked.

'Oh, I'm surviving. Concentrating on my maths subjects, mainly.'

'Smart choice. Maths opens up a lot of good career prospects. Have you decided what you want to do next, after you've finished with school?'

'Not sure. But I've been thinking about studying statistics. We just started on stats in Maths Methods and I like the way you can relate it to real people. Although I like most kinds of maths, really.'

'Hmm, stats sounds good. We need people like you to provide reliable data for the political analysts. Maybe we'll end up working together one day.'

'Yeah. Maybe.'

She stuffed her mouth with potato and zucchini to put an end to the conversation. Jesus, Leon can be so pompous, she thought. He sounds more like a middle-aged uncle than someone the same age as me. Can't believe I used to fancy him. Can't even remember what it felt like.

Then she had a twinge of guilt: after all, Leon had made the effort to ask her what she was doing. So she gulped down her food, asked a question about his uni course and listened until Cam chipped in with some more stories about film school. Clair produced ice cream and chocolate sauce and they lolled around the table, reading Rhett's latest postcards and trading gossip about the kids they'd known at Central.

'And Yannis Karametsos has cracked onto some real silvertail,' Leon told them. 'Trust Yannis to strike it lucky. Her dad's a judge, her mum runs some big deal art gallery - and she's a total babe as well, wouldn't you know. We're going to a twenty-first party at her house tonight, right, Clair?'

'Party?' Clair repeated and he glared at her.

'I told you about it two days ago,. You *are* coming, aren't you?'

'No,' she said vaguely. 'No, I don't think so. I need to work.'

'Listen, you can work any time. This is a major opportunity. You could run into all sorts of people from the art world, just like I stand a chance of making an impression on some serious bigwigs. Lawyers, politicians -'

He stopped short, staring across the table. At first Dinah thought that Clair must've

given him the finger but then she turned and saw a man standing behind Clair, his long arms hooked across the doorway. His jeans were ripped and patched, his heavy black jumper was darned with scarlet wool and he was so tall and so thin that he seemed to be bent under the weight of his own head. Black stubble dusted his jawline, acne scars pitted his cheeks and above that were the wariest watching eyes that Dinah had ever seen. Even more watchful than mine, she thought, and for a moment she wondered whether he was part-deaf too.

'Oh, mate,' he said to Leon, 'your parents did a fantastic brainwashing job on you. You really believe in the whole deal, don't you? Important contacts, smart career moves, success and power and above all, money, money, money - the great god of the nineties.'

His voice was unexpectedly resonant and he lingered over his words as though he could taste every change of tone, amused one minute and savage the next.

Leon shrugged. 'Listen, Bailey, if I wanted to be rich, I would've picked a different line of work. Politicians aren't exactly rolling in money, y'know.'

'Compared to me, they are. But you're right, that's not the main con in politics. It's more of an ego trip, isn't it? You feel like you're going to control the lives of everyone in Australia, move us around like pieces on a chess board.'

'Come off it, Bailey. Politicians don't control the voters; it's the other way around. We've got to have the support of the electorate or else we can't get into power - and we definitely can't stay there.'

Bailey smiled down at him. 'Unreal. You're more naive than I thought. Haven't you ever noticed that this country's actually run by a bunch of business men? Politics is meaningless, mate. Even if you managed to backstab your way to the top, you'd still only be a figurehead for the multinationals.'

'Oh, right. You're an expert, of course. Ever been involved with any of the political parties, huh?'

'No. That's why I can see things more clearly than you can.'

Silence for a moment and then Leon pushed back his chair, a harsh scrape across the floor. 'I'm going to get changed now,' he said to Clair. 'You've got twenty minutes to decide whether you're coming with me.'

He headed straight for the door, shoulders braced. Bailey watched him from worldweary eyes and, at the last minute, lifted his arm to let Leon pass. Then he lounged over to Leon's place at the table, swung the chair around and sat down, resting his arms on its back.

'There's leftover vegies on the stove,' Clair said. 'Help yourself, if you want any. I've got to go and work now.'

'The dedicated artist,' Bailey commented. 'Off to create another great masterpiece?' She looked down at her hands, white and purple from the cold. 'Not exactly. My

painting's not going too well at present. That's why I need to spend a bit of extra time on it.'

'Hey, I understand,' he told her, instantly sympathetic. 'Believe me, it's not easy to be an artist in this society. You're good, Clair. Too good, in a way. You're going to find it hard to get recognised, because most people are idiots. They'd rather look at pretty scenes on a calendar than paintings like yours.'

Clair blinked. 'No, that's not the problem,' she said. 'It's just that I'm kind of stuck with this particular painting. I can't see how to place the figure of the guy in relation to the figure of the kid. I mean, I tried it with the kid crouched behind the rose bushes and the guy, like, looming over her but -'

In the middle of the sentence her voice faded and she headed towards the door. Bailey raised his eyebrows. 'This place isn't exactly buzzing,' he said. 'I better see what I can do to hype things up a bit. Here, Stacy's sister, you haven't seen my card tricks, have you?'

'No. And my name's Dinah.'

She'd thought that she was just introducing herself, since nobody else had got around to it, but her voice sounded scratchy and cross. Bailey chuckled.

'Well, *Dinah*, how about acting as my beautiful assistant? I warn you, though, you might have to smile at the audience every so often. Watch closely, *Dinah*, this is the way it goes. Will you take a card, *Dinah*?'

Dinah scowled and tugged at the middle of the pack where the cards were tightest. Bailey nodded tolerantly.

'I've got a dodgy customer here - trying to make it as difficult as possible. But she's going up against the Great Bailey tonight and he's not an easy man to beat. Go on, Beautiful Assistant, show them the card.'

She flashed the card at Stacy and Cam and slapped it down on the table. Bailey collected it and polished it on his sleeve.

'The joker,' he announced. 'My main man, Mr Tricky himself, the coolest dude in the pack. This guy can take any card, from trumps to aces, so let's see whether he can take the mickey out of you, Beautiful Assistant.'

He slid the joker back into the pack, shuffled theatrically and presented the cards to Dinah again. She reached for the top card, then changed her mind at the last minute and went for the second card.

'And it's the joker again!' Bailey said. 'God, I'm so brilliant - how do I live with myself? Look at the face on the little guy - I swear he's laughing at you. How about I give you an even chance this time, Beautiful Assistant? You can shuffle the cards yourself, just to make sure that the Great Bailey's not cheating you. Make like Batman and go after The Joker. Come on, you can shuffle faster than that.'

Dinah's fingers felt thick and clumsy but Dinah's brain was computing at top speed.

She rammed the two halves of the pack together, split it again and let cards fall between cards. If she was right, then there was a way of testing her theory.

'I get to pick the card as well,' she said and Bailey shrugged.

'No problem. Go ahead, Beautiful A.'

That settled it. Dinah pulled out a card from the bottom of the pack, dragging the next one with it. She dropped them side by side on the table.

Two jokers.

'Clever girl,' Bailey said. 'Most people take a lot longer to work it out. I had to buy fifty-two identical packs for that trick but it was worth it.' He swept the cards together and tucked them into his pocket, adding, 'See, I'm a nice, friendly sort of bloke after all, aren't I?'

Dinah couldn't say yes and didn't want to say no. As she hesitated, Bailey's face changed. His eyes hooded over and he shrank in on himself, then pushed the chair back and took three long strides out of the room. There was a twang of springs from the next room as he flung himself into the biggest and oldest armchair.

Stacy jumped up and hurried after him. 'Bailey,' she said in a voice Dinah hadn't heard before. 'Bailey, I've been wanting to ask you - how did your talk with that producer go?'

A brief pause and then their voices blended together. Left alone in the kitchen, Dinah and Cam stared at opposite walls for a while and then they let their eyes meet, like conspirators.

'Is he always like this?' Dinah breathed.

'Not quite as bad. You mean you haven't met him before?'

'I think he's out a fair bit of the time. Anyway, he's never been here when I've dropped round.'

'Lucky you,' Cam whispered back. 'Come on, we better go and help Stacy out.'

When they edged into the lounge room, Bailey was sprawled in the armchair with Stacy on a cushion at his feet. 'In other words, the guy couldn't help being impressed by my film script,' he was saying. 'But he wanted me to do another draft in my own time, no contract, no cash up front. That might be okay for a beginner but it's a pretty shithouse way to treat a guy with my kind of experience, so I told him he could shove it.'

Turkey, thought Dinah: an echo from Kyle. She glanced towards Cam, ready to share another conspirator's smile, but this time Cam was looking interested.

'Hey, are you working on a film script?' he asked. 'I thought you were an actor, Bailey.'

'So I am. Is there any law that says I can't have more than one talent? Some of us really need to work at it, y'know, in order to survive. As of tomorrow, I'm going to be a waiter as well - hope that doesn't offend you too much.'

'Come off it, mate,' Cam protested. 'Nothing wrong with being a waiter. You can

learn from anything, right? Like the old song says, “Do what you do do well, boy”.’

Bailey slumped deeper in the armchair and yawned, long and slow. ‘Oh, sure. That’s easy for you to say. I bet you’ve never dirtied your hands with anything more than a few weeks of work experience at school. Face it, Cameron, some jobs *are* more creative than others. Acting’s a fucking sight more creative than running round with plates of food, believe me.’

Before she could stop herself, Dinah realised she was nodding. Acting’s a fucking sight more creative than working out maths problems too, she agreed. Or at least people think it is, which amounts to the same thing. Some jobs are glamorous, others aren’t. Stacy and her crowd are glamorous, Kyle and I aren’t.

She hunched her shoulders and tore at a rough scrap of skin beside her thumbnail. I shouldn’t let Bailey get to me, the way he tried to get at the others, she thought. Then again, even Bailey had to be right some of the time and this time he’d really summed it up. Glamorous versus boring. Stacy glamorous, Dinah boring.

She could hear voices in the distance - Bailey cross-examining Cam about the film school – but when she tried to tune in, but she couldn’t hear a word they were saying because a gang of unexpected thoughts at the back of her brain was kicking up an unexpected row. Something to do with the way that working on the chaos equations didn’t *feel* boring. Something to do with the fact that she’d rather wrestle an angry Rottweiler than walk out onto a stage in front of hundreds of people. Something to do with being sick of sitting around and comparing herself to Stacy for the five thousand and seventh time.

Stop it, she told herself but the thoughts clamoured even louder. ‘Listen,’ they said. ‘You’re doing what you want to do and Stacy’s doing what she wants to do. So who cares what other people think about it?’

All of a sudden Dinah’s shoulders relaxed and her lungs filled with such a rush of air that she felt like she was stoned. Hey, I get it, she told the gang of thoughts. This glamorous-versus-boring stuff - it’s something everyone has to deal with. Even if they don’t have a twin sister who’s always one step ahead of them. Even if they’re not part-deaf. Even if their friends don’t want to be politicians or artists or film directors. In other words, all my problems don’t date back to the meningitis.

Can’t explain why but that feels like a *big* relief.

She leaned back against the cushions and let the new thoughts settle deep into her mind. When she glanced round the room again, Bailey had hooked one long leg over the chair arm and was levelling one long finger at Cam.

‘Okay, that’s enough. I’ve got the picture. You’re flavour of the month in Sydney. Your street kids video’s been shown as a model low budget film and the head of school’s taking a special interest. Nice going, Cameron. A few more years and you’ll be off to Hollywood, selling out along with the rest of the golden boys and girls.’

'No,' said Cam. 'I'm not going to do that.'

'Ah, be real for once. Are you trying to say you'd turn down an offer from one of the major studios? Like hell you would.'

'Fair enough, I might accept. But I'll make sure I accept on my own terms.'

'Oh, mate,' Bailey sighed. 'By the time the film school's finished with you, you won't even remember what your own terms were. You'll be another little clone, churning out the sort of films the money men want you to make.'

'Look, I know that's a danger,' Cam said. 'I can see how some of the film school people are pushing me but I reckon I'll be able to hold out and make the films / want to make. I talk about it all the time with one of my mates. He cops a lot of shit for his stuff, just like I cop a lot of hype, so we're both trying to teach ourselves not to care about what other people say.'

Bailey whistled softly and watched Cam till he started to squirm. 'Jesus wept,' he said. 'You've even made friends with a loser, just like all those glamour girls who hang around with a real dog to make them look better. For Christ's sake, Cameron, I didn't realise you were that insecure.'

Cam's fair skin reddened slowly, from the edge of his cheekbones to the tip of his nose. This isn't fair, she thought. Cam *is* insecure - everyone knows that. Including Bailey, by the look of things.

'You've got the same problem as Leon, haven't you?' he said to Cam. 'Your folks have kept you in a nice little dream world all your life and now you're finally getting a taste of reality. I just hope, for your sake, that it isn't too late.'

Cam's voice stuck in his throat as he tried to answer. For the first time, Stacy stirred.

'No,' she said. 'No, Cam hasn't had it easy. His parents got divorced last year and before that — before that, things were even worse.'

'Uh-huh,' said Bailey, as though he was making a note of it. 'I see. So you're busting a gut to prove yourself to them, right, Cameron? The original poor little rich boy.'

The blush faded from Cam's skin, leaving him as white as he'd been scarlet. Stacy bit her lip and looked as if she wished she hadn't said anything. Leon strolled in, carrying a jar of gel, took one look at them and almost ran into the bathroom. And Dinah watched all of them, wondering how the evening had fallen apart so fast.

It's not as though we never argue, she thought. We're not always nice and polite to each other. I mean, I got shitty with Leon tonight and Leon got shitty with Clair. Still, everything seemed to work out in the end, until Bailey walked in. If that guy was a mathematical quantity, he'd signal the onset of chaos.

Luckily, she knew all about chaos theory now. Just a slight change in the starting value and all the results from then on could sometimes be wildly different. So she pushed herself away from the cushion and took a deep breath. The minute she opened her mouth, the words started to flow.

'What's the big deal, Bailey? You sound like you think there's something wrong with being successful. Unless you're just sounding off because Cam wants to make it in the film industry. Would it bug you as much if he was being successful at fixing cars?' *Like Kyle*. 'Or planting a garden?' *Like Mrs Watson*. 'Or having a good long-term relationship?' *Like Ness and Lina*. 'Or - or any of the million other things that people get a buzz out of?'

By the time she stopped, her hands were shaking. As she locked them together in her lap, Bailey turned towards her. 'Oh wow,' he said. 'The lady can talk. Only one problem - I don't believe a word of it. You can't get the same satisfaction from being a garbo as you can from being a famous film director. Not possible.'

Dinah twisted her fingers till they hurt. Go on, she told herself. This is your brand new thought. Argue for it, okay?

She gulped. 'Well, I don't know any garbage collectors,' she said. 'But what about my friend Kyle? He's a panel beater and I used to think he was, like, totally ordinary, except that some of his mates dropped into the workshop the other day and I found out that he's actually kind of famous for what he does.'

'A famous panel beater?' Bailey mocked. 'Sorry, Dinah, I don't think so.'

'That's because you're into the arts - you probably know all the gossip about what play's doing well and who's won a prize for their film and all that. But Kyle's mates are interested in cars, so that's what they talk about. Turns out that Kyle and his boss got onto this great scheme where they restore old Renaults and Fiats and Hondas and Datsuns and sell them to Japan as collectors' items. A real specialist business.'

'You're not kidding,' agreed Leon, on his way back from the bathroom. 'Selling cars to the Japanese - that'd be like selling fetta cheese to Greece.'

'It's not as weird as it sounds,' Dinah told him. 'Plenty of people in Japan can afford a new Japanese car but apparently, if they want real prestige, they go for a restored model from the fifties or sixties or seventies. And we've got a fairly dry climate here, which means our old cars haven't rusted too much, plus we tend to keep cars on the road for longer than in most countries. Still, it was smart of Mr Armani to put those two things together.'

She talked on, impressed by how much she'd remembered. Leon was intrigued. He leaned on the back of Cam's chair, asking Dinah about the sale price of the cars against the cost of Mr Armani's expenses. Cam roused himself to ask how they went about restoring the cars; Stacy tossed in a few questions about Kyle. And Bailey brooded on the sidelines, waiting for a gap in the conversation.

'So this Kyle guy's an expert,' he said as soon as he had the chance. 'That puts him in a different league from your average mechanic, y'know. Makes him more like a film director than a garbo.'

'Okay, forget Kyle then,' Dinah said. 'Let's talk about my mum's friend Lina instead. Lina works in an office and she does this fantastic leadlighting and embroidery and silk

painting in her spare time. People keep going, “You ought to try and sell your stuff” but she reckons she’d rather have a job she can switch off from, so she can do exactly what she wants with the rest of her life. There’s plenty of people like her around. Do you reckon they’re all copping out, just because they’re not interested in being famous?’

Bailey rubbed his hand across his face, dragging his mouth down like a sad clown mask. ‘You make it all sound very nice and neat. “Just do what works for you and everything’ll be easy”,’ he said in a squeaky falsetto.

Dinah grinned. ‘Well, it *is* easy. The hard part’s finding out what works for you.’

‘Clever girl. An answer for everything.’

He lifted his head to look at her but when she stared back, his eyes moved on to Cam. ‘What about you, Cameron?’ he asked. ‘How do you feel about all of this? Are you happy to be a bigtime video director at the expense of the street kids you make videos about?’

Oh shit, Dinah thought. I might’ve been a bit too clever. It was kind of exciting, arguing Bailey to a standstill, but now he’s going after Cam again and this time he’s got even more to prove.

‘Hang on, you’re getting off the track,’ she said. ‘I was talking about how people ought to do what they want to do. Nobody *wants* to be out of work or living on the streets. Besides, even if Cam chucked in his course tomorrow, it wouldn’t make any difference to a single street kid.’

She’d been saying the first things that came into her head, so she wasn’t surprised when Bailey leaned back and smiled at her.

‘Are you sure?’ he said. ‘Just look at the fantastic salary packages that film directors get. Seems to me that if companies didn’t shell out so much for the top jobs, there’d be a lot more money to go around.’

He waited for Dinah to answer but her brain was empty. She glanced towards Stacy for help and met Leon’s eyes instead.

‘Good point, Bailey,’ he said in his future-prime-minister-of-Australia voice. ‘But you can’t expect Cam to change things single-handed. The question of full employment’s a tricky one - the sort of question that needs a political solution, not individual solutions.’

‘Nice try,’ Bailey said. ‘But the fact is, I was actually talking to your friend Cameron.’

He leaned forward and fixed Cam with a hungry stare. Cam opened his mouth to reply, wheezed, opened his eyes wide in panic, gasped and struggled for breath.

‘Cam!’ said Stacy straight away. ‘Where’s your ventilator?’

‘In.’ Wheeze. ‘Bedroom. Don’t worry.’ Wheeze. ‘I’ll get.’

He clutched his chest and headed for the door. Dinah followed him with her eyes, feeling worried and obscurely responsible. She hitched herself forward, then settled back in her chair again when she saw Stacy getting to her feet. It’s all right, she thought with relief. Stace’ll take care of things.

But as Stacy turned to go, Bailey grabbed her by the wrist and jerked her towards him. 'It's okay,' he said. 'You don't need to tell me. I know. It's all my fault. I don't blame you for walking out on me.'

Stacy pulled herself free. 'I'm not walking out on you, Bailey. I just -'

'No, that's cool. Go to your boyfriend - the poor guy who's having an asthma attack because I'm an insensitive cretin.'

He curled up like a prodded spider, arms and legs jutting out at ungainly angles. Stacy bent over him.

'Listen,' she said, 'it's not your fault. You got some bad news about your film script, right? I know that's why you got upset and I promise Cam won't hold it against you.'

Bailey shrank into an even tighter ball. 'You're good kids,' he said. 'But I fucked up again. Don't know how you can forgive me.'

'Hey,' said Stacy, 'what's to forgive?'

She perched on the arm of the chair, shielding Bailey from the others. Dinah turned her head away. What's happening? she thought. I don't get it. How can Stacy feel sorry for that creep after what he just did to Cam? She ought to be yelling at him, not protecting him.

She turned her head away, too embarrassed to watch. Beside her, Leon ran his hand through his hair. 'I'll be late for the party if I don't leave now,' he said. 'Do you want a lift home, Dinah? No problems, it's on my way.'

Dinah hesitated. She'd been expecting to hang around for a while but that was before Bailey pulled this stunt. She sneaked a look at her twin, thought of the maths books lying open on her desk in the upstairs room.

'Um, maybe,' she said.

'But you can't go now,' Stacy protested. 'We haven't had a chance to talk.'

Then she glanced back at Bailey and Dinah made up her mind. 'Come round and see me tomorrow,' she said and followed Leon out of the lounge room, leaving her twin behind.

They looked in on Cam, who was lying on Stacy's bed and practising his relaxation exercises. They looked in on Clair, who said 'Have a great time' and dabbed another blob of red onto her canvas. ('She won't even remember I said goodbye,' Leon whispered proudly as they headed out to the car.) He dropped Dinah off at her front gate and she lingered on the porch for a few minutes, looking up at the full moon and trying to make sense of the evening.

She was still mad at Bailey: that hadn't changed. And she was mad at herself for talking back and provoking him. But even more than that, she was mad at her twin. Stacy had kept her head down, stayed right out of things. I don't understand, Dinah thought. We could've stopped Bailey in his tracks, if we'd been working together.

She spent the rest of the night having one-sided arguments with Stacy that interrupted her maths study and even continued on in her dreams. But next morning, on her way to the milk bar to buy croissants for a late Sunday breakfast, she saw Stacy coming round the corner and started grinning like a Cheshire cat.

'Oh, Twin,' she said and Stacy clutched her arm and gasped, 'Oh, Twin' and then they jumped straight to the middle of the conversation, as if they'd been talking for hours.

'The thing is, Bailey's not as much of a deadshit as he likes to make out. You have to get to know him, Dinah. Then you'll understand.'

The invisible cord between them twanged insistently: Stacy, begging her to agree. She really wants me to like Bailey, Dinah thought. She really, really wants it. And she's my twin, so I suppose I'll have to give it a go.

'Yeah, maybe,' she said. 'But I still reckon I could only take him in small doses. I don't know how you and Clair and Leon can stand it, day in, day out.'

'Well, small doses of Bailey is all you ever get - the guy spends most of his life in pubs and coffee shops. Besides, Clair and Leon can be pretty irritating themselves.'

'Oh, sure. Clair vaguing out and Leon making endless political speeches. The two of them are such total opposites. I can never figure out how they've managed to stay together for so long.'

'Ah, Clair's Leon's soft spot,' Stacy said. 'Sometimes I feel as though he's, like, a human computer - all those binary logic type plans for making his way to the top. But Clair doesn't fit in with that side of him at all. I mean, can you seriously imagine her as a prime minister's wife, opening community centres and throwing cocktail parties for visiting VIPs?'

'No way. She'd wander off in the middle of the reception to go on with her latest painting.'

Somehow that seemed like the right moment to take a break. Without bothering to consult each other, they turned and headed into the milk bar. While Stacy picked out the best croissants, they swapped bits of random gossip. Mr Hansen had raved about Dinah's chaos project: Stacy'd had flu and missed a week of classes. Tammy had come around to work on the Maths Methods CAT with Dinah: Stacy had met Robbie for dinner at Southbank and was sure that he'd given up on his plans to return to England. Dinah nodded and smiled and felt as giddy as if she was time-travelling, back to the days when nothing was completely real until she'd told it to her twin.

Then, as they came out of the shop, Stacy glanced across at the closed roller door of Canfield's Automotive Workshop. 'So what about Kyle?' she asked. 'Any progress there?'

'Not really. I'm working too hard right now - no time for that sort of thing.' Before

Stacy could start to give her another encouraging lecture, she added, 'And what about you and Cam? Was it hard, adjusting to each other after so many months apart?'

Stacy shook her head. 'Not a problem,' she said. 'Cam and me, we fit. Always have. I'm tough where he's gentle - but he's tougher than me at rock bottom, even if most people wouldn't see him that way.'

'Cam? Tough?'

'Think about it, Twin. Leon didn't want to know about the stuff that Bailey was saying but Cam took it all in - which means he'll know how to answer, next time something like that happens.'

Dinah was silent for a moment, rearranging the way she saw Cam. Stacy's theory made sense, although it couldn't quite wipe out Dinah's memories of Cam blushing, Cam turning pale, Cam clutching at his chest as he stumbled out of the room. I'll wait and see how it all checks out, she thought. But that settles one thing, at any rate.

'So you're still keen on Cam, huh?'

'Of course. Why wouldn't I be?'

Dinah searched her twin's face, decided that Stacy looked genuinely surprised. 'Listen, I could be way out of line here,' she said, 'but I couldn't help wondering, after what happened last night, whether maybe you fancied Bailey.'

'*Bailey?* Oh, come on. Are you serious, Dinah?'

She shrugged. 'It looked a bit strange, that's all - the way you kept hanging over him and reassuring him or whatever.'

'Hey, what else was I supposed to do? The guy had worked himself into a really dark mood. He needed me to talk him out of it.'

'Well, Cam needed you too, y'know.'

'Not as much. Cam's got his films, Twin. Bailey's got nothing. It doesn't matter how hard he tries: things always seem to go wrong for him. But that's where I can help. I've got a more positive attitude than he has, so I can make him feel better about himself. We've had quite a few late night sessions when the others weren't around, talking stuff through. It's great to feel like I'm actually making a difference to someone.'

Fair enough, Dinah thought. That's the way you see it. But the Bailey you're describing isn't the Bailey I met last night. Sorry, Stace - I've tried my hardest but I can't go along with you on this one.

Instantly she felt light and buoyant, as if she'd just tipped a heavy weight off her shoulders. I'm glad I fronted up to Bailey, she thought. He deserved every word of it. Stacy and Cam and Clair and Leon - they're all smarter than I am but I was better at putting Bailey in his place, because I understand him better than they do. I know what it's like to think you're a failure; I know what it's like to be jealous of everybody; I know what it's like to see the dark side of everything. That doesn't make me more sympathetic towards Bailey, though.

As a matter of fact, it makes me even angrier.

The invisible cord twitched sharply. When she looked up, Stacy was watching her. She wants to know what I'm thinking, Dinah realised. But I can't tell her. I can't say any of this to Stace.

Bailey.

Kyle.

Cam.

Her decision to concentrate on her maths.

It was starting to seem like there were more and more things that she couldn't talk about with Stacy these days.

AUGUST

Dinah wakes feeling sad and soggy. She puts on her red windcheater for comfort and drags herself off to school, thinking sad and soggy thoughts. *There's that little dog again, shivering on its pile of sacks. Why don't its owners ever let it sleep inside? When's this winter ever going to end?*

She arrives at the intersection just as the lights at the pedestrian crossing start changing from green to red (a bad omen), so she waits on the corner, staring at the lines of cars without seeing them. The people in the cars can see her, though. A young guy shouts to his mates in the back seat, 'Hey, look at the tits on that one.'

In a fraction of a second Dinah moves from sadness to rage and she shouts, 'Get fucked'. Straight away all the car windows wind down and all four guys start yelling back at her.

'Jesus, what a dog.'

'You a leso or something?'

'What's your problem, fatso?'

'Wouldn't fuck you if you paid me.'

Then the lights finish changing and the cars roar off. Dinah refuses to jump back, so she gets muddy water splattered across her jeans.

Dinah stops at the milk bar opposite Central and buys two pineapple doughnuts. When the man behind the counter gives her the change, he slides his hand under hers and strokes the backs of her fingers. Everyone knows you have to watch Mr Caruso but

today Dinah wasn't watching.

She heads out of the shop, scrubbing her right hand on her jeans, while her left hand eases the first doughnut out of the bag. Sugary lumps start to slide down her throat. Even before they hit her stomach, she feels big and bloated. She crosses the school yard, pulling more pieces off the doughnut, and looks up to see Josie di Santo turning away from her.

'Josie,' she calls and Josie hesitates, then turns back. 'Did you say something just then?'

'I was standing right next to you,' Josie says. 'Don't tell me you didn't hear.'

'Well, I didn't. I'm deaf in one ear, remember. That's why I always sit down the front in class.'

'Oh right, I fuckin' forgot. Anyway, you didn't miss much. I just said, "Great doughnut", that's all.'

Dinah looks down at the greasy chunk in her hand. 'Want the second one?' she asks. 'I had breakfast already but I always eat when I'm depressed.'

'Me, I just eat when I'm hungry, which is most of the time,' Josie says, taking the doughnut. 'So what are you depressed about, Carr?'

'Oh, these guys on the way to school. They were whistling at me and yelling stuff and all.'

Josie grins. 'No need to worry about that. It's a compliment, mate. Gross, for sure, but a compliment all the same.'

'Then how come that sort of stuff always happens when I'm feeling down?' Dinah asks. 'If it's meant to be a compliment, you'd think I'd get more of it when I was feeling great.'

Josie thinks about that. 'Bummer,' she says. 'I can see why you're pissed off. But that's not how it is for me - at least, not usually.'

She smooths her tight green jumper, fluffs out her black curls, licks sugar off her lower lip. Dinah watches her admiringly. Josie's fatter than me, she thinks, but she couldn't care less.

Mind you, on her it looks sexy and I just feel like a blob.

Dinah sits in her Maths Methods class, feeling like a blob. If she slouches forward, her midriff and stomach bulge out like squashed doughnuts. If she pulls her shoulders back, her breasts push up like a centrefold. *Look at the tits on that one.*

She's working so hard on her posture that she doesn't hear a word Ms Lee's saying, until the teacher turns and looks straight at her.

'Well, Dinah, I'm sure *you'll* be able to help us out here. I've been hearing a lot about you lately - only good things, of course - all your work on difference equations, which should come in handy now.'

Dinah glances at Tammy but it's impossible for Tammy to prompt her when Ms Lee's only a metre away. 'Um, would you mind repeating the question, please?' she says.

Ms Lee starts to frown and then changes it to a sympathetic smile. After a few seconds Dinah notices that she's talking louder than usual. Clearly Ms Lee thinks she missed the question because she couldn't hear it properly. But I can hear okay from the front row, Dinah thinks guiltily. I just wasn't listening, that's all ... and then Ms Lee's foot starts to tap and she realises she's drifted off into her thoughts and missed the question for the second time.

'Sorry,' she says. 'Dunno,' and she sits there feeling slow and stupid while Smart Alex tells Ms Lee how to solve trigonometric equations.

To make matters worse, Smart Alex comes over to her in the yard at lunchtime. Smart Alex has hair like brown wool and a long skinny neck and a nose like an eagle's beak but she'd be prepared to bet that he never has to worry about being jeered at by carloads of girls.

'Listen, are you having trouble with the trig equations?' he asks. 'Because I could explain them, if you like.'

He's been making offers like this ever since Mr Hansen congratulated both of them on their chaos equations. Other people might think he's being friendly but Dinah thinks he sounds patronising. She says, 'Thanks, I'm fine' and glares at him till he goes away.

'What a waste,' Tammy says. 'If Alex wants to show off, we might as well get the benefit. Here, wait a minute.'

She follows Smart Alex across the yard, while Dinah watches from a distance. Smart Alex is scared of Tammy, so he starts saying, 'Yeah, sure, whatever you want,' before she's even opened her mouth. She chats with him for a few minutes and comes back, laughing.

'Hey, I'm getting good at this. I got all the information we need, plus I asked Alex a few questions he couldn't answer. He went into this big rave about how maths isn't really his main specialty - he's only doing it to top up his VCE scores, so he can get into law and then maybe go into politics.'

'Politics?' Dinah echoes. 'I don't believe it.'

'Smart Alex for prime minister, eh? I'd vote for him - and then I'd go straight up to Canberra with a big mob of cousins and we'd say, "Okay, this is what our people need" and he'd say -'

' "Yeah, sure, whatever you want." '

While they're giggling, Dinah's mind takes off on another tangent. So Smart Alex wants to be prime minister too, just like Leon - which means there must be hundreds of other kids round Australia who are watching the prime minister on TV and thinking, 'Some day that'll be me.' But they can't all be right, because there's only one prime

minister at a time. What if Leon's one of the kids that doesn't make it? Oh, poor Leon, how on earth would he cope?

Her eyes fill with tears. She has to knock her lunch box off the seat, so she can blot her eyes on her sleeve while she picks it up. Get real, she tells herself. You can't possibly feel that sad about Leon - there's got to be some other reason. Maybe you're upset because Smart Alex isn't really serious about maths but he's so much better than you. Or maybe it's because Tammy handles Alex so well, when you're the one who's known him for years.

Or maybe it was just because Smart Alex, her enemy, and Tammy, her friend, both make her feel slow and stupid.

Dinah heads for home, wearing her raincoat to hide her red windcheater, taking the long way round to avoid the lights at the intersection. As she goes past the pool hall, she glances through the window and there, sure enough, is Gavin Petty, hovering on the edge of a bunch of young guys, looking as lost and lonely as she feels.

It's another bad omen, so she's not really surprised when she drops into Canfield's Automotive Workshop and finds that Kyle has gone to pick up a box of light fittings from a supplier on the other side of town. Mr Armani is very apologetic: in fact, he's so nice about it that Dinah decides he feels sorry for her. As she walks out of the workshop, she's wondering what Kyle has said about her and despising herself for wasting all those hours on a hopeless crush.

Back in the street she glances at front window of her upstairs room but for the first time in weeks she doesn't want to hurry back to the maths books waiting on her desk. She's still hesitating when she spots Mrs Watson in her front garden. Dinah likes talking to Mrs Watson. It helps her to imagine what it might've been like if one of her grandmothers had lived in Australia.

She calls across the fence and Mrs Watson comes over, trundling a small trolley covered by a canvas flap, with Garden Helper stencilled on it in green and pockets of all shapes and sizes to fit trowels and gardening gloves, seeds and bags of potting mix.

'My son gave it to me for my birthday,' she explains. 'I must have every possible kind of gardening equipment by now. Sometimes I think I ought to take up another hobby, just to make it easier for my kids and the grandkids.'

They chat for a while, about gardens and hobbies, and then clouds close across the sun and huge drops of rain start to spatter the footpath between them. 'Why don't you come in for a cup of tea?' says Mrs Watson and Dinah nods. She suspects that Mrs Watson might be feeling sorry for her too but this time she doesn't mind. After all, grandmothers are supposed to be kind when you're feeling lost and lonely.

Mrs Watson's lounge room is stacked with layers of history. Old brown photos in silver frames on the bookcase; a fifties couch with stiff wooden legs, like the one Stacy

raved about in a Brunswick Street antique shop; a poster from the Impressionist Exhibition that Robbie took the twins to when they were eight; a Nintendo game for the grandchildren to play with. Dinah hasn't been inside the house for ages and while Mrs Watson makes the tea, she wanders around, looking at everything.

'I didn't realise you had so many science books,' she says when Mrs Watson comes back. 'There's a whole shelf of them here, everything from the new physics to genetic engineering.'

'Oh yes, I've always been interested in science. I never miss an episode of *The Science Show*.'

'Did you study science at uni?' Dinah asks and Mrs Watson laughs.

'I left school at fifteen, dear. There was never any question of me going to the university. Girls didn't in those days - not in my family, at any rate.'

'But that's not fair. So you were a girl - so what? I mean, you might've been a really brilliant scientist like Marie Curie or something, if only you'd got the chance. Doesn't it make you mad to think of all the things you missed out on, just because you were born at the wrong time?'

Dinah's voice is rising, bouncing off the walls and disturbing the layers of history. Mrs Watson pours the tea and passes her a plate of biscuits.

'Well, dear, I've had a good life,' she says. 'Forty happy years with Mr Watson, three lovely children and now all the grandchildren as well. And I like hearing about the things you young ones are doing these days. It reminds me that I could've had a completely different kind of life and enjoyed it just as much.'

To begin with, Dinah was angry at Mrs Watson's parents but now she starts feeling angry at Mrs Watson instead - although she's angry because Mrs Watson *isn't* angry, which seems kind of pointless. To stop herself from saying anything, she stuffs a biscuit into her mouth and chokes on a throatful of crumbs.

Dinah takes off her dripping raincoat and stands in the empty house, feeling lost and lonely. Still, the phone's only a metre away. She picks up the receiver and dials Stacy's number.

'You're there!' she says with relief. 'I thought you'd still be at college.'

'I took the day off,' Stacy says. 'Listen, is this important? I'm in the middle of talking to Bailey. He's been planning to start an alternative theatre group with some friends of his but he found out today that they've gone ahead without him. He's feeling really betrayed, so I -'

Dinah's sick of hearing about Bailey. 'It's okay,' she interrupts. 'I'm fine. Just felt like a chat, that's all.'

'Good,' says Stacy. 'Then we can chat later in the week,' and she hangs up straight away: not another word.

Dinah goes into the kitchen and lines up bread, cheese, ham, chutney, lettuce and tomato for a sandwich. Then, as she's reaching for the breadknife, she remembers the five shortbread biscuits she ate at Mrs Watson's place and she forces herself to put the bread, cheese, ham, chutney, lettuce and tomato back again.

But her body's still crying out for something, so she goes down the hall and looks in the bathroom cabinet, where she finds a jar of Henna Creme that Stacy left behind. Dinah scoops up handfuls of mud-coloured paste and plasters them onto her scalp. She stares into the mirror and admires her warrior face, spikes for hair and a smudge of mud across one cheek. Tough, she thinks. Ready for anything.

The label tells her that Henna Creme takes fifteen minutes to work, just enough time for a bit of maths revision. Dinah bounds up the stairs to her room, gets out her Maths Methods notes and begins to read through the section on trigonometric equations, to make sure Ms Lee and Smart Alex won't be able to catch her out again. At first sight the page is a jumble of figures and symbols but, line by line, she sorts them into a pattern. Hey, she thinks, this is easy.

Then, between one equation and the next, her shoulders stiffen and her temples clench. At the same moment the voices start whispering inside her head. *Easy?* they say. *Yes, too easy. Sure, you've got a good memory. Sure, you can repeat whatever Afr Lee and Alex and Tammy have told you. But you're just a little parrot, Dinah. You don't get the basic concepts, the way Smart Alex does.*

The rain drums heavy on the roof. Dinah props her elbows on her notes and hides her face in her hands. Why am I so hooked on this maths business, anyway? she wonders. Is it really as important as I think? What if I've made a huge mistake, telling everyone that I want to do well. I could've kept my mouth shut and let them say things like, 'Yeah, it's a pity about her marks but she's got a lot of potential, y'know.' Whereas now, if I flunk out, the entire world'll know that Dinah Carr tried her best...

...and failed.

She hides in the darkness behind her fingers. Her heart thuds louder than the rain on the roof and between its thuds she hears the echo of voices. But this time the voices turn out to be real.

When she goes to the top of the stairs, Dinah sees her mum and dad jostling past each other in the hall, wet and laughing.

'My car broke down!' Elaine calls up to her.

'And she bribed me with an offer of steak and kidney pie by the fire, if I collected her from the shop. You're the fire-lighter in this family, Dinah. Come and get a fire started for us - unless you've got homework to do,' Robbie adds, turning back into a teacher.

Dinah looks back at her desk, then comes down the stairs. Forget about maths, she thinks. At least I'm an expert on fires. It's not much but it's something.

Dinah watches the blue-orange flames spread out across crumpled newspaper and start licking at the kindling. 'So that's how Mrs Watson reckons things were, when she was a girl,' she says over her shoulder. 'What was it like in your day, Mum?'

Elaine Carr tugs her heavy wool cardigan around her and her eyes become distant and dreamy. 'Good,' says Robbie, recognising the signs. 'A story. Come on, Elaine, tell us a story.'

'All right,' she says. 'You asked for it,' and as the flames start to edge along the bark of the first log, she begins.

'I started getting interested in maths in primary school. Our teacher was a Welshman called Hugh - he loved poetry, he took us on nature rambles, he used to sneak up behind us and say, "Quick! What's £2.7.6 in halfpennies?" Once he mentioned some famous insoluble maths problem and I copied it out and took it home, because I was positive I was going to solve it for him. Although I couldn't, of course.'

The fire blazes higher. Dinah thinks of her year five teacher and nods.

'Anyway, Hugh really started something,' Elaine continues. 'I kept on with maths and I got interested in science as well. But in the end there were only four girls left in the maths science stream and the other three had all picked it because it was a great way to meet boys. If I wanted to fit in, I had to flirt with the boys and let them do my science pracs for me, which took a lot of the fun out of it. So, even though I got good marks for physics and chem, I found myself concentrating more on maths in my final year.'

Elaine's eyes are misty and her voice is meditative and calm. It's all in the past for her but somehow Dinah feels edgy, as if it's still happening right here in front of her.

'Go on, Mum,' she commands.

'Everyone thought I was going to be dux of the school. I only had one serious rival, a boy called Tony who'd been in the same class as me all through secondary school. We'd been neck and neck the whole way - one of us would come top one year and the other would come top next year. Then in our final year everything changed. I started to notice it on the day when my maths teacher brought in some extra books for Tony. I gave him a filthy stare and he looked at me with genuine pity and said in a quiet, sad voice, "You're a *girl* and you're good at maths."

'The final prize at the end of the year was voted on by all the teachers. I assumed that at the very least Tony and I would share it but Tony won outright. I was so devastated that the chemistry teacher took me aside and explained that they'd given the prize to Tony because maths and science came naturally to him, whereas I'd had to study.

'So I decided that if no one was going to reward me for studying, there wasn't much point in going on with it. I enrolled in an accountancy course, instead of the pure maths I'd been dreaming about. I got involved with half a dozen radical groups on campus,

dropped out, fell in love and met a zany Australian woman who talked about going back home to start a left-wing bookshop. And here I am.'

Dinah can't bear it. She doesn't want the story to end that way. 'But you're *good* at maths,' she wails. 'Look at the way you've always helped me with my homework. You could easily go back to uni and do all the study you missed out on.'

'Thanks for the vote of confidence,' Elaine says dryly. 'But I don't need any more choices. I've got enough on my plate right now.'

Beside her Robbie shifts and stretches, as if he's shaking off twenty years of memories. 'So you're still deciding whether to stay at the bookshop or go to the publishing company with Ness?' he asks.

'More or less, although I think it's fairly definite now. Ness needs me. I can't really leave her to set up the company all on her own.'

Robbie grins. 'Oh, yeah? That's your fourteenth definite decision since May. Can we trust you this time, Laney?'

'Huh!' she says. 'You're a fine one to talk. I suppose you've forgotten how many wild ideas you've run past us over the years. It's not long since you were going to drop everything and hare back to England to become a writer, remember.'

She leans forward to prod the fire with the poker. Behind her back, Dinah catches Robbie's eye. Only for a second but it's enough to convince her that her father still wants to drop everything and hare back to England to become a writer. Despite what her mum thinks. Despite what Stacy said a few weeks ago.

Dinah catches her breath, a small sharp sound like the beginning of a sob. If she was on her own, she would fall into the cushions and cry a storm of tears about her dad's lost dreams and her mum's lost ambitions. And her own lost ambitions too: between them Mrs Watson and Elaine have convinced her that there's no place for women in maths.

But she's not on her own and she can't start crying. How could she possibly explain it to Robbie and Elaine? So she sits there, holding her breath, until her dad says, 'By the way, what's with the muddy spikes? Is that the latest fashion these days?'

'No,' she says, 'it's Stacy's Henna Creme. Thanks for reminding me. I'd better go and rinse it out now, before it sets like concrete,' and she escapes into the hall where the tears can roll down her face unchecked.

Too much sadness. Her body can hardly contain it. She clutches her head, grieving for Robbie and Elaine and Mrs Watson and herself, and her fingertips are spiked by the sharp points of her hair.

Oh yeah, almost forgot. Gotta wash out that Henna Creme.

Two steps take her into the bathroom; two twists of the wrist turn on the shower. Dinah knows that the sound of the water will drown out any other sound, so she sobs as she drags her windcheater over her head. Sobs as her foot gets caught in the leg of her

jeans. Sobs as she struggles with the catch of her bra.

And then gasps herself into silence as she looks down at the red-brown smudge on her briefs.

Dinah stands under the shower. Streams of water run down her shoulders, divide around her breasts and join together again at her stomach. Her relief is so strong that it's almost unbearable. She tilts her head back and chants,

*'Sad and soggy;
Big and bloated;
Slow and stupid;
Lost and lonely;
Doomed and desperate -
Down the plug hole!'*

So that's what it was all about, she thinks. All the misery and the doughnuts, wanting to kill those guys in the car, wanting to burst into tears over Dad and Leon. You'd think I'd recognise the signs, after seven years of it. You'd think I'd know when I was getting my period.

As the water flows over her, the day rearranges itself in her mind. She sees Tammy and Josie di Santo as inspirations, not reproaches. She sees Mrs Watson learning to find her own way in the world of science; she sees her mother taking a few steps further forward; she sees herself making her own tentative moves. Step by step by step: it mightn't be easy, finding a place for women in maths, but it's a progression, all the same.

And the guys in the car were just dickheads and even if Smart Alex is better at maths than she is, he doesn't care as much and that has to count for something. In fact, every miserable event of this miserable day suddenly seems quite simple and manageable, now that she's figured out what's going on.

Although I can't blame it all on my period, Dinah admits while she towels herself dry. I mean, hormones can't tell you what to think. The thoughts must've been there already, waiting for a chance to get out. They're my thoughts. I may not like them but I've got to come to terms with them.

Then, seconds later, she drops the towel and a tampon and laughs out loud. Oh wow, she thinks. *Déjà vu*. I've been here before. Two months ago, to be precise, when I worked out my theorem. *'Dinah Carr stopped trying and now she wants to change - but it might take her a while to get out of the habit of holding herself back.'* That says it all, really. Looks like I have to keep learning the same things over and over, until they finally sink in.

Dinah fluffs out her hair and admires the shine. (Hey, Henna Creme works!) She runs her hands down her body, enjoying the feel of her skin. When she checks, she

finds she's not envying anybody any more. She's not feeling sorry for anybody, either, as a substitute for feeling sorry for herself. By now there's only one small niggle left from the miseries of the day. It's the last thing she would've expected, the thing that seemed least important at the time.

But all the same, she still feels angry at herself for wasting so much time over this hopeless crush on Kyle.

SEPTEMBER

Wednesday morning.

Dinah on the couch, eating muesli and flicking the pages of the newspaper. Elaine in a green suit, roaming round the room with a cup of coffee. She pushed the glass doors open and spread her arms to the weak trickle of sunlight.

'I've changed my mind,' she announced. 'I'm not moving on with Ness - I'll be staying at the shop. Everything's going so well at present and I'm getting on so well with everyone. I couldn't leave now.'

'Uh-huh,' said Dinah, without bothering to looking up. 'Going to tell Ness what you've decided?'

'Ness has given me till the end of the year, remember,' Elaine said. 'I don't think she needs to be bothered with all my chopping and changing.'

In other words, she knows she'll change her mind again, Dinah thought. That's why she's not telling Ness. This whole business could go on forever. It drives me mad because -

She got up to close the glass doors, paused in a patch of sunlight and forced herself to continue the thought. Because I'm as bad as she is. Because I still haven't done anything about Kyle. Because one minute I want to take a risk and let him know how I feel and next minute I think, 'Hold on, what if he's not interested?' Because I've gone to the workshop half a dozen times, determined to say something, and each time I've gone away with nothing said. Because I keep chopping and changing, just like Mum.

I wonder if there's a gene for terminal indecision.

Friday lunchtime.

Tammy at one end of the seat, staring off into the distance. Dinah at the other end of the seat, fiddling with her sandwich wrapper. More of this bloody indecision, she thought. If it was Clair or Stacy sitting there, I'd have been asking questions long before this. But it's different with Tammy. I know she'd rather be with her Koori mates from Jarrah College, same as my real life's still with Stacy's gang. Which probably explains why the two of us have never talked about anything really personal.

She and Tammy got on okay, of course. Even if Tammy had only teamed up with her for convenience, they never ran out of things to chat about. Not until now, with Tammy hunching her shoulders and scowling at the pale yellow sun.

'What's the matter?' Dinah blurted out and Tammy turned to her straight away.

'Ah, it's this Jarrah College business. Things are hotting up again and it looks like we might stand a real chance of getting Jarrah re-opened. I want to be in there, doing my bit for the next lot of Koori kids, but my brother keeps going, "No, Tammy, you gotta finish your studies first." What do *you* reckon, Dinah?'

'Hey, how would I know? Why ask me?'

'You listen,' Tammy said, as though it was an obvious answer, and Dinah shrugged.

'Only because I'm part-deaf. I have to listen hard, otherwise I'd miss most of what's going on.'

Then she listened to the echo of her voice and felt startled by the bitterness she heard in it. Good one, Dinah, she thought. The first time Tammy asks for help and what do you do? You launch into a whinge about *your* problems, that's what.

But Tammy didn't seem to care. She just said, 'Give yourself a bit of credit, eh. You may've started out like that but you're good at listening now - you know that, don't you? Real good.'

Dinah blushed. 'Okay, you better give me a chance to practise. Come on, tell me some more about this Jarrah College stuff.'

That shifted the spotlight away from her, just as she'd hoped. Tammy hooked her arm over the back of the seat and began to talk. Jarrah, Central, maths, living with her brother's family and planning to work with her auntie: everything jumbled together in a rush of words.

'And right now, Kooris are needed all over the place. For ages your mob pretended we didn't exist but these days everyone's taking a bit more notice, so they want Koori stories, Koori spokespeople, Kooris in everything from medicine to modelling. That's good, in a way, but it can be pretty confusing too. Like, how am I supposed to know which is better - throwing myself into the Jarrah campaign or sticking with my maths, so there'll be some more Kooris who understand about figures and money and that?'

She stopped and waited. Dinah frowned at the clouds, wondering how to live up to her new reputation as a good listener.

'Well, you've put a lot into the Further Maths course,' she said. 'It'd be a pity to waste all that effort.'

'I've put a lot into Jarrah too. That's why I was late enrolling at Central, remember.'

'But other people can work on the campaign,' Dinah argued. 'You're the only one who can finish the course. Look at it this way, Tammy, if you don't see it through, you'll never know how it might've gone.'

She was talking about herself again but it seemed to make sense to Tammy as well. She grinned and said, 'Yeah, that's what my brother keeps telling me. I knew I'd end up going along with him ... but I feel better now I've sorted it out for myself. See, Dinah, I told you. It's good stuff, that listening.'

They leaned back on the bench, side by side. The sun glistened on their bare arms, gradually soaking into the skin. After a while Dinah said, 'Tammy, where did you get this idea about me listening to people? I mean, I'm not saying you're wrong, but nobody ever commented on it before.'

'Yeah, well, I listen pretty carefully too. Us Kooris have got to be on the lookout all the time, right? - in case someone calls you a bad name or reckons you're going walkabout or whatever. So I notice how most people don't actually bother to listen. And I notice when I come across anyone who does.'

'Okay,' Dinah said with an effort. 'Okay, I get it.'

Before she'd even finished speaking, her eyes slid out of focus and she slipped away into the silent spaces inside her head. So that's why everyone keeps telling me their problems, she thought. Because I listen. Simple as that. Mind you, even if it's simple, I never would've figured it out for myself, so I'm glad Tammy told me. And she told me heaps of other stuff as well: really personal stuff. It's almost as if -

Omigod.

Almost as if she trusts me; much more than I realised.

Even likes me, maybe.

She pushed that idea away, reminding herself that Tammy would rather be with her mates from Jarrah, Tammy had only teamed up with her for convenience. Within minutes her defences were so solid that there was a twenty second delay before Tammy's voice reached her.

'Sorry,' Dinah said. 'I missed that. Mind repeating it?'

'I said there's a Koori band playing at the Eureka Stockade hotel tonight,' Tammy told her. 'And I asked if you'd like to come along.'

Tuesday afternoon.

Dinah saying, 'I had the best time. The band was playing in the back room, on this

little stage squashed in between the tables and the bar. At least half the audience were Kooris, all ages, from an old guy in a denim jacket to a fat brown toddler with blonde bubble curls. Then there was a bunch of those supercool kids who follow the latest indie bands and up the back there were some long-haired types in t-shirts saying East Timor and Land Rights and Save the Forests - old lefties, the sort my parents hang around with. And all the different groups overlapped in the middle, so that's where Tammy and I sat, right at the centre of the room in front of the band.'

'Sounds great,' Kyle said. 'Wish I'd known about it, but.'

'Well, they'll be playing at the Stockade again next Friday. Want to go?' she said and Kyle said, 'Hey, why not?'

Dinah stared at him. Big hands, close-cropped hair, snub nose, round amused eyes, just the same as usual. Nothing had changed: except that everything had changed. She'd asked him out, she'd actually asked him out, and he'd said yes. As simple as that, once she forgot to worry about it.

Which was exactly what Tammy had predicted, when they'd talked about Kyle at the pub.

Friday evening.

Dinah in the lounge room, ironing her red shirt. Elaine, unwrapping a bunch of freesias and dropping them into a vase. The flowers slid sideways, hanging over the edge like exhausted Olympic swimmers, and Elaine pushed them upright.

'I wish I was going out on the town tonight,' she said.

'So ring Ness or one of your other friends. Maybe there's a party somewhere. Maybe you could go to a movie.'

Her mum took the flowers out of the water and snapped off a few centimetres of stem. 'Can't be bothered. Parties are too much of an effort and the people who go to the movies on Friday nights always talk the whole way through, when they're not munching popcorn in your earhole.'

'Okay, what do you feel like doing then?'

'Nothing, really. I suppose I wish I *wanted* to dress up and go out and rage around, the way we used to do. But I'm too old for successful raging, so I'll probably spend the evening reading one of our new books ... and worrying about whether I ought to stay at the shop or go on to Ness's publishing house.'

'Oh, Mum!' Dinah said. 'Not again. Get a life, can't you?'

Elaine sighed. She put the freesias back in the vase and looked surprised when they settled into a perfect circle.

'All right,' she said. 'I will. As soon as I've decided what I'm going to do next year.'

They were still staring at each other when the doorbell rang. Dinah whisked off her t-shirt, stuffed it under a cushion and snatched up her shirt. As she ran down the hall, she

heard a clank of metal from behind her: Elaine, folding up the ironing board. Thanks, Mum, she whispered under her breath and then reached out and turned the knob of the deadlock.

Kyle in his best clothes, his fresh-shaved skin smoother than ever, his long lanky body on display, without the disguise of those baggy overalls. Kyle in her house, quite different from Kyle in the workshop, and somehow that made her house look quite different as well. Dinah would've like to press the PAUSE button and hold him there for a while, so she could prowl around him and take in all the changes. But her mum was waiting and Kyle was already starting to laugh at her, so she swung away and hurried back down the hall again.

'Kyle,' she mumbled, 'I want you to meet m'mum. Elaine, this is, um, Kyle.'

Underneath the bright lights in the lounge room Kyle seemed to grow taller and taller, until his head almost scraped the ceiling. Elaine, in contrast, looked even smaller and more dumpy, like a middle-aged child staring at Kyle's knees. Dinah panicked. This is going to be a disaster, she thought. They're total opposites; they can't possibly get on together.

For a moment her brain blanked out completely. When she recovered, she found that Kyle and Elaine were discussing cars and politics, more or less simultaneously.

'Here,' called Elaine, darting to the bookshelves, 'I'll lend you my old favourite, *Economics for Beginners*. That ought to help you make sense of the jargon in those newspaper articles.'

'Terrific,' said Kyle. 'And would you like me to take a look at your car some time during the week?'

So that was all right - in fact, better than all right, because it meant that Kyle would be coming to their house at least one more time. Dinah eased out a sigh of relief and joined in the conversation. She chatted away with Kyle and her mum; she went on chatting with Kyle while they drove through the night streets.

And then, as they walked into the pub, her brain went blank again and she felt as though she was walking straight into her worst recurring nightmare: the one where she was out on a spotlit stage, wearing her oldest windcheater and trackie pants, with no make up and no script and no idea of what the play was supposed to be about. Somebody, get me out of here, Dinah thought. I can't handle public appearances when I don't even know what's going on between me and Kyle. I mean, is this a date or what?

She glanced up at Kyle but his smooth, pleasant face didn't give her any more clues than she'd had before. So, when she noticed Josie di Santo at the pool table, flirting with half a dozen guys at once, she muttered, 'Hang on, I'll just be a second' and scooted over to tug at Josie's sleeve. Josie must've seen her already, because she turned round straight away, brushing off two of the guys with a shrug of her plump shoulder.

'Who's the hunk, Carr?' she asked without wasting any time.

'Uh, Kyle Donnell. He's a mechanic - works at this place opposite our house.'

Josie giggled. 'Pretty convenient, hey? You won't even need to change your name, seeing you're Dinah Carr already. Carr and cars, get it?'

She prodded the nearest guy who laughed obligingly, even though Dinah was pretty sure he hadn't heard a word they were saying. 'Come off it, Josie,' she protested. 'I'm not planning to marry Kyle tomorrow. This is the first time we've even been out together.'

'So?' said Josie, unabashed. 'You're obviously keen on him and he seems like a pretty reliable sort of guy. Trust me, mate. I'm ace at summing guys up, even though I'm not looking for the reliable type myself.'

'Yeah, I can see that.'

She looked round the pool table until Josie pinned her with a swift, sharp glance. 'Listen, Carr, I'm Italian. I know exactly what I'll be doing for the rest of my life. Once I quit school, I'll work in the office at my dad's factory, then I'll get married and work in my husband's business. So I might as well have fun while I can, right?'

She reached for the pool cue, her plump shoulder closing off the conversation, but Dinah went on standing there, sighing and thinking: poor Josie. While she was still sighing, Josie slapped the nearest guy's hand away and took command of the table and Dinah had a sudden vision of her at fifty, round and regal, still flirting with every customer or business rep in the area. No need to feel sorry for Josie, she decided. One way or another, she'll never stop having fun.

She turned away, smiling to herself, but the smile wavered when she realised that Kyle had disappeared. So much for steady, reliable guys, Dinah thought, but seconds later she spotted him through the doorway of the back room, head and shoulders above the rest of the crowd.

'It seemed to be filling up pretty fast in here,' he explained, when she wriggled past the tables to join him. 'I thought I'd better go ahead and save a space for us.'

'Steady and reliable,' Dinah said and Kyle nodded.

'That's me. I'm the middle kid, remember. My sister got the flash and dash, my brother got the charm and I got the leftovers.'

'Nothing wrong with leftovers,' Dinah told him but that sounded a bit stupid, so she tried again. 'Nothing wrong with you, at any rate.'

As Kyle started to reply, a guitar chord jarred through the room. He shrugged and laughed and helped her onto the tall stool beside him. From her high perch, Dinah surveyed the room. The blue and plum-coloured and bleached hair of the supercool set. Faded denim, marking out the old lefties' section. A shimmer of black, red and yellow across the Kooris; wrist ties and necklaces and heavy bead earrings in the colours of the Aboriginal flag.

Then the band launched into their opening song and the room narrowed to the small

square of light that was the stage. At first Dinah just sat and gripped the seat of her stool, bracing herself against the crash of the music, but before long she started trying to sort out the players from the sound. The manic drummer, to begin with: nobody could've helped noticing him, dreadlocks tossing, thin copper-coloured arms blurring with the speed of their movement. After a while she realised she was focusing almost as hard on the singer who bounced energetically round the stage, clicking two smooth sticks with circular patterns burned across their surface, while he wove between the others and drew them all together.

It took a bit longer before she became aware of the rhythm guitarist, hunched over the strings, off in a place of his own. But then the singer danced past him and he glanced up and grinned and Dinah found herself grinning along with him. So after that she turned her attention to the lead guitarist, wanting to like him as well. He stood apart from the rest of the group, tall and distant and controlled, his eyes stern and his mouth pinned down at the corners and - no, I can't, thought Dinah. I can't like him. I can't see how on earth he fits in with all those other lovely guys.

Not that it made any difference to the music, though. The music went on hammering and building, growing and changing, as they sang about history and pain and hope.

About their land. About her land.

In the break she turned towards Kyle and managed to say, 'Wow, weren't they -?' before someone tapped her on the shoulder. Dinah looked round to see Gwyneth Katz, one of her parents' friends, gazing at her with misty enthusiasm.

'Weren't they magnificent?' she breathed. 'It's great to see Aboriginal people coming into their own at last. Well, I should say "again", not "at last" — after all, this was their own country for forty thousand years before the white invasion. But we'll be hearing a lot more from this generation of Kooris. Tonight's a classic example, especially Greg Parks.'

'Who's he?' Dinah asked and Gwyneth said, 'The lead guitarist.'

'The lead guitarist?' she repeated doubtfully. 'I didn't -'

'Oh yes, he writes almost all their songs. A really talented young bloke. And now, tell me, how are Robbie and Elaine? I haven't seen them for a year or two, because there's so much to do, fighting against this government's cutbacks, but I admire your parents a lot, particularly the way they handled their divorce - when Harry and I split up, things were so difficult that I thought I'd have to leave the Socialist Alliance, except that luckily he got involved with Greenpeace.' She paused, trying to remember where that sentence had started, and added, 'You must be very pleased that everything's worked out so well.'

'Yeah, in a way. Although Mum hasn't got involved with anybody else and Dad's girlfriends never seem to last very long. It might've been different, if either of them -'

'Oh, do you think so? I've got on much better with Harry ever since he moved in with

his new partner. Still, everyone's different, I suppose - but listen, I shouldn't stand here monopolising you all night. If you and your friend could just sign this petition to the Education Minister about Jarrah College before I go ...'

By the time they'd signed two different petitions and listened to several more of her breathless stories, the band was back on stage. Dinah was only able to exchange a quick grin with Kyle before the music surged over them again.

Straight away her eyes went back to the lead guitarist and this time, after what Gwyneth had told her, he seemed quite different. Not stern, just serious. Not distant, just keeping an eye on the others to make sure everything worked okay. He's the real centre of the group, she decided, but then she looked at the drummer and the singer and the rhythm guitarist and changed her mind. They were all part of the music, every one of them. All different, all essential.

As voices blended with guitar riffs and guitar riffs blended with the beat of the drums, she leaned back and let the music take her deeper into her own thoughts. Groups, she mused. That's how it is with groups. My family, Stace's crowd, the kids at Central. We're all different, we've all got our own way of doing things. And we're all essential.

Although I mightn't have thought so at the beginning of this year, she admitted a few seconds later. Back then, she'd been too busy envying Stacy for her confidence, Leon for his plans, Clair for her singlemindedness and Cam for being famous already, his name in the local paper before he'd even left school. The four of them had set the standard by which she'd judged everybody else but now, bit by bit, she was starting to see that they were only one small part of a world that included Robbie and Elaine, Ness and Lina, Kyle, Tammy, Josie and thousands of others, all setting their own standards and following their own dreams. All combining, like the players in the band, to make the music she could hear all around her.

In the small crowded room the guitar chords shivered through the floorboards. The drums' thunder shook the glasses on the tables and the sticks tapped out a message in the silence that followed, like rain dripping from the gum leaves after a sudden storm. Dinah sighed and settled herself more securely against - no, not against the back of the chair. After all, she was perching on a bar stool and bar stools, by definition, don't have backs.

What's more, once she checked closely, she realised that chairs were never this warm and flexible. Chairs didn't adjust themselves to the shifts of your body. Chairs didn't breathe in time with your own breathing. The truth was, she'd been leaning against Kyle's shoulder for the past ten minutes and she hadn't even noticed until now, because it felt so easy and comfortable.

Five minutes into Saturday morning.

Dinah and Kyle, walking down the lane behind the pub. A silverpaper moon is pasted

high on a navy satin sky and Dinah glances up at it and smiles.

'That was amazing,' she says. 'And it never would've happened if Tammy hadn't asked me along last week. I always thought Tammy was just putting up with me but I'm starting to believe that she genuinely likes me.'

Kyle considers this, taking his time as usual. 'What's so surprising about that?' he asks. 'Plenty of people like you.'

'Oh yeah?' she says. 'Who, for example?' and Kyle says, 'Me, for example.'

Their feet slow down; they miss a step; they stop in the middle of the lane. On instinct Dinah moves into the safe hollow of Kyle's shoulder. Then she looks up, to check that it's okay, and he looks down and their breath mingles and their lips touch and they're kissing. Wait a minute, Dinah thinks. This is the part I've been fantasising about forever, this part and some of the parts that come afterwards. It ought to feel kind of familiar. It shouldn't ... *make my sentences fall apart, no subject verb object, not any more, just words warm tongue silver fire satin sweet strong hands skin smooth body shiver sounds gasp Kyle!*

Even when they move apart, her mouth feels bright as neon and her pulse keeps on racing against time. Kyle wraps his arm around her shoulder.

'Was that just an accident?' he asks. 'Or are we going together?'

Dinah looks up and watches the fantasy and her friend fuse together. 'Not an accident,' she says. 'Bad timing, though, because I've got exams coming up in about five weeks time.'

It's another risk but what else could she say? She's gone too far now: she can't push her maths to one side, not even for Kyle. So she stands there, counting the seconds, wishing she'd made her move sooner, while Kyle thinks it through.

'No problem,' he says finally. 'I can wait.'

OCTOBER

And then suddenly everything was flashing past at top speed. Drawing up timetables for revision; ticking off the squares, one day at a time; falling behind; drawing up new timetables. Working on her maths till the last possible second at night; lying awake while symbols and figures pounded through her brain like marching feet; standing on the bath mat next morning and swaying slightly, as if she was sinking downwards in an invisible lift.

Checking other people's study techniques; trying to get up early and study before breakfast like Tammy; yawning continuously for an hour and a half; going straight back to her usual routine. Rumours about the exam questions. *Oh shit, I haven't even looked at co-ordinate geometry yet.* Sleeping through the alarm. *Oh God, what if that happened during the exams?*

Study frenzy. Sometimes she felt as if she knew everything and sometimes she felt as if she knew nothing. But all the time, no matter where she was, no matter what she was doing, part of her mind was always focused on the exams. She stopped watching the six o'clock news, she stopped flicking through the newspaper. She lost track of the world around her.

She only saw Kyle on Friday nights, although she still dropped in at the workshop every now and then. She only talked to Elaine at dinner time; she only talked to Robbie when he came over to help with her English revision.

She didn't even feel the invisible cord that connected her to Stacy until it jerked her

halfway across the room.

Dinah blinked dazedly at the reflection of sunlight on glass. Looked over her shoulder at the cluttered desk behind her. Rubbed her forehead, thought for a moment and ran downstairs. As she reached for the phone, it started to ring. She snatched up the receiver and said, 'Stace! I was just going to call you.'

A second's pause, enough time to think: hang on, what makes me so sure? What if it's the gardening people or one of Mum's business contacts? But then Stacy gasped, 'Oh Twin! I was hoping you'd be there' and Dinah made a thumbs up sign with her spare hand.

'So how are things?' she asked, before she remembered that things had to be bad, if the invisible cord tugged at her this strongly.

Sure enough, Stacy hesitated and said, 'Listen, do you have time to talk? I know you need to study and I promise I won't rave on forever. It's just that this house is full of crazy people right now.'

'Yeah? What's going on?'

A sigh shivered into her ear. 'I suppose you saw on the news that Barry Barton had a stroke yesterday - he's the Federal Treasurer, in case you've forgotten, and he's only forty-two, just a few years older than Dad. Anyhow, Barton's always been a big hero to Leon, so he's taking the whole thing pretty personally. He keeps wandering round the house, saying, "But Barton was in line for the leadership. He'd worked all his life for that." And Clair keeps following along behind him, saying, "Okay, now are you going to figure out how to write rest and recreation into your life plan?"'

Dinah bit her lip, trying not to laugh. She was sorry for Leon, of course, but Stacy was an ace mimic, even when she was depressed. 'Okay, that explains why Clair and Leon are off the air,' she said. 'What about Bailey?'

'Bailey's not here.'

'Oh yeah. As usual.'

'That's right, you never liked him, did you?'

There was something stretched and breakable about Stacy's voice. Dinah decided that it might be a good idea to think before she spoke: like Kyle.

'No, I didn't,' she said in the end. 'But you do and that's enough for me.'

Another pause, while Dinah drew a pyramid of π symbols on the message pad, and then Stacy said, 'This is too hard, over the phone. Can I come around?'

Dinah inverted the graph of $y = 2e^{x+1} + 5$ and nodded with satisfaction. Not bad, she thought. I reckon I can tackle any question about co-ordinate geometry now. She twisted around to rub an itch between her shoulder blades and as she turned, she saw Stacy in the doorway, watching her intently.

'You've changed a lot over the past year, haven't you?' she said, as if it had only just

occurred to her.

'Yeah, I have,' Dinah agreed. 'Now, come on, Twin, tell me about Bailey. That's what this is all about, right?'

Stacy sat down on the end of the bed, staring at her clasped hands. 'Bailey,' she said. 'I thought things were getting better for him at last. An old mate of his had wangled him into this children's theatre project and he was rapt, kept raving about the importance of showing kids that there were other alternatives to the telly and all that. But then one of the women went to the director and said she couldn't work with Bailey. She'd been involved with the project for yonks, so the director said he had to smarten up or get out.

'I was trying to convince him to make a few compromises to stay with the project. We sat up till all hours, three nights in a row, going through the major issues. But the third night was the night before my final acting class and I had to go, because you fail if you miss more than ten per cent of the classes and I'd already skipped a few weeks - some of it when I was sick and some of it when I was helping Bailey with his film script.

'Anyhow, I told him I needed to get some sleep but he was meeting with the director next morning and he was pretty desperate, so I hung in there for as long as possible before I had to crash. I staggered off to college on four hours sleep - the tutor wasn't too impressed but at least I got there. And afterwards, when I staggered back home -'

Her voice cut out. She glanced up at Dinah, looking startled, and tried again.

'When I got home, there was a note from Bailey on the kitchen table. It said that - that everyone let him down in the end. That he'd thought I was different but then I'd walked out on him when he needed to talk, which meant I was just like all the rest of them. And so he was splitting - he'd made arrangements with one of his friends and he was going up to Sydney, because people were cooler there.

'I went to his room and it was empty, all his things had gone - and before I even had time to think, the phone rang and it was the department secretary, wanting me to make an appointment with the Acting Coordinator - and I'm scared she's going to tell me I've failed after all - and it's impossible to talk to Clair or Leon right now - and Cam's basically glad Bailey pissed off - and I couldn't sleep last night, because I kept going over the whole thing in my mind. And oh, Twin, my life's in a shit awful *mess*.'

Tears welled up, slow and steady, and rolled down her ghost-pale cheeks. Typical, Dinah thought. Stacy even gets upset better than I do. She lets her feelings out, she gives everyone a chance to console her - and she actually manages to look good while she's doing it.

Then Stacy slumped forward onto her knees and let out a loud, hiccupping sob. Dinah stared at her in alarm. *Wait a minute. This isn't just some act that she's putting on for my benefit. Stace really is upset.*

She jumped up and ran over to tuck her arm around her twin's shoulders. 'I didn't realise,' she said. 'I thought you were doing well at college, same as usual. Why didn't

you tell me?’

‘I’m not used to failing,’ Stacy muttered. ‘I didn’t know how to say I was having trouble with the course.’ She looked up, straight into Dinah’s eyes, and added, ‘Besides, I figured it was more important to help Bailey, the way you’re always helping people. Everyone talks to you ... but Bailey said / was the only one he could talk to.’

Dinah pulled back and her arm dropped to her side. There was something puzzling about what Stacy had just said: some sort of edge to her voice. But before she had time to think it through, Stacy’s eyes were filling with tears again.

‘Jesus, Twin, why did he do it? Disappearing like that - nothing but a note on the table, for Christ’s sake - and saying all those horrible things. I didn’t mean to let him down, honestly I didn’t. I just wasn’t prepared to blow my chances at college, that’s all.’

‘Hey, relax. It wasn’t your fault, Twin.’

‘What do you mean?’ Stacy asked. ‘I walked out on Bailey. I failed him. I -’

‘You were the last in a long line, remember. There was the college and his flatmates, that producer who wanted him to rewrite his script and two different theatre groups who decided they couldn’t work with him. That has to be more than a coincidence, Stace. Fact is, Bailey turns on everybody in the end.’

She waited to see whether her twin was going to keep on defending him. ‘Fair enough,’ Stacy said finally. ‘I suppose I should’ve seen it coming. But, Dinah, he really *is* talented. I’ve seen him act and I’ve read heaps of his writing. He’s good, y’know. It isn’t all a big pose.’

And Stacy had pretty high standards. Stacy wouldn’t just say that because Bailey was her friend. Which meant that there must be more to Bailey than Dinah had ever noticed, although that still didn’t explain why the guy felt compelled to screw things up whenever he had the chance. It was almost as if ... Oh yes! thought Dinah, feeling her brain shift into overdrive. Almost as if he wanted to fail.

Like me, a few months ago, when I wished I’d never gone public about my maths ambitions, so that people could’ve kept on being impressed by my hidden potential. I always knew I had an uncomfortable sort of fellow feeling for Bailey and now I know why. We’ve both made a career out of holding ourselves back. Except that I want to do something about it and Bailey doesn’t seem to be interested.

She tried to put some of this into words but Stacy just stared at her blankly. ‘Sorry, Twin, I don’t understand,’ she said. ‘Why would anyone be frightened of doing well?’

‘Lots of reasons. Like, maybe Bailey’s worried that he won’t measure up. Maybe he’s criticised everyone else so much that he’s scared they’ll do the same thing to him. Or maybe he’s got used to being an outsider - maybe he can’t handle the idea of being on the inside, for a change.’

‘But he knew I was trying to help him, Twin. Why couldn’t I have helped with all of that, as well?’

'Hey, some people get a kick out of complaining. If you solved their problems overnight, they'd feel like they were losing something.'

Stacy nodded sadly. 'That sounds like Bailey, for sure - and you only ever met him two or three times. How come you're so smart about this sort of stuff?'

Dinah shrugged, trying to look as though she took it for granted. And thought: *simple, Stace. You want to be smart about people? Just spend six years on the sidelines, watching everything that goes on and listening twice as hard as everyone else. That ought to do the trick.*

For a moment she felt as if she was looking at her twin through the long distance end of a telescope but then she reached out and put her arm round Stacy again. 'Let's go downstairs and find some food,' she said. 'I bet you didn't even have breakfast this morning.'

'I couldn't eat a thing,' Stacy protested but once they were sitting in front of a pile of sandwiches, she nibbled at a crust, picked out a scrap of frilly lettuce and looked surprised to find that the whole sandwich had disappeared. Then Elaine bustled in with a box of vegetables from the market and demanded to know what was going on.

'Oh, Mum!' Stacy wailed. 'It's Bailey! He -'

Dinah switched off. Her body went limp and her elbows slid slowly across the table until she was propping her chin on her fists. It was always exhausting, getting Stace through a crisis of confidence, and this time she'd been exhausted before she'd even started. I didn't want to think about Bailey today, she thought. I wanted to think about co-ordinate geometry.

She closed her eyes and tried to picture the next entry on her revision timetable but she kept seeing her twin's face instead. How come Bailey means so much to Stace? she wondered. Mum and Dad and me - one way or another, we all have problems with success. But not Stacy. For some reason, Stace seems to be immune. Wonder why.

And if she's genuinely immune, I wonder why she hooked up with a guy like Bailey, who's so dead set on failure that you'd think he was almost in love with it.

She looks up, looks into her twin's eyes. Dinah frowns in concentration; Dinah wills herself to understand. For a moment her tired brain nearly shuts down and then she finds herself performing a trick that she's never tried before. She walks the invisible cord like a tightrope and slides straight into Stacy's head.

And she's falling, falling like Alice down the rabbit hole, grabbing at an idea here, an emotion there. *It's not fair, Stacy is thinking. I was sure I was making a difference to Bailey, right up until the minute when the bastard turned on me. Now no one's ever going to believe I can be as understanding as Dinah.*

She's jealous, Dinah realises in amazement. Jealous of me. I never would've guessed ... but before she can finish that thought, she's falling again, falling into a deep well of sadness where her twin thinks: *Oh Jesus, I wanted so much to save Bailey. Because of Dinah. Because I wanted so much to save Dinah and I could never work out how to do it.*

Dinah's still trying to take that in when she drops down to the deepest and darkest level of all. At first there's nothing but disconnected images. Dinah's ten-year-old face distorted with pain: Stacy at the end of the bed, clutching her own head in sympathy: Stacy at the school gate watching Dinah walk away, back into the junior school: Stacy on the lookout, always ready to nudge her twin whenever she misses something that someone has said.

Why Dinah? Stacy is always thinking on the deepest and darkest level of all. *Why not me? I could've been the one who caught meningitis. I could've ended up a year behind, part deaf, the second best twin. It should've been me but I'm glad it wasn't me.*

So it's my fault.

All my fault.

Dinah winces in sympathy, which propels her out of Stacy's head and back into her own body. She clutches the table to steady herself and sneaks a glance at her twin, to see whether Stacy knows she's been rummaging through her brain. But Stace is still listening while their mum reassures her about the interview with the coordinator. So that's okay, Dinah decides. And now I know. Stace got tangled up with Bailey because he's got some of the same problems as I did.

She feels like she's the other side of me, just like I feel I'm the other side of her.

The minute Stacy leaves, Dinah heads for her desk. She's sure she'll never be able to settle back into her maths revision with so many things to think about, but then suddenly it's all flashing past at top speed. Drawing up timetables; ticking off the squares; falling behind; drawing up new timetables. Working on her maths till the last possible second at night. Overhearing Smart Alex say that you shouldn't need to study if you've worked hard all year; wondering whether it's true; deciding she needs to study anyway.

Standing at the window; sniffing the smells of heat and mown grass; making long lists of things that she's going to do after the exams are over. Ringing Tammy; talking each other into a panic; talking each other out of it again. An hour with Kyle; half an hour with Elaine; English revision with Robbie; a quick phone call to Stace. Then back to her desk again, back to work.

Sometimes she feels like she knows everything and sometimes she feels like she knows nothing. And sometimes she just feels tired and gritty-eyed, with a brain that can't stop, even when her body's ready to collapse, and a body that aches in every muscle, as though she's been shovelling knowledge into her brain.

Study frenzy. Each day another number in the countdown to the exams.

NOVEMBER

Lines of cars edged up the road past the cricket ground, bumper to bumper. Dinah propped her foot on her knee and brushed a crust of dried sand onto the floor of the Kingswood. Her hair was sticky with seasalt and her skin still tingled from the sun and the wind. Memories of beach and sky, the sound of waves breaking and a calm, happy place inside her that nothing seemed to alter.

She looked across at Kyle and smiled as he instantly turned and looked back at her. 'Hey,' she said, 'I forgot to tell you the latest on Smart Alex.'

'What's he done now?' Kyle asked, getting ready to be amused.

Dinah shook her head. 'No, this is serious,' she said and then her mouth started to twitch at the corners. 'Serious for Alex, at any rate. He was spending a lot of time with Josie di Santo before the exams, helping her with her maths revision, and - well, somehow they ended up getting off together.'

'Josie and Smart Alex? What a joke. They'd have to be the world's all-time odd couple.'

'Yeah, that's what everyone thought - except that apparently Alex has had a crush on Josie for years. So, when he finally made it with her, it really blew his mind. He couldn't sleep, he couldn't study, he just went around in a daze, dreaming about Josie. And along with blowing his mind, he blew the exams as well.'

Kyle juggled the gear stick and inched the car forward. 'Okay, I take it back,' he said. 'That *is* serious. What's the poor guy going to do - and how do you come to know so much about it?'

'He told me himself, at that breakfast we had in the park on the morning after the exams finished. Tammy and I couldn't get away from him, because he kept yakking on and on. He's dropped all his plans about going into politics - he just wants to marry Josie and become an accountant, like his dad. He sounded so different, Kyle. How can anyone change that much, that fast?'

Kyle narrowed his eyes, a sure sign that he was thinking things through, and Dinah waited contentedly. It's great to have somebody you can discuss stuff with, she thought. Most people probably wouldn't see Kyle that way, because he wasn't quick and definite like Stacy. Stacy summed up and moved on but Kyle paused and puzzled and checked every angle. Much more my speed, she decided. No wonder I used to get into trouble when I kept comparing myself to Stace and her mob.

'It must've been all bottled up inside him,' Kyle said finally. 'Alex, I mean. Sounds like he's one of those guys who know about everything in the universe, except themselves. That type can screw up in a major way when they finally fall for someone ... It's not going to work out with Josie, is it?'

'No way known. Alex talks like he's practically engaged to Josie but Josie doesn't talk like she's engaged to him. Frankly, I don't think she's got the faintest idea of what's going on in Alex's head. She was just being nice to him, that's all.'

'Thought so. Like I said, poor guy.'

'Yeah. Poor Alex.'

The car eased another half metre forward. Dinah sighed and stretched and reached across to run her hand through the prickly fur at the back of Kyle's neck. 'Listen, are you sure you won't come to dinner tonight?' she asked and he rubbed his head against her hand, like a cat.

'Sorry, mate. You told me already, it's a family do. I don't think I count as part of your family yet.'

'Fair enough. I suppose I shouldn't push it. It's just that I keep wanting to make up for lost time.'

'Don't worry,' Kyle said. 'We can do that.'

She shut the front door behind her and headed down the corridor, thinking about Kyle. Someone had strung a silver banner saying CONGRATULATIONS over the door to the lounge and as she walked under it, five people started to sing 'For she's a jolly good student' at the top of their lungs. She stopped short and stared at them, eyes hot with unexpected tears. Elaine and Robbie, Stacy, Ness and Lina. Her family, if family could include two unrelated lesbian aunts. And my family does, thought Dinah.

She tried to hug everybody at once and then went back to hug them all individually. 'This was my idea,' Stacy whispered to her, while she was wiping her eyes on a handful of Robbie's shirt. 'Mum said we ought to wait until after you'd got your marks but I

reckon the real high spot is when you actually finish those bloody exams. Right, Twin?’

‘Right,’ Dinah said and moved on to her mum. Elaine kissed her on both cheeks, smoothed her hair and handed her over to Ness, who gave a brisk nod of approval and said, ‘So what sort of courses have you applied for? Any chance that we might be getting a new accountant for the business in three years time?’

‘Um, I don’t think so,’ Dinah apologised and Lina grinned.

‘Don’t worry about it,’ she said. ‘Ness just likes the idea of having all her people under the one roof. She only forgave Robbie for leaving the bookshop because she reckons he’s out there training future readers for her.’

Stacy peered over Lina’s shoulder. ‘Okay, that’s enough talking,’ she said. ‘It’s time for the celebration dinner. I’m starving.’

The table was crowded with plates and bowls and casseroles. Robbie’s Beef Wellington, Elaine’s scalloped potatoes, Lina’s fried tofu with Chinese mushrooms, Stacy’s Caesar salad and two bottles of champagne provided by Ness. Dinah gaped and smiled and looked round at the circle of expectant faces.

‘A feast,’ she told them. ‘It’s a family feast.’

At first she was the centre of attention, answering questions about the exams, heaping her plate with food, blushing as the others raised their glasses and chorused, ‘To Dinah!’ But after a while, to her relief, they moved on to other things. Funny stories about the end of term at Robbie’s school. Stacy’s announcement that she’d been accepted into the second year of her drama course, with a caution. Wicked one-liners from Lina and a report from Ness on the latest developments with the publishing venture.

‘It looks as though we’ll be getting off to a good start next year,’ she summed up. ‘And while we’re on the subject -’

‘Yes, I know,’ Elaine cut in. ‘I have to make up my mind. I’m *almost* ready.’

‘No, not that, Laney. It’s something else. Something completely different. I’ve decided to send Robbie to England as a kind of talent scout for the publishing house - which means that he’ll be able to stay on and start work on his novel. Smart idea, hmm?’

Ness sat back, smiling proudly, but as she looked around the table, her smile warped and crumpled. Robbie was staring down at his plate. Elaine sat with her mouth half open, eyes fixed on the wall opposite. Stacy’s face was white and shocked and Lina had whisked her embroidery bag from under her chair and was carefully stitching a red knot at the centre of a flower.

The silence was so deep that Dinah could hear the champagne fizzing in her glass. Then Elaine shook herself and turned on Robbie. ‘How could you?’ she demanded. ‘Are you mad? Walking out on your job, leaving the kids -’

‘The kids are leaving us, in case you hadn’t noticed,’ he said without looking up. ‘And

I'm still not entirely sure that I'm going.'

'Jesus Christ! Don't tell me you're waiting for our permission. You won't get it, Robbie, I warn you. Not from me and not from the twins.'

There was a muffled thud as Stacy's chair toppled back onto the carpet. She ran across to the far side of the room and stood there, shoulders shaking, pretending to stare out through the glass doors. Elaine swung towards Ness.

'Look what you've done,' she said. 'I just hope you're pleased with yourself, because no one else is.'

Ness blinked. 'Laney, I don't understand. I was only trying to help.'

'Well, you should've talked to me first.'

'I can see that now. But I thought it'd be a nice surprise.'

'Oh, it's a *surprise*, that's for sure.'

Silence again, a tense silence full of anger and unspoken words. As it stretched out towards breaking point, Lina caught a loop of thread with her needle, looked up and said, 'What do *you* think, Dinah?'

Time goes into slow motion. Dinah hears another bubble pop in her glass, watches a leaf detach itself from the flowers on the mantelpiece and spiral slowly to the floor. The voices have started up again at the back of her brain. '*Who cares what you think?*' they say. '*Face it, you've always been the least important person in this family.*'

But then she sees a glint of light in the shadows above the door. The silver banner is rippling in the breeze and when Dinah checks, she realises that the calm, happy place is still there inside her. She's not shaken and confused, like the others are, and there's a reason for that. She knows how Stacy feels, she knows how Elaine feels, she knows how Robbie feels - and Ness too, although not as much. She knows because she's listened to all of them, over the months and the years. Tammy's right, listening is powerful stuff.

And because she's been listening, she can see what's going on. Half a dozen people, all trapped in their own points of view, all unable to hear what the others are saying. Somebody needs to take charge: but who? At the start of the year Dinah would've automatically turned to her mum or her dad or her twin, because they all seemed much more sure of themselves than she was. Although a lot of things have changed since then ...

All of this has only taken a few seconds. Lina is still looking at her and now the others are turning towards her as well. Stacy's eyes are trusting, Robbie's eyes are hopeful, Elaine's eyes are hurt and baffled and beseeching.

So Dinah takes charge.

The sound of voices from the hall, Elaine saying goodbye to Ness and Lina. Dinah

slumped back in the armchair and allowed herself to relax. Mission accomplished, she thought. Everyone's talking to each other again. I couldn't've done it without having Lina on side but she couldn't've done it without me either. We herded them like sheepdogs; we asked questions and waited till we got answers; we made sure they all had a better idea of what each other was thinking. And the rest of it's up to them.

Cicadas were buzzing in the garden outside and the light from the lamp behind her gleamed like a floating candle on the dark surface of the window glass. Her dad had stretched out on the couch and Stacy was sprawled on the carpet nearby. Her mum came back and propped herself in the doorway, almost invisible in the twilight.

'So you really want to go to England, Robbie?' she asked, sounding more resigned.

'It scares me,' he admitted. 'But if I don't give it a try, I'll never know.'

'Do you think you can be a good writer? Good enough to make it all worthwhile?'

A long pause and a sigh from the darkness. 'It's a dream, Laney,' Robbie said eventually. 'I'm not planning to win the Booker Prize - in a way, I don't even care whether the novel gets published. But I want to write it, all the same. Does that make sense to you?'

Elaine crossed the room and sat down on the couch beside him. 'Not really,' she said. 'I'm the practical one in this team, remember. I've only had one missed opportunity in my life and, as I said to Dinah, I don't intend to go back to university and start studying maths all over again.'

'But you could, if you really wanted to,' Robbie said. Elaine turned on him and he flung up his hands like a shield. 'Okay, okay. I know, I know. We always disagreed about those sorts of things, didn't we? If we hadn't, we'd probably still be married.'

Another pause, and then Elaine said, 'We still *are* married in a way. I suppose that's why I made such a fuss tonight.'

Before she'd finished speaking, Robbie's hand was reaching out across the gap between them. Dinah said in a loud voice, 'Hey, Stace, remember that book I was going to show you?' She could see her twin's mouth shaping a 'no', so she frowned and poked her with her foot. Stacy finally got the point.

'Oh yeah,' she said. 'That book. Of course. Come on, Twin, I want to see it *now*.'

They jostled through the doorway and hurried upstairs, pushing and shoving and hanging onto each other like eight year olds. 'That was the worst piece of acting I've ever seen in my life,' Dinah said. 'I can't believe they let you into that drama course.'

'Well, they nearly threw me straight out again, remember.' Stacy started to giggle and couldn't stop. Dinah flapped her hands.

'Stop it, you idiot! Do you want Mum and Dad to hear you?'

Instantly Stacy sobered up. They hesitated on the landing, listening hard. But the house was silent. They turned away and went into Dinah's room, shutting the door behind them.

The upstairs room was hot and airless. Dinah was about to turn on the fan when Stacy shook her head and said, 'No, too noisy.' So she opened the three windows instead and dropped onto the bed next to her twin, stunned by the heat.

'Remember how we used to make plans for getting Mum and Dad back together?' Stacy said after a while. 'I taped that movie with Hayley Mills playing twin sisters whose parents got divorced. We used to watch it at Clair's house in secret, trying to figure out how we could pull the same stunts on our mum and dad.'

Dinah propped herself on one elbow and studied her sister's face. 'That was a fantasy, Stace,' she said. 'A little kids' fantasy. It wouldn't've worked, not in a million years.'

'Why not? You saw what they were like tonight. Dad still worries a lot about what Mum thinks; Mum still gets upset about some of the things Dad does. Face it, the two of them are still really involved with each other.'

'Yeah, and that's the whole problem. I mean, you can't get together again unless you've actually separated first, can you?'

'Well then, maybe it'll be good if Dad goes to England,' Stacy persisted. 'Maybe they'll finally figure out how much they mean to each other.'

'Maybe,' said Dinah. 'I wouldn't count on it, though.'

She rolled over and lay on her back, mapping the cracks in the ceiling. After a few minutes the mattress started to quiver and when she lifted her head, she saw a line of neat, regular tears sliding down Stacy's cheek. She's crying about Dad, Dinah realised. Does that mean I ought to be crying too?

She blinked experimentally but she couldn't manage to feel sad. If anything, I'm a bit envious of Dad, she thought. He's taking off, hitting the road like Rhett and his mate. Earlier this year, that would've really appealed to me. Only now I've got a life and I don't want to leave my maths / Kyle / Tammy / the chance of finding out what happens next.

The heat pressed down harder, slowing her brain and pinning her to the bed. Beside her Stacy let out a long shuddering sigh. 'This isn't the way I thought things were going to work,' she said. 'I thought I could leave and do the stuff I wanted to do and the rest of you'd always be here waiting for me to come back to. But everything's changing, including us. We're not even proper twins any more, if you know what I mean.'

We were a united front. The Carr twins. Marching into the playground side by side. Same height, same fluffy dark hair, same round dark eyes.

Take on one of us and you had to take on the pair.

'Yeah,' Dinah agrees finally. 'I know what you mean. Except that we haven't been twins like that since we were ten.'

'I suppose not ... Do you ever miss it, Dines?'

'Course I do. Although I wouldn't want to be like those twins you read about in the papers - you know, the ones who marry twin brothers and live next door to each other

and have matching sets of children.'

'Oh spew. Me either. I'm glad you don't want to be an actor - and I'm triple glad that I don't have to slave away doing maths.' She picks at a loose thread on the bedspread and then adds, 'All the same, I'd hate it if we got to the point where we couldn't even talk to each other.'

'Won't happen,' Dinah tells her. 'Not possible. We'll always be twins. It just won't always be the same as it was.'

Her words sink down through the thick sticky air. Somewhere in the night a cat yowls. Small breezes crawl through the windows and lick the sweat from their skin. Stacy is silent for so long that Dinah has almost decided that she's fallen asleep when suddenly she wriggles round and reaches out, butting her head against Dinah's ribs and holding tight.

Her body is hot and heavy but Dinah doesn't push her away. They lie like twin puppies under a blanket of heat, while Stacy's breathing slows and steadies and Dinah's mind floats like a kite across the landscape of the past few months. Chaos equations scrolling down the page. The silver banner rippling above the lounge room door. Tammy trusting her, her family turning to her, Kyle's face just before they kissed. Memories of beach and sky, the sound of waves breaking, and a calm, happy place inside her that nothing seems to alter.

Stace is right about change being scary, she thinks. It scares me too. Still, I can handle the scary parts, now that I know there's good parts as well.

DECEMBER

The party is in full swing. Dinah can hardly recognise her own lounge room because it's crowded wall to wall with her parents' friends, half of them in executive-style suits, half of them in East Timor and Land Rights t-shirts. She dodges between two groups and bumps into Gwyneth Katz.

'Dinah!' Gwyneth breathes, grabbing her hand. 'I thought about you every time I read one of those feature articles on the exams. You've got your results now, haven't you? Tell me, how did you go?'

Instant flashback. The party ripples and fades, time and space collapse into a vortex and Dinah drops straight down it, emerging on the morning of December the fourteenth, when the letter from the Board of Studies was due to arrive. She'd tried to sleep in, she'd tried to have a long leisurely breakfast but in the end - after all, there was nobody at home to see her - she'd given up and gone out to the front gate. An hour of staring down the street, an hour divided between telling herself to stay calm and muttering 'Come on, postie, come on.' And then, just when she'd finally managed to relax a bit, a bicycle turned the corner with a mail sack on its front handlebars and all her suppressed panic swept over her in a flood.

If her knees hadn't started to buckle, she would've turned around and run back into the house. Instead, she'd hung onto the gate post, forcing her numb mouth into a smile when the postman cracked a friendly joke. The minute he cycled off, she took two steps backwards and sat down behind a fuchsia bush to open the letter in private. Her hands

were shaking so hard that her thumb wouldn't slide under the flap of the envelope and in the end she had to tear off a corner with her teeth. She pulled out the printed sheet, stared down at the tidy columns and watched them melt into a grey blur.

She couldn't remember how long she'd sat there with the letter shivering in her hand but eventually the words and symbols started to come back into focus. She found the column headed RESULTS and scanned it quickly. S/S S/S S/S S/S S/S S/S. S for Satisfactory, which meant that she'd passed all her subjects. Well, she knew that already but somehow she'd convinced herself that she'd got it all wrong and they'd decide to fail her after all.

One fear down, one more fear to go. Dinah located column three, the column for the exam results, took a deep breath and slid her finger from line to line until she came to the two maths subjects.

Dropped her head onto her knees and burst into tears.

But she's smiling now as she tells Gwyneth, 'I got an A for my Maths Method exam ... and A+ for Further Maths. It really threw me at first - I'm not used to doing that well. I did okay in the rest of my subjects too but maths was the most important, by a long way.'

'That's wonderful,' Gwyneth breathes. 'Really wonderful,' and she's in the middle of a long rave about the young women of today when Dinah catches sight of Kyle, head and shoulders above the crowd. Her heart jumps. She says goodbye to Gwyneth and elbows her way towards him.

'We'll have to go soon if we want to get to Stace's place on time,' he reminds her as she tucks herself under his arm. 'Better start looking round for your folks. I think I spotted your dad a few minutes ago, somewhere over near the door.'

She shuts her eyes and listens for Robbie's rumbling laugh. 'Yep, that's right,' she says and sets off straight away, towing Kyle behind her. As they come closer, she can hear the words 'England' and 'novel' and 'chance of a lifetime'. Until her dad glances in her direction and his face shutters.

Dinah laughs at him. 'Relax, Dad. This isn't just a New Year party - it's your farewell party too. You can talk about that stuff as much as you like.'

Her father hugs her, quick and hard, and then they lean peacefully against each other while the party swirls around them. Someone has turned up the radio to listen for the time and Dinah is glancing at her watch when Elaine appears behind her.

'You're not thinking of leaving, are you?' she says. 'Because you can't go yet. It's only an hour till midnight and I still don't know what I'm going to do next year. You have to help me make up my mind.'

'Oh, for heaven's sake, Mum,' Dinah groans. 'I'm really sick of this. Toss a coin, why don't you?'

Her dad frowns at her, so she shrugs and starts to apologise, but her mum isn't listening. 'All right,' she says. 'All right, maybe I will.'

She borrows a twenty cent piece from Robbie and bounces it on her palm. 'Heads, I stay with the bookshops; tails, I go to the publishing house,' she decides. Other people gather around, calling out 'Go on, Laney' and 'You can do it'. Elaine flexes her fingers and tenses her muscles and tosses the coin.

It spins high, falls to the floor and goes bowling across the carpet until Ness treads on it. She lifts her foot and looks down. 'Tails,' she announces and Elaine's hand flies to her mouth.

'Oh no!' she says. 'No, I couldn't possibly leave the bookshops.'

A few seconds of silence and then Lina says, 'There, you've decided.'

Ness says, 'I'll miss you, Laney ... but I thought that's what you'd do.'

Robbie says, 'You'll make a great manager, love. Really great.'

And Elaine says nothing but her face starts to change. The furrow between her eyebrows smooths out and the corners of her mouth relax into an ironic smile. Dinah can almost see the old matter-of-fact Elaine coming back from the place where she's been hiding for the past nine months.

'What a relief,' her mum says finally. 'Is that how people usually make important decisions? If only I'd known, I could've started being decisive years ago.'

The Kingswood slides to a halt. In the dappled night, neon light sifted through a mesh of plane leaves, Dinah and Kyle lean towards each other and kiss. A friendly kiss, lips meeting briefly and then lifting into a smile. A kiss that says: there's plenty of time.

As they scramble out of the car, a figure looms out of the darkness. They're moving closer together, fists starting to clench at their sides, when a voice says from the shadows, 'Dinah, did you ask Josie to your sister's party?'

She laughs with relief. 'Alex, you scared me! Yeah, I talked to Josie when I met her in the mall last week but I think she said one of her cousins was having a New Year bash.'

'Did she? Are you sure? She didn't mention it to me.' Smart Alex falls into step beside them until they get to Stacy's house. Then he steps in front of Dinah, blocking the gateway, and says, 'Listen, how do you reckon Josie feels about me?'

Dinah shuffles from one foot to the other. 'Um, I get the feeling that she's not exactly planning to settle down just yet,' she says. Alex swallows hard but he keeps asking questions, even after Kyle has nudged him aside and headed on into the party. And Dinah stays because she has a question of her own, though she can't quite figure out to get it into the conversation.

In the end she cuts across one of his long involved sentences and says bluntly, 'Alex, what were your study scores for maths?'

Smart Alex shrugs. 'Thirty-nine out of fifty for Further Maths and thirty-seven for Maths Methods. Not as good as I'd expected but, oh well.'

The same as me for Further Maths, thinks Dinah. And I did better than him in Maths Methods. I don't believe it. I don't believe I actually - and then she suddenly feels ashamed. *Hold it till later, Dinah. You don't need to congratulate yourself on beating Alex when the guy's standing right there in front of you.*

But Alex hasn't even noticed the interruption. He's talking faster and faster, spilling out all his dreams about Josie, while his eyes glaze and his hands wave frantically. Dinah reaches out and touches him on the arm.

'Alex,' she says. '*Alex.*'

Smart Alex stops in the middle of a sentence. 'All right,' he says. 'I know it's not going to work out. But it was worth it.'

He stands there, stiff and steady. Dinah would like to hug him but she can see he doesn't want to be hugged. She tugs at his arm, saying, 'Come in to the party,' but Alex shakes himself free.

'In a minute,' he says. 'I just - I'll be there in a minute.'

So she leaves him and goes inside. Me and Alex, she thinks. Alex and me. Somewhere during this year the two of us seem to have changed places. I could never have messed up my study plans, just for the chance of going out with Kyle. But that's what Alex did, for Josie's sake - and he doesn't even regret it.

As she steps into the front room, the noise of the party hits her like a slap. When she spots Cam and Leon, she backs into the corner where they're standing and shelters behind them while she starts to look around.

Stacy is swanning about, playing hostess, and the room is full of half-familiar faces. Some from Central, some from Kingston Hall, some from Stacy's drama course and, over near the food table Gavin Petty and an olive-skinned guy with long curling hair and wary eyes. She shifts closer to Cam and says, 'Who's he? I recognise him from somewhere.'

Cam follows the direction of her eyes. 'Yeah, you probably used to see him around at Central. That's Manny Theostratis, the guy Rhett went travelling with. They got back a week ago - I thought Rhett'd be here tonight but he doesn't seem to have turned up yet.'

'And the guy next to him is Gavin Petty, an old mate of Manny's brother Con,' Leon informs her, although she knows that already. 'I just heard an interesting story about Gav. His parents kicked him out in the middle of the year, so he went to live in the Theostratis's bungalow. Con got to work on him - he's a real mother hen, Con - and in the end Gav decided to sign up for some nursing course, the same one that Manny's applied for. I thought it was dead weird at first - I mean, the guy was a total hoon when he was at Central. But apparently he almost killed another kid in an accident two years ago and somehow that swung him around to Con's idea.'

'Makes sense,' Dinah says, watching Gavin with interest. 'Seems like everyone's on the move, one way or another.'

Leon nods. 'Clair's doing pretty well at art school,' he boasts. 'One of her tutors reckoned that the painting of her dad was - get this - "a fine example of post-regionalism". And I scored three of the first year subject prizes but the big news is that I've taken up jogging. I could only manage half a kilometre to start off with but I've been building up gradually. In six month's time I ought to be doing about four kays a day.'

Then he glances across at the food table and spots Clair, spooning dollops of cream onto a plate of small cakes. 'Not on the baklava,' he says and hurries over to make sure she gets it right. Dinah and Cam catch each other's eye and grin.

'That's Leon all over,' says Cam. 'Even when he's relaxing, he has to do it better than anyone else. Hey, I've got another interesting story for you, about another old friend of ours.'

'Oh yeah? Who?'

'Bailey,' he says and Dinah's eyes widen.

'My favourite person. Come on, Cam, tell.'

So Cam tells her how Bailey had hung around the film school for a while, acting in one of the student films until he got kicked out for trying to take over from the director. Dinah laughs the whole way through: she can enjoy Bailey stories now that Stacy isn't involved.

'The guy's a maniac,' she says. 'I wonder what'll happen when he runs out of groups to work with.'

Before Cam can say anything, a couple of Kingston Hall girls close in on him, asking breathless questions about Sydney. Dinah edges away and leans against the wall, closing her eyes and letting her mind go blank. Parties are always an effort. Too many people, all talking at once: an impossible blur of voices.

Her muscles are just starting to relax when a hand brushes her cheek. She looks up to find Kyle in front of her, holding two glasses of cider in the crook of his arm. Dinah takes one of them and clinks it against his, then clinks it again because she likes the sound of it.

'Here's to our first New Year's Eve,' she says. 'Although, come to think of it, we bumped into each other last New Year as well, didn't we? Oh wow, what a waste of time! If only we'd got together then.'

'Well, it's not my fault,' Kyle says. 'I asked you out, after all.'

'You *what*?'

'I asked you out. After I'd driven you home, just as you were opening the car door, I said, "Listen, how would you like to go to a movie later on?" Or words to that effect.'

Dinah stares at him in disbelief. 'You did?' Then the mechanism of her memory starts to whirl and click and she says, 'Oh shit, maybe you did. You said something to

me, at any rate, but I didn't hear it properly. I just pretended to - I do that sometimes.'

'I know,' Kyle says, smiling, and Dinah groans and grabs his hand.

'Jesus, no wonder you seemed a bit distant when I started dropping in at the workshop. I'm surprised you were even prepared to talk to me.'

'I figured out what'd happened after a while,' he admits. 'But - oh, I dunno. Somehow I couldn't get up the nerve to try again.'

'Me either. I mean, I couldn't get up the nerve to try at all.'

They look at each other and laugh. Kyle folds his arm round Dinah, pulling her close. 'This is so weird,' she says as she leans back. 'I thought my life had changed totally over the past year. Except now it turns out that you fancied me all along - and Stace envied me as much as I envied her - and I suppose I wasn't ever completely hopeless at maths either. It's like everything's changed and yet nothing's changed. Like Alice in Wonderland, running to stay on the same spot. Like -'

'Like arriving where you started and knowing the place for the first time.'

'Yeah, that's it,' she says and then she frowns and looks round. Cam takes a step backwards, blushing scarlet.

'Sorry,' he says. 'I wasn't eavesdropping, I promise. I just heard the last couple of sentences and I couldn't help -'

'No problem,' Kyle tells him. 'What you said sounded good.'

'Oh, that wasn't me. I mean, they weren't my words - I was quoting from a poem by T.S. Eliot, the last section in *Little Gidding*.'

'Poetry, huh?'

He looks down at little blond Cam, who blushes even harder and starts to apologise for quoting poetry at a party. Kyle holds up his hand.

'It's all right, mate, I was just interested. I never met anyone who read poetry for fun.'

Cam launches into a long, complicated explanation about how reading T.S. Eliot gave him the idea for a film that brings together a streetkid and a small boy whose parents are getting divorced. Kyle watches him thoughtfully and Dinah is watching Kyle when she feels a sudden tweak at her midriff. The invisible cord.

She turns and looks straight through the party, into Stacy's eyes. *Hey, the two of them are getting on really well*, Stacy says without words. *That's great, I wasn't sure whether they would. Leave them to it, Twin, and come over here.*

So she squeezes Kyle's hand and goes. As she wriggles past Cam, somebody turns the music off and somebody else turns the TV on. The screen flickers into life and Dinah sees crowds ebbing and surging like waves across the city streets. Above them, in the high grey tower of the post office, a clock begins to strike.

One, two, three. Dinah passes Clair and Leon, still arguing about the baklava. Two very different people, although somehow that doesn't seem to stop them from being crazy about each other. Two of Stacy's glamorous friends, the ones who used to scare

her so much. But she knows more about them these days.

Four, five, six. Dinah thinks of Tammy, at a party on the other side of town, celebrating the Equal Opportunity Board's decision to reopen Jarrah College. Tammy, who told her that she was smart. Tammy, who noticed the way she listened. Tammy, her friend. The first time she's ever had a friend who was completely separate from Stacy.

Seven, eight, nine. Dinah passes Manny and Gavin slapping palms, with Alex in the background behind them. Gavin Petty, who has been weaving in and out of her life like a coloured thread. Smart Alex, her rival for a long time but not any longer. Manny, who she doesn't know at all. So many people and so many stories, all different, all essential. All combining, like the players in a band, to make the music she hears all around her.

Ten, eleven, and she hesitates, glancing over her shoulder at Kyle. For a moment she wants to turn and run back, she wants to be standing beside him at the exact second of the changeover into the new year. But when his eyes meet hers, the message in them is as clear as the pulsing of the invisible cord. So, as the sound of twelve goes ringing through the room, Dinah takes a final step forward and looks into the face of her twin.

It's her own face but not her own face. A magic mirror, reflecting other choices and other possibilities. Dinah smiles. Dinah reaches out and strokes the curve of her twin's cheek. *Looks like I don't envy Stacy any more. Don't envy anyone any more. Because I understand. Something about the way my mind works, something about the way the world works.*

I'm getting somewhere at last.

Night time in the city. The darkness keeps shifting and changing. Drifts of cool air crossing drifts of warm air, like currents at the bottom of the ocean. Somewhere in the distance car horns are honking and blaring to welcome in the new year but here, in this maze of lanes and narrow streets, everything is hushed and still. Overhanging leaves brush against your face. You breathe country smells of sap and flowers and earth.

Some of the houses are dark and in some there is only a glimmer of grey light behind the blinds but the house on the corner spills out light and music and voices. You do what everyone does when they walk past a lighted window: you slow down to look inside.

All round the room people are hugging and kissing and slapping one another on the back. Except for the two young women near the window. One smiling and one serious, both with bright faces and dark hair. They stand there, suspended in time, staring into each others eye's, and then they tilt their heads back at an identical angle and start to chant. If you veer closer, you can even catch the words.

'Alla-lalla-samma-sinn.

Twin-twin-twin.

Twin-twin-twin.'

As you pause to listen, they turn in unison and smile out into the night. So you lift your hand in an embarrassed wave and keep on walking, past the next side street and around the corner. The main road cuts a neon channel into the future and when you look up, the sky is blazing with its eternal pattern of stars.

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Jenny Pausacker asserts her moral right to be identified as the author of this book.

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