

WALKING IN THE DARK

Pamela Baker

I slip through the back door, closing it softly behind me.

The old apple tree spills over the side fence. It hasn't been pruned for years. After the stuffy overcrowded house, I shiver in the cooler air. I take a deep breath and smell the mint growing near the back door.

As my eyes grow accustomed to the dim light, I see that the ceramic pot where Mum planted the herb has been smashed, shards lying on the ground, the spilled earth dry and crumbly. She'd be furious. Peering closer, I discover the mint has taken root beside the broken pot. Now it's sprawled across the whole garden bed, circling the pond where goldfish used to swim, I see it makes a thick untidy fringe, so that the stones marking the edge of the water have vanished. *A wanton plant*, Mum always said, *must be contained in a pot*.

I yank out a few stalks of the *wanton* mint, but there's so much I soon give up. I've been clearing out the old place, but I haven't got around to the garden.

I found the long ruler with the wooden base used for measuring the hemlines on our skirts. My sister and I had to stand on the kitchen table, rotating slowly while she marked the fabric with chalk. No fidgeting. She used the ruler to whack us around the legs too. Many times, we went to school with our long socks pulled up over the red welts on our calves. Treats in school lunch boxes to make up for the whacking. A morsel of pink jelly coated on coconut falling on my tunic. Telling my friends my mother kept the last jelly cake for my lunch. *Someone has to spoil me*.

I hear my sister's shrill voice calling *good night* to a neighbour. Any second Richard and my daughters will come looking for me. I want to be left alone, left to ponder my mother's pale face, her contorted facial muscles, her gaze fixed on me, those final whispered words.

I creep down the drive, staying in the shadows of the tall shrubs until I'm out on the footpath. Someone's calling my name: *Jinny, Jinny*. Richard, an anxious note in his voice. I walk swiftly away, finding myself following the old route to the Swimming Baths, not along Canterbury Road, the way we always went as kids, a weaving route along lanes and back streets. But it's not the Baths I'm drawn to, it's that other place deeper into Surrey Park. I hurry through the reserve. One of the old gum trees from when I was a girl is still standing, creaking in the night air, although there's little breeze.

Now I can smell the water. Not the stink of chlorine, but the sour muddy smell of the old Surrey Dive. I leave the road and step on the grass. A pale moon in the sky, skating clouds. Only a faint glimmer from the water. No fence now, which seems extraordinary. Everything about the Dive has changed, but I can still sense the fear and mystery that always overshadowed the place. As a kid I'd walk past peering through the gaps in the picket fences, to stare at the murky brown surface surrounded by high cliffs. Tall Norfolk pines along one side cast their shadows into the water, swaying and rippling over the muddy surface, as if whispering about what was underneath. I used to imagine the Dive as the perfect place to dispose of a body.

We grew up hearing of people drowning there. The high wooden fence was topped with rolls of barbed wire. The single gate was manned by groundsmen, usually a man with thick arms and a battered hat on his head. *Hop it*, he told any boys pretending they were old enough to swim in the Dive.

No kids were allowed to swim there, only members of the Surrey Park Men's Swimming Club. We kids swam at the Baths, a neat rectangular pool with blue water so clear you could see the black lines marking the swimming lanes on the white tiled bottom. Lines, straight as a ruler, until someone dived in, making the lines waver. Even at the deep end the bottom was easy to see. A large painted sign, ignored by most boys, banned running. Two diving boards, the minor one for the timid, only a metre above the water, and the big board, three metres high. More than once I had a stinging belly from a dive that was too flat.

One night, by removing a few pickets from the fence, my sister and several boys forced their way into the Dive. They dived in and swam out to the floating platform in the middle, over the deepest part. Nobody knew how deep it was. One of the boys had pinched a bottle of port from his father's cabinet. *We all took a swill*, my sister said, laughing at my shocked face. She threatened the boys would tie my hands together and throw me in the Dive if I told on them.

Wherever she went, wolf whistles followed my sister, dressed in brief shorts and low-necked blouses, especially in summer. Three times her photo was spread across a full page of the *Sun*, wearing her bathers and a sash printed in blue letters across her thirty-six-inch bust. My father beamed with pride at her success. Using the big kitchen scissors, he cut out the picture and pinned it to the fridge door. *My beautiful blonde girl*, he said. Her nickname was *Foll*, from the *Folies Bergère*, when she danced the cancan in the middle of the school oval, kicking her legs so high you could see her knickers. A crowd surrounded her, bringing the senior mistress, in her sensible shoes, clumping down the front steps, frowning.

I creep closer as if I'll see my mother's faint anguished face reflected in the water. But it's too dark to see anything. I breathe in smells of damp earth and muddy water. The water is shallow these days, no longer a dangerous swimming hole secured by barbed wire and guards. Years ago, the cliffs around the Dive collapsed, filling in the old quarry.

In my grandparents' day, the men mining the quarry for the Box Hill Brick Company dug so deep they broke through to the roof of a vast underground cavern. The water rushed up so fast the miners drowned, struggling to swim to safety. We kids imagined the white bones of men buried on the muddy bottom of the Dive. Some people swore they could taste salt in the water, and if you could dive deep enough into the subterranean cavern you would eventually surface in Port Phillip Bay. Or even Bass Strait.

I lean over and taster the water at the edge. I spit it out. Muddy, not salty. Before I was born, my mother competed in the annual swimming carnivals at the Surrey Dive. Thousands flocked to Box Hill to watch these events. When my sister was a toddler, Mum continued to race. Nan moved in to care for us so she could maintain her training.

I should return to the house, but instead, I sit on the grass, clutching my shawl around me, quivering with cold and a sort of nervous agitation.

Jinny, *I wish you could have met my special friend*, Mum said. When she spoke of Harry, she always used my pet name. Then her voice sounded softer or warmer, different. I could picture Harry's twinkling eyes and tanned skin, even in winter. He had a bit of Maori blood and dark curly hair. He sang *I dream of Jeanie with the Light Brown Hair* to my mother. A fine tenor voice, she said, smiling in a dreamy way. I first thought my name was like my mother's. Jean and little Jean, Jeanette.

Harry seemed like a character in a book, as romantic as Wally in the Billabong books. I am certain she never spoke to my sister about Harry. Handsome Harry with his dark curly hair, *just like yours, darling*. Eventually I asked what happened to him. She mumbled that he had returned to New Zealand. When I asked if she had photos of him, she paused, and shook her head. I wonder if she had some hidden away somewhere.

She told me Harry was a great swimmer too. Three times winning the hundred yards at the aquatic carnival at the Dive. He became famous for something else too. The highest rock striking out over the edge of the steep cliffs of the Dive, about sixty feet above the water, was called the Pinnacle. Harry climbed it, smeared his body with methylated spirits and struck a match. Streaking blue and yellow flames, he dived into the water.

I picture my mother's fingernails tapping against her front teeth, a nervous habit she had when excited. The crowd was silent when Harry did not appear for what seemed a long

time. Then, a communal sigh of relief when his dark head finally appeared. Everyone cheered. The reason he was under water so long was because the force of the jump had dragged his togs down to his ankles and he couldn't kick properly until, his lungs bursting, he yanked them up. She stopped and smiled in such an enigmatic way that I felt she had forgotten I was *there*.

As a kid I wished Harry was my father. I'm shaking now, but not with cold. My fingers quiver against my cheeks.

Four days ago, I dragged a chair close to my mother's hospital bed. I bent my head to hear her fluttery voice as she whispered that she had something to tell me. Her intense gaze frightened me. I took her hand. Her mouth twisted. She made a strangled sound before she turned her head to the wall, and died.

Pamela Baker has been writing literary fiction for many years after a teaching career in adult education. She has won first prizes, including the Alan Marshall Short Story Award 2012, and the Williamstown Short Story Competition 1997, and been published in journals, including *Busybird Publishing* 2019 and the *Australian Multicultural Review* 2004.