

Frank

Anne Hotta

'Lipstick.' He points. 'On your nose.'

Sitting at her dressing table, she picks up her powder puff and sweeps it grandly across her face.

She used to take such care with her appearance. Always got dressed up to go out. Make-up, stockings, good dress and shoes.

'All better.'

It's not. He walks across to the dressing table and stands beside her. He pulls his handkerchief out of his pocket and makes a few furtive jabs. She pushes his hand away.

'What do you think you're doing, Frank?' She glares at him in the mirror.

'I'm trying to get you ready.' He retreats and sits back down on their bed.

'Ready? Ready for what?'

'The clinic. We're going up to the clinic.'

'Why? Do you feel sick, Frank?'

'No. It's just a check-up. For you. We discussed it.'

'When? Was I listening?' She stands up. 'I'm not going.' Chin held high, bright pink nose, too. 'I'm perfectly well.'

He turns away, goes back to his chest of drawers and continues to rummage through them. Odd socks, underpants not folded properly, belts, loose cuff links. Nothing in its place. But he can manage the drawers; he'll tidy things up as soon as he has a minute. It's the children he doesn't know how to manage.

'Dad, something's up with Mum.' It's Alice. 'She thinks I'm her sister. Calls me Barb. Maureen says the same. She calls *her*, Alice.'

He tells them it's change of life. All women go through it.

'Change of life? Come on, Dad. That's way passed.'

Then Paul, pleading with him to take Mum to Bob Miller.

'Just let him take a look, Dad. That's all I'm saying.'

Sinking down onto the bed, he tugs on a fawn sock. It's all right for them, off living in the city. The sock has no mate so he thinks about pulling on a grey one. But he can't and gets down on his knees to have another rummage in his bottom drawer. For a moment he's lost sight of Shirley. He hears a strange noise – loud breathing, skin and fabric rubbing up against each other. In her haste to get undressed, his wife has tried to haul her dress off without unzipping it. Now it's stuck and she's a trapped. Arms flailing above her head, struggling like a caterpillar in a blue cocoon.

'This stupid dress. Get me out of here, Frank. I'm suffocating.'

'Keep still. You're making it ten times worse.' He begins to tug at the dress. 'I'll have to pull it back down again or we won't be able to get at the zip.' He's become quite devious, thinking up little ways to get her to do what he wants. What's best for the both of them. After some complex manoeuvring, he has the dress back where it started – before he mentioned the clinic.

'There, that wasn't so bad.' He surveys her. Her face is flushed. 'Blue's your colour.'

'Blue? You always said it was pink.'

'Did I?'

She adjusts the shoulder pads. 'You don't think it's too tight?'

He does. 'No,' he says, 'it's perfect. But you'd better pull your petticoat down. It's all hooked up.' He feels he's probably on safe ground. 'We need to get going. Bob Miller's expecting us.'

'Bob Miller? You didn't tell me that.' She turns to the mirror, slides her hands over her hips, smoothing away any

invisible wrinkles. 'Are you *sure* I look all right, Frank?'

'Yep.'

Good enough for Doctor Wonderful. He gets out an empty handbag. What does Bob Miller know about their life together? What does he know about the pain Frank feels? Real pain, in his chest, whenever he lets himself think about what might be happening to her. Shaking his head, he goes to one of her drawers, takes out one of the handkerchiefs he's ironed so carefully and puts it into the bag. She no longer carries their bankbooks, bills to pay, letters to post to the kids. These days, such things don't cross her mind. He slips in a few coins from his pocket. Company for the hanky.

In the surgery, Frank sits silently. Occasionally, he affords Bob Miller a glance. He's never liked the man. Way too charming for a country GP. Shirley reaches out for his hand but Frank doesn't take it; he wants her to show Bob Miller, and the kids, what she can do.

Bob has known Shirley a long time. Almost as long as Frank. 'Tell me, Shirley, how many children do you have?'

'How many children? That's a silly question.' She giggles. 'You were there, Bob. Telling me when to push.'

'Yes, of course, but...' He tries to avoid looking at Frank. Some men don't like to know about such things, the details of their wives giving birth, the male doctor in attendance. He looks down at her file. 'It's just that I need you to run through their names for me.' He picks up his pen. 'So I can check my records.'

She hesitates, looks at her husband. 'Frank, what should I ...?'

'Answer the man's questions.'

Bob's always felt sorry for her: all those kids, Frank changing jobs, drinking too much. How can he help her, warn

her about what's coming?

'Paul, he's the oldest, then Alice...'

Bob smiles. 'Paul, Alice...And then?'

'Paul, Alice and ...' She's looking past him. Towards the window. But there's nothing to see: the blinds are closed.

'Suzanne. Yes, that's right. We always called her Suzy, didn't we Frank? She came after...' She half closes her eyes, as if she's concentrating.

A baby in her arms? A child starting school, a debutante at a ball...? Are these what she's looking at? Photos in an album with names written underneath? Maybe it's rote, the doctor thinks, and she's recalling forms she's filled out for school registrations or child endowment payments. He nods encouragement, willing her to find them. To tell him.

'Frank.' She turns to her husband. 'You know, the one everyone said looked like your mother. The one with fair hair. You know.'

Frank clears his throat but doesn't answer.

'Good, Shirley, good.' Bob won't give up on her. 'And after Suzy?'

'James, James came after... She reaches out to her husband again. 'Frank, who did...?'

'James was your brother.'

'Oh.' She gasps. Her hands cover her mouth. 'My brother? James was my brother?' She's barely audible. 'Yes, he was. Poor James.' She turns back to the doctor. 'Bob, I realise I can't say all their names. Not right now. But that doesn't mean I don't *know* them. A mother never forgets her children. It's just the names. Sometimes they... You know.'

'Yes, Shirley, of course. No one's saying...'

He can't look at her. It's never been this close before. Never someone he's known so long, cared so much about. He opens his desk drawer, pulls out another memo pad, tinkers with his pen.

Shirley's taken off her shoes. Her stockinged feet are sliding about under the chair, bumping against the legs. Against Frank's chair, too; her husband doesn't seem to notice. She's crying. Quietly. Trying to brush the tears off her cheeks with her fingers.

'Please, Bob, I...' Her voice falters. 'I can't find my handbag. It's somewhere under the chair. It's got my hanky.'

'Hanky?' Finally, he gets it and grabs his box of tissues. 'Here, take these. Use as many as you like.'

'It's okay.' Frank stands up, takes the tissue box and puts it on his own chair. He removes his wife's glasses and wipes her face. 'Come on now. Put your shoes back on. It's just a bad day.' Above his wife's head, he glares at the doctor. Warns him to be careful with his words. Enough damage has been done.

The doctor, back behind his desk, takes out his prescription pad and begins to line up the sheets of carbon. He clears his throat. 'Shirley's only in her sixties,' he says. 'There's not a lot...' He looks at Frank. 'But I can give you something, Frank. To help you manage. To help Shirley sleep.'

'That won't be necessary, Doctor.' Frank picks the handbag up off the floor. 'Here you are, Shirl.' He passes over the bag. 'We don't want her drugged up all the time.' Then taking his wife's hand, he leads her from the surgery.

When the local pastor pressed him, Frank joined the army. He was 21. They sent him north to Queensland, then put him in a troop carrier with other young men from all over Australia. This ship took him further north, to a tropical island off New Guinea. In a sweltering jungle, smelling of rotting fruit and stagnant water, he waited. Terrified of what might happen next.

They gave him as many cigarettes as he wanted, but even the strongest rollies couldn't dull the pain of an unsightly ulcer

eating away at his leg. The rollies couldn't numb his brain, either. A Japanese soldier lined up in his rifle sights, his palms sweating, hands shaking, what was he to do? The little nip was certainly his enemy, but when all was said and done, you couldn't say it was a fox or a rabbit.

After the war, back at the farm, his family found him moody, unpredictable. Frank and his father had never seen eye to eye, and he wasn't surprised when the old man suggested he look for work elsewhere. It seemed while Frank was away, serving his country, his younger brother had taken his place. It left a nasty taste. He drifted from farm to farm and was about to move to the city when he met Shirley O'Connor. In the town hall, all dolled up for the annual Debutante Ball. Shirley was no longer a debutante, being in her late twenties, but she was more beautiful than any of them. He plucked up the courage and asked her for a dance. The band was playing *The Tennessee Waltz*, a catchy country and western song, top of the Billboard charts. If there was one thing Frank could do, it was dance. Light on his feet, army posture, he was a stand-out. Shirley could also dance. Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, they called them. Six months later, she agreed to marry him. Finally, his ship had come in.

Their first baby was stillborn. A few days later, when Frank came to take Shirley home from the hospital, Dr Miller told him his wife felt a bit low. 'She'll need to take it easy for a bit, Frank.' Frank knew all about feeling low; whatever happened, you had to pick yourself up and get on with it. There was a war to fight. Shirley had a house and a husband to take care of.

His wife was standing by the window in the maternity ward, staring outside, dressed and ready to leave. She'd put on some make-up and brushed her hair. She was a good-looking girl; she'd get her shape back soon.

'Come on, now.' He picked up her case and took her arm.

'I'm all right, Frank. Let go.' She pulled away. 'I'm all right,

I said.'

A nurse approached and Frank took her arm again.

'Shirley, don't be silly. You're still weak.'

In the years to come, she gave birth to five children in that same hospital. Each time, her small waistline increased a little. After the fourth, John, Frank bought her a whalebone corset to give her her figure back and an army surplus washing machine to help with the laundry.

It's pitch black, no moon. A car whizzes past and a dog barks. Shirley lies beside Frank in the bed they've shared for more than thirty years.

'Frank, do you remember when you used to come up to our farm on a motorbike? Red dust all over your hair.' She nudges him. 'With all that lovely, curly hair, it was no wonder everyone thought you were handsome.'

Frank's hair is no longer plentiful, but he can't sleep through such a compliment. 'Weren't you the lucky one?' He puts his arm over his wife's stomach. 'I think I deserve a kiss.'

'Not now, Frank. We've got things to do. Doug's just brought some apricots over. For preserving.'

'Doug?'

'Dougie. You know. From Allendale. He wants me to go to the Red Cross dance with him. He's a nice fellow, but he's not really my sort.'

'No, he's not. I'm your sort, wouldn't you say?'

'Are you? I hope so. Mum and Dad say we have to get married. As soon as we can. But people will do their sums. They always do.'

Frank sits up in bed. 'That's a helluva thing to say, Shirl. You wanted to get married as much as I did.' He sighs. 'In the end, it didn't really matter. We lost it.'

'Lost it? Lost what?'

'Lost the baby. Our baby. We lost it. But we had some

more. We...'

'As if you'd know.' She rolls over, her back to him. 'What do you know about having babies? You were never around. Never took me to the hospital. I always had to ask other people.'

He's been ambushed. Again. In the same place.

'How could you expect me to walk into the front bar in my condition? No woman could.'

'Shirley, stop. We've been through all this before. Hundreds of times. You don't know what you're saying.'

'Is that right? Well, what about Maureen? Nowhere to be found. Bob Miller had to come and get me.'

Frank does remember Maureen. He hadn't been 'nowhere'. He'd been at the Commercial having a beer. It was a Friday, the day all working men go to the pub for a well-earned drink.

'Hey, Frankie,' the barman had called out. 'That's your Paul, isn't it?' A young boy stood squirming in the doorway. 'Come on in, Paul. It's okay. Your dad's here.'

The boy ran in. 'Dad, come quick. Baby's on the way.'

Frank hadn't even climbed off his stool before Bob Miller had wiped his mouth on a paper napkin and located his bag.

'It'll be quicker if I pick her up, Frank.' He dropped a note on the bar to cover his half-eaten steak sandwich.

'You said it, Doc,' a local wag shouted. 'Frank's already done his bit.' The place erupted.

Paul clutched his father's arm, pulling him through the uproar. 'Come on, Dad, Nanna says we gotta get home. Take Mum's things to hospital.'

'To hospital? Right then. If that's what the good woman...' Frank struggled to get his hat on.

Paul pulled harder, his face flushed. 'Dad, come on. Hat don't matter.'

'Boy's right, Frank,' the publican hollered. 'Hat don't

matter. '

Frank turns on the bedside lamp. The lads certainly got their money's worth that evening. He gets up and takes his dressing gown out of his wardrobe. 'I'm not listening. How come you can remember all this, but you can't even remember the names of your own children?'

'I remember what I need to. I don't know where you were but I have my suspicions.' Shirley is sitting up too. He is not going to get away with it. She is fearless, playing out a fight that's as old as the marriage. 'Why do you stay, Frank? Why don't you go and live in the pub?'

'Yeah, that's a good idea.' He can't help himself. On he goes, line perfect. 'Why don't I? Let you look after five kids on your own.'

'Go on then, do it. Leave us, Frank. We'd be better off without you.'

She lies back down, her back to him. Pulls the bedclothes over her head. Frank's hands tremble as he ties his sash. Those children were her life. Now she can't even remember their names. He moves around to her side of the bed, rubbing his fingers into the stubby crevices in his chin. She's right. He should've been there, taken her to the hospital. He crouches down. Places his hand gently on her arm.

'Why do we keep doing this? You know I'd never leave you, Shirl. Ever.'

She sniffs and shifts about, takes the covers off her head. Pats his hand and starts to sing. Full-bodied and full volume. '*I was dancing, with my darlin' to the Tennessee Waltz when an old friend I happened to see.*' She stops.

'Frank, can't you hear them? The band. They're back. They're calling the last dance.'

In the dim light, he can see her eyes. Shining. Excited.
Those same eyes. That same night.

‘The last dance?’ He takes hold of the blankets, throwing them aside. ‘Right then. We’d better get a move on.’

‘Show ‘em how it’s done.’ She laughs.

With his help, she untangles herself from the sheets, steps over the cascading blankets and onto the floor. He squares his shoulders, extends his hand and pulls her close.

‘Let’s show ‘em.’

Anne Hotta lives in Victoria after spending many years in Japan. She is a teacher with various hobbies, the most important being creative writing. She has had several short stories published and others have received awards both here and overseas.