

Lily

by Eliza Murray

~~~~~ Autumn 1 9 2 1 ~~~~~

The biggest, meanest looking snake I've ever seen is dead now, hanging over the barbed wire fence like a wet strip of candlebark. Nugget hit it seven times with a stick, showing off to the little kids and Maisy Williams from next door. She doesn't look too impressed by the flat pulpy head Nugget's trying to show her. He's telling her about the belt he's going to make.

Jock is giving Freddy a piggy back ride through the long grass but the rest of us are barefoot as usual, shoes hanging by their laces around our necks so they won't get wet from the dew. Nobody wants to be squelching around school all day and you don't normally see snakes at this time of year. Me and Maisy squat down to tie our laces. We've only gone another few yards when a kookaburra swoops down and takes off with the snake. It's up in the tree now, laughing at Nugget storming off ahead.

~~~~~ Spring 1 9 2 6 ~~~~~

Dad's out checking his rabbit traps and doesn't know that Georgie has drowned. The big boys were down at the dam jumping off the rope swing, supposed to be watching while Georgie and Fred were seeing who could hold their breath under water the longest. Then Fred screamed. Nugget dove under and found Georgie with his foot hooked under a tree root.

Me, Betty and Ivy are helping mum get the house ready for the next lot of boarders when Jock and Fred run screaming up to the back verandah. Nugget tries to run too, but Georgie is wet and limp and heavy and his head is lolling from side to side with each step Nugget takes. He lays Georgie out flat on the verandah and runs to his horse. I think he's going to get the doctor, but he comes back with dad. I guess he knew that it took too long to get Georgie's leg free.

The house is the quietest it's ever been except for the swagman at the door. Dad finishes yelling at him and gives him the rabbits, six of them, fur sticky with blood. They dangle by their feet over the swaggie's shoulder as he wanders back down the driveway to sleep someplace else.

~~~~~ Winter 1930 ~~~~~

The Doctor calls me Evie and I've never told him that's not my name. Three years I've been living with him, tending to this enormous house and his children while he doctors Darling Downs. He tells me that my father sent a telegram. Fred, my youngest brother has taken ill and I am to return home. The Doctor drives me with my leather case to the new Qantas office in Brisbane and buys my ticket to Melbourne. "Farewell, Evie", he says.

Fred is even smaller than I remember him. His face is white, nearly grey, and his eyes are sunken. He's breathing quietly, asleep now. The Doctor taught me to brew up a broth when his girls were sickly. I take a chicken and boil it with carrots and potato from the garden. I know I'll be lucky if Fred can even swallow the liquid, but it's all I can do.

I cool it and he rouses. I sit on his bed, lift his head onto my lap and spoon the salty broth into his mouth. He swallows three mouthfuls.

Four days later and he is feeding himself.

Another week and the local doctor visits. "A miracle", he proclaims.

~~~~~ Spring 1937 ~~~~~

The boarder pushes me backwards into his room and kicks the door shut behind him. Not that he need bother. Mum and Betty have gone into town and he knows all the men are out at the sheds. I struggle and kick but there's no point in screaming. I'm pinned down, his huge arm across my chest and the other tearing the buttons off my dress. He reeks of the shearing shed – wool and tar and sweat. He licks my cheek and I smell rum or whisky – I can't tell which. He pulls down my knickers and shoves his knee between my legs, undoing his trousers and grinning at me. It hurts like he's branding me with a hot iron and I can't catch my breath. I don't know how much later and he's heading out the door with his pack. He winks at me and I think I'm going to be sick.

~~~~~ Summer 1942 ~~~~~

Ivy is standing on the kitchen table. She has me drawing lines up the back of her legs in eyeliner pencil to look like nylon stockings. We're going to a dance at the lifesaving club to meet the American sailors and she's telling me I simply must wear a frock. I tell her you don't need stockings with trousers and I don't understand what the fuss is about.

Tall, uniformed sailors are spinning local girls in real nylons around the hall to a band that's trying to sound like Glenn Miller. I'm standing up the back and a local boy, just back from somewhere he doesn't want to talk about, likes my trousers. "You wouldn't have been seen dead in something that modern last time I saw you, Lily Nelson", he says. "Well, Teddy Bennett, things have changed since then". He's telling me how unfair it is that the Americans are getting all the good girls and I raise my eyebrow at him.

~~~~~ Winter 1952 ~~~~~

Pregnant. Again. I'm 37 and this time the doctor hasn't said congratulations.

I'm back for tests. He's telling me about the risks. I have toxoplasmosis and it's me or the baby. He's telling me I should be grateful that I've had two healthy babies already. Reminding me that John and Julie need their mother alive. I want to scream at him. I can feel my baby moving inside me, strong and human. I tell him I am having my baby and that's that.

Three months of bed rest that would have been four. Time enough for the magpie out my window to build a nest, lay her eggs and time enough for John, nine years old now, to climb up and steal them. Joan, wrinkly and red, is born one month early and only a little bit bigger than the palm of her daddy's hand.

~~~~~ Summer 1 9 5 6 ~~~~~

Ted walks through the front door with a television and the news you never want to hear. It's the first TV in our street and I'm going to be a widow.

The Van Wijk children call over the fence, "Yon, Yulie, Yoan, can we come over?" They're watching the Olympics and I wonder if they're cheering for Australia or Holland.

Ted is home from work again and I'm buttoning my blue shirt to wear to the office. Someone has to be there collect the rent and put up the new listings. I wonder what will happen when he goes. Who will pay a woman to sell their house for them?

It's been another slow week and I lock up the office, grateful that there are no auctions tomorrow. I've just turned in the driveway when Julie runs out to tell me Joan is missing. Ted has been in bed all day and didn't hear her go. John and the Van Wijks are already out looking for her. It's another two hours before John finds her sitting in the gutter three streets over, watching an army of ants pull apart a dead beetle.

~~~~~ Summer 1 9 6 7 ~~~~~

It's hot and still and people are walking slower than normal. Two weeks until Christmas and it's too quiet. Joan is over at the beach with the Wardlor girl, throwing hot chips to seagulls that all pretend to have lost a leg.

Mr Cockle can't pay the rent again. At least he comes in to tell me, unlike the others that just hide out and hope I don't notice or won't come looking for it. He sits down opposite my desk, hunched over and heaving like he's trying not to cry. I tell him

that John's cat had kittens last month and ask "would your girls like a kitten for Christmas?" I tell him to take the Christmas tree from the shop, a plastic one with flashing lights and tinsel. He picks it up that afternoon and pushes it home in a shopping trolley, just a little less hunched.

~~~~~ Spring 1978 ~~~~~

Joan is getting married on Saturday. Robert wants to escort me and God knows what else he wants. I've been widowed 20 years, raised three kids, run a business on my own, and he thinks I need an escort?

John has bred a flock of white pigeons to release after the ceremony. Robert tells him, "they're better than those ugly fluffy looking things you usually breed, but they ain't doves, are they". John ignores him and keeps loading cages into the panel van.

The bluestone chapel is long overdue for restoration and has scaffolding where the roof should be. Lucky it's a sunny day. Lucky people don't take photos of ceilings. Collingwood is playing the Cats and all the men are crowded around John's van listening to the game, waiting for the bridal car to pull into the driveway.

The priest is just getting to the "I do" part when Robert, bitter and crazy as ever, releases the birds. They circle over the chapel and come to roost on the scaffolding. Three dozen white pigeons cooing at the congregation and I'm sitting on a pew praying they don't shit on anyone.

~~~~~ Winter 1984 ~~~~~

I'm trying to talk but I've just woken up and my words aren't coming out right. My head is thumping and I reach up to find stitches in my numb cheek. There's a policeman standing over me asking about Ellie's car seat, and I'm grateful when the doctor comes and ushers him out. "Constable Richards is a friend of your son-in-law", the doctor tells me. I wonder which son-in-law but I'm scared to ask.

The doctor is back. "Mrs Bennett", he says, "I'm afraid we have some bad news. Ellie's car seat came loose in the crash and she received an injury...." He's talking about children having soft skulls, but there's a sound like static in my head and my vision is blurry. I shut my eyes and wait for him to leave.

Julie is here. She stands in the doorway and won't come in. "Mum, what did you do?" I tell her it was a kangaroo. "We were going to the jetty to feed the pelicans and I came around the corner and there was a roo on the road and I swerved so I wouldn't hit it and I ran up the gutter". Her eyes are dark and I turn away. "You killed my daughter to save a bloody kangaroo". I hear her heels fade down the hallway, pull the sheet over my head and pray.

~~~~~ Autumn 1 9 9 2 ~~~~~

I'm dressed in a scratchy mauve frock and I don't know what the occasion is. We're at someone's house, or a restaurant maybe, with children I don't know. They give me shy kisses on the cheek and run back to their mothers. My daughters. They're older than they should be and fatter, and what has that waiter done to his hair to make it look like sheep dags? He sees me staring and says "they're called dreadlocks, nan".

There are candles on a chocolate cake and everyone is singing. I join in and they laugh at me. I don't get the joke but I'm laughing and pretending.

Joan's husband, what's-his-name, drives me home and walks me in. "This isn't my house", I tell him. What is this place? "It's OK", he tells me. "This is home now. Banksia Lodge, remember?" It smells of lavender and bleach and urine. Smells of senility. I frown and shoo him with the back of my hand, clutching my purse on an unfamiliar bed.

~~~~~ Summer 2 0 0 1 ~~~~~

There are men on floral sofas watching the cricket. Old men with wispy white hair and tartan slippers. I'm sitting at a table with an old woman I don't recognise, listening to a wireless playing songs I remember dancing to. There's a kookaburra out the window, laughing, and I wonder if Georgie or Nugget will visit today.