

THE QUARRY

Amanda Midlam

LEAVING

“Leaving” is a chapter from a work in progress, a memoir of childhood, called *Good Girl*. In this chapter I have just turned 14 and my sister, Allie, is nearly 16.

My stepfather is going to kill us. Of this I have become convinced. I do not remember when I first began to fear this; the violence has been going on too long and now has become a blur.

I feel the threat of death when I wake up in the morning, get ready for school and scuttle as quickly as I can out of the house. I feel the threat when I arrive at school at 7.30am for a spot of early morning vandalism. I feel the threat during days at school that aren't nearly long enough, knowing that at the end I must go home. I feel the threat when I arrive home, change out of my uniform and escape the house again to the bushland at the end of the road or to Taronga Zoo, which lies on the other side of the bush.

My stepfather threatens constantly to kill us.

I feel the fear, then and now, especially at dusk. That was the time I had to be home and the time my stepfather returned from work. Now, decades later, dusk is still a dangerous time for me. Time folds in upon itself like the pleats in my school uniform, grey and drab, sucking the colour out of my skin, making me clammy and cold. I forget to breathe.

Most of all I feel the fear one cloudy day in July 1968. Allie and I are huddled next to a grey sandstone wall, peering around the corner into St Elmo Street, too scared to go any further. Our mouths are dry and we are dumb in our fear. In our silence we share feelings of shame, loss and betrayal but most of all intense fear.

My mind can't grasp this, then or now. My mother wouldn't go back to the house without a police escort but she sent Allie and me, by ourselves, to get changes of clothing. My memories of this time are a skeleton in the family closet; broken bones pierce my dreams and make me wake screaming in the night but the connective tissue is gone. How did we get to this corner? I have no memory of that at all. A tornado may well have dumped us there. Suddenly, ill-prepared, we were close to home but too scared to go there.

All that was familiar had been left behind at Wedgwood when we fled. My diary, the notebooks where I scribbled stories, my collection of bus ticket stubs, cicada shells, sea shells, china animal ornaments, a collection of dolls from around the world in various national attire, rocks and odds and ends that I kept in dusty shoe boxes under my bed, books of course, my blue bicycle and my clothes. What tugged

most strongly though were the pets. They'd been left behind. Were they being fed? Was anyone giving them fresh water?

Homer and Luther had been a source of solace to me since we got them when I was 7, especially Homer who was my own. Luther, a tan dachshund, belonged to Hyacinth and was bigger than the black and tan Homer, but Homer was smarter. I talked to him a lot with his sausage shape cuddled on my lap, my tears dripping into his sleek black coat, my fears alleviated somewhat by his warmth. Allie's cat, Plato, has also been left behind but he is more independent and I think he'll be okay. The pull to see the pets is immense and the need for clothes that don't smell is strong but my terror is paralyzing.

We need to go home but we also need to know it is safe and there is no way of knowing that.

I replay the argument with my mother. I remember the words but not the setting. Probably it was the flat rented by Hyacinth and Pedro. Mum was staying somewhere with her new love Denys, and Allie and I floated, spent a night or two in the apartment of a woman that someone knew, from somewhere, and spent time on the streets.

'I don't want to go. I'm frightened that Teddy will be there.'

'Don't be silly,' Mum scoffed. 'It's not you kids he wants to kill, it's me. Besides he'll be at work.'

Being a work day did not necessarily mean he'd be at work. Beyond abandonment I feel confusion. My sister and I have been taught to distrust our own perceptions. Perhaps our mother was right. Mum had copped more violence than we did, but I had seen with my own eyes my stepfather pick Allie up and throw her like a javelin at a wall and he had threatened to kill us all. Our fear meant nothing to her. Did she genuinely think we would be safe? Was she half-crazy from all that violence. Or was she prepared to sacrifice us for the future she wanted. There is no answer to those questions, but I never trusted her again. With a smile more enigmatic than the Mona Lisa's she sent her children on this terrifying errand. We left home, we left everything behind; what we have left is our mother, and we hope, but do not trust, that she is right.

What we would do if Teddy is there, I wondered. No point in screaming. The

neighbours never get involved. Would it be safer to run down to the bush at end of the road where we could hide, or run back up to Thompson Street, then to the busier Bradley's Head Road in the hope that if he knew there were witnesses it might curb his murderous rage. But I knew there was no right answer, no safe place.

We stand frozen on the street corner. There seemed something inevitable to this journey, it was like a pilgrimage but we were reluctant pilgrims. I didn't, and still don't, understand why our mother would send us somewhere she was too scared to go.

Allie is ashen, moving almost robotically around the corner and, feeling like an automaton myself, I follow her. It is a few days since we left home. We are still in the same clothes. Those days are now a blur in my mind, but truth to be told they were a blur then too. We knew nothing about how or where we would be living and each day we did not know where we'd be spending the night.

I understand my mother's fear but don't understand why she ignores ours. Even if she genuinely thought there was no danger, how could she ignore our terror? Her lack of fear for her children was, and still is, breath-taking. Some time before she sent us on this dangerous quest I had witnessed Teddy try to kill her. I remember her running to the phone one evening and he chased her, wrapped the phone cord around her neck and pulled it tight but I don't remember why he stopped strangling her. It's a freeze frame and my memory goes no further.

Allie and I turn the corner and inch down the street past the mock Tudor home of the Gray family, wishing we were invisible or invincible instead. But we are just scared children.

Mum had been wanting to leave Teddy for a long time and Allie had been like a zombie for even longer but I took note of everything I could that happened around me. My vice was eavesdropping and whenever I heard the catch cry 'not in front of the children' I would go into sleuth mode. I was very good at sneaking into the lounge room. Crawling silently on all fours, I'd hide behind the couch listening in to conversations. I knew, from doing this, that my mother had seen a solicitor, but as she told her friend Inger on the couch, he had told her that the law said that each time she cooked her husband a meal or ironed his shirt after an act of violence she condoned it. What she had to do was wait until he was violent again then leave

immediately.

That wait was terrifying especially as our mother provoked the mad man with more venom and vehemence. 'You're not a real man,' she'd taunt. The violence was one of the secrets that happened in the house and we never breathed a word of it to anyone. I thought and hoped that when he was next violent we'd leave permanently, but it didn't happen that way, my fear didn't abate and despair set in. What was my mother waiting for?

One night my mother calls, 'Come on kids. We're leaving'. For the last two years I have kept an overnight case packed and ready to go but we always return. This time I am very ill and have gone to bed early, I have a terrible choking cough and a fever, can barely breathe and don't want to get out of bed but I stumble out and pull on the clothes I wore that day, old pedal pushers and a jumper. I'd love to leave Teddy permanently before he kills us but Mum always goes back. *Always*. I am so sick I feel delirious and this time I leave the little red suitcase that is kept with Allie's little blue suitcase behind our bedroom door. One time these cases saved Allie. She tried to hide behind the door when Teddy was on one of his rampages but he knew she was there and, big man that he was, he kept slamming the door with all his might. Luckily the cases saved her and she wasn't crushed between door and wall.

This time, the time I left my suitcase behind, we didn't go back. We drove to a Chinese restaurant in Crows Nest, oddly enough across the road from the appliance store where Teddy used to work some years before and where we used to wait for him in the car. Teddy came into my life when I was five and now, a couple of months after my birthday, I was fourteen and in the bizarre garish setting of a Chinese restaurant when I should have been home sick in bed I began to consider that Teddy might be leaving my life. Or rather that we might be leaving him permanently his time. My mother showed none of usual distress and despair but instead sparkled with optimism and hope. Usually we just drove around before going home. I had no idea what we were doing in a restaurant and felt so ill I just wanted to lie down. The room was cavernous and looked like a temple with red and gold wallpaper and lamps, the waiters wore black suits and the tables, mostly empty as it was getting late, were covered with stiffly starched white table cloths ready for the next

day.

Right at the back of the restaurant Hyacinth sat at a table with her boyfriend Pedro and a stranger, a middle-aged man with a balding head. He and my mother greeted each other and she bubbled with excitement and happiness. I hadn't known she had a boyfriend but obviously there was something between them. 'This is Denys, your new father,' she said. Denys and I looked stunned.

Most of the rest of that night is a blur. Hyacinth, Pedro and Mum celebrated getting away from Teddy, Denys continued being stunned but kept looking at my mother, entranced by her. Allie, as usual in that stage of her life was present but not present. She hadn't spoken for a couple of years unless it was strictly necessary but no-one seemed to have noticed. The red walls of the restaurant made me feel like I was in the middle of a fire, my throat was so sore and swollen I could barely swallow. I didn't have a change of clothes and didn't know where I'd be spending the night.

Denys hadn't considered taking on teenagers. Mum assured him that Allie, turning sixteen next month, was almost grown up. She had left school at fifteen and had for a while left home, working in a cousin's vet practice in the country. That left me. Denys was dubious. He and his wife – another surprise for me discovering he had a wife - had had a teenage foster daughter and it was a difficult experience that he didn't want to go through again. But nothing was going to ruin Mum's dream. I realised that Mum and Denys hadn't known each other long and didn't know each other well but Mum laid out for him what a life of happiness they'd have together and assured him I would be good and no trouble.

Hyacinth, madly in love with Pedro, had moved in with him and was thrilled that her mother and sisters had also gotten away from Teddy and she shared Mum's excitement and enthusiasm for a brighter, happier future. I sat still. In my head I could hear my mother's constant refrain to her children, 'Don't rock the boat'. Allie had subsided into herself. Wherever she was, she wasn't rocking the boat. I felt sea-sick, clammy and nauseous and the room was spinning. Thinking I might throw up, I went to the toilet and discovered my period had started and I was flooding blood. Mortified I returned to the table and tried to get Mum's attention but she had eyes only for Denys and flirted with him persuasively. Finally, I think Hyacinth or Pedro must have engaged his attention, I whispered to her that I had a heavy period and

didn't have any pads. She looked crossly at me and hissed 'stuff toilet paper in your pants' then proceeded to ignore me while I tried as hard as I could, as sick as I was, to collude with my mother in giving this new man the impression that I was good and no trouble at all. That meant ignoring my own needs, so I sat, smothered in my own silence, somewhere between pretending my needs didn't matter and believing it was true, as I bled into the nap of my blood-red upholstered chair.

A few lost days after that Allie and I slink towards our home. In silence we sidle by the beautiful Federation homes of the Holmans and the Whelans. We are getting close now.

Leaving Teddy wasn't supposed to be like this. Leaving Teddy was supposed to mean that we were together with Mum and were safe, and happy, and living without fear. It wasn't supposed to mean this heart-in-mouth creeping down the road.

We are barely breathing although my lungs still rattle with bronchitis. St Elmo Street is quiet and empty. The sandstone walls give the impression of solidity and stability, the houses sedate behind them. The people who live in these houses have not given a sign that they ever heard or saw anything on the nights of screams and police visits at our house. The houses are rigid and durable, the lawns manicured, the flower beds professionally groomed by hired gardeners. There are no people in sight. Children, the only residents ever seen in the gardens, are in school.

The stillness and silence is eerie. Being winter there are no thrumming cicadas or buzzing of bees and the birds are absent. The sky is light grey and the road dark grey, and colour seems absent.

We inch down the road. I want to see the dogs, to pat them, to tell them how much I love them and miss them, I want to sob into Homer's fur but the fear is overwhelming. Wedgwood seems malevolent, malignant and I want to run away but it is as if I've been programmed and have no mind or will of my own. Maybe Mum is right and if Teddy is there he won't attack us.

The quietness of the street is disrupted as behind our backs a car turns the corner from Thompson Street. The sound has a deadly familiarity. It is Teddy in his green falcon. Allie and I break into a run as he accelerates. Time stops beating in its regular pattern and instead splits into two. On the one hand it takes half an eternity to try to think what to do. Do we run up a neighbours' front path and bang on their front

door? What if they aren't home? What if they are home but don't let us in? Our thoughts are hectic and over-active and our feelings of horror are matched by feelings of the shame that has attached us to us, shame that follows us for decades like a shadow. Did we deserve to die?

The car is coming closer and on the other hand, in real time, the whole thing happens in seconds.

Then our stepfather swerves to aim the car at us. I don't know how the hell we do it but we jump a shoulder-height sandstone wall as the car mounts the kerb. He had tried to ram us. We are next door to Wedgwood and that is as close as we get. If there are any witnesses behind the windows of these expensive houses they stay silent. The fog of forgotten memory descends here. I don't know how we get out of there. I think we stayed crouched behind the wall for a while. In a state of trauma I think our short term memories were not functioning any more. It is not so much that I have forgotten what happened next, but in my state of shock I think memories were simply not recorded for several days afterward. Not that anyone cared at the time.

I don't know what happened next but I can tell you that I am writing this in my late fifties and part of me is still cowering behind a wall, terrified of what may happen next.