

The Point

He came to them by water when they were kids, when the old timber jetty was still there, long before the ferry burned up on the river like cracker night without the bangs. Down they went to meet him, but got there so early that they had to wait for what seemed like hours. Jordy took his nerves out on his bike, fanging up and down the jetty, arms shuddering over the gappy planking, fingers buzzing with adrenaline each time he skidded to a yet more dare-devilish stop at the far end.

Bel wondered if today was the day when he would finally miscalculate and careen over the edge. She thought about ticking him off, but the water wasn't that deep and the bike was near buggered and he could swim well enough, so she leaned on the section of railing where the ferry docked and took turns squinting upriver and staring down into the water where bully fish hovered in rock shadows and sea lettuce swished with the current.

"*Richard* is stuck-up," Jordy said as he sped past, sending vibrations under her feet. "I say we call him Dick, whether he likes it or not!"

Bel had to agree that the omens concerning their cousin were not good. Sydney. Private school. Only child. He was a good age, though—older than Jordy but younger than herself. And he was brave. He'd have to be to spend days alone on a ship to Hobart, then find his way to the ferry that would complete the journey to The Point. Never mind coming this far to stay with relatives he didn't even know.

She searched the bright and the dark patches of the river for the squat shape of the ferry, but saw no sign. There was still time to duck up to the house and brush her

hair, even to put on a dress that made her look more grown-up. But she decided against it. Jordy would notice, and there'd be no end to it.

"Who'd call a kid Richard Edward?" Jordy sang out as he fired himself up for another hairsbreadth skid at the business end of the jetty. "Hey, Dick! *Dick Ed!*"

Bel and Jordy belonged to the second-youngest of their grandmother's nine children, and that made them—along with Richard, who belonged to the youngest—the last of a long string of Devereux cousins to spend summers with Gran at The Point.

Scratched and ruled in pencil and ink on the kitchen door frame were that many names and dates and stripes it was hard to work out exactly which cousin had been how tall and when.

For Bel and Jordy it was something to look forward to through the year: being the kids from the grand white weatherboard on the headland. The place had been built out on the water's edge at the southern end of a popular holiday beach, on a salty reach of the river near to the sea. The house had seven bedrooms, and many-paned windows on every side, and was encircled by a stone wall that seemed to grow out of the rocks of the headland itself. The Point lorded it over every one of the ticky-tacky shacks that rimmed the beach. Its garden had palm trees like a row of shaggy sun umbrellas, their trunks conjoined and overgrown by wild and weedy vines. A rocky path led directly from the garden gate down to the jetty, which had been built for the exclusive use of the owners of The Point.

Bel and Jordy had been told that Gran no longer had a lot of money, but everywhere at The Point they saw the remnants of it. Fading on the floors were Persian rugs that Bel and Jordy would imagine into flying carpets that bucked and soared over the shimmery water which filled every window of the second- and third-storey rooms. In one of the bedrooms was an elaborately carved four-poster bed whose lumpy mattress became the deck of the good ship *Lollipop* and whose curtains billowed like sails in the sea breeze that cooled the house each afternoon. Bel supposed she would have to grow out of all of that soon, maybe even now. Who knew what fancy kids from Sydney did for fun?

Gran hadn't seen Richard since he was a baby, but she didn't seem fussed. She was a big woman, and in the summer she wore insubstantial floral dresses that flew up and flapped open to reveal mammoth white legs gnarled with blue and purple veins. She always had a hanky that was draped over her face as she sunned herself on

a canvas recliner, or tucked into the long stripe of her cleavage. It was quite something to be consoled on Gran's lap, where the sting of stubbed toes and hurt feelings subsided in a pillowy squish of bosom.

Gran had been born in India, and you could tell. For one thing there was a picture of her as a naked baby on a tiger skin; for another she retained a companion who was neither her servant nor her equal. She was Boo to Gran, Auntie Boo to the children, and Bel and Jordy never knew or thought to ask where she'd come from or why she didn't have a family of her own. Her jobs were to sit out on the terrace with Gran, knit, gossip, make the tea, help with nagging and scolding, and to lose at cards.

"Thirty days in the bun shop with your mouth sewn up!" Auntie Boo would crow as she tabled three tens.

But if Auntie Boo had tens, Gran would have queens. "Three witches!" she'd cackle, though Bel knew she said *bitches* when she thought the kids weren't listening.

Theirs was not a baking Gran, and not even Auntie Boo spent much time in the kitchen as far as Bel could recall. And yet, somehow, at lunch and dinner, out would come a big oval plate piled with everything the children liked. There were slices of bread mangled from the butter being too hard to spread—the butter was put on in big yellow gobs and the bread was white because there was no other kind. There were wedges of ripe red tomato that tasted like ripe red tomato, and chunks of lettuce that nobody ever thought of calling iceberg because lettuce was lettuce and that's all there was to it. But best of all was the cold meat. Camp pie. Or Spam. Pink and gelid, straight out of a tin, cut into salty-sweet, grainy slices with round moulded shoulders. Sometimes Jordy used one of the bone-handled butter knives to cut the meat into little matchsticks that slid down his throat without any intervention from his teeth.

"What do you suppose *he* has for tea?" Jordy mused, the night before the morning the ferry was due.

"He'll be right. You'll see," Gran said, taking a licked hanky to a brown mark on Jordy's neck that turned out not to be dirt after all, but suntan. "He's a Devereux."

When the ferry came in leaking rainbows out its back end there was a kid standing at the stern with his hands in the pockets of his short pants, and Bel was pleased to see that he wasn't too tall. Jordy took stock of the short-back-and-sides and the poncy V-neck waistcoat, but didn't let himself get too worried: that sort of thing was easily fixed.

The ferrymen lowered the gangplank, and Bel and Jordy's cousin marched over it, chin forward-thrust. His was a sharp-jawed face that you might call square, except that it was probably a tad wider than it was long, and Bel observed that the boy had yet to grow into his new front teeth.

"I'm Ricky," he said with a grin that fired the chips of colour in his irises to a glint, and Bel and Jordy knew that he was going to be all right.

Jordy did try it on, naturally, calling his cousin "Dick Ed"—but it was as pathetic a sight as watching a pup humping a top dog's haunch. Ricky only sighed and rolled his eyes in Bel's direction, as if to say *kids these days*, and Jordy never did it again.

Ricky wasn't usually the superior type, though. Not at all. He was up for anything. Once, Bel mentioned rowing the width of the river. She'd only been flapping her gums, really, but before you knew it the three of them were out in the middle, having busted a rowlock and lost one oar over the side, and with a stiffening breeze and no lifejackets. A trawler towed them back into the jetty where a fat shape and a thin shape gradually refined themselves into the figures of a thunderous Gran and a nerve-wracked Auntie Boo.

Jordy and Bel made a bit of pocket money from the local farmer by selling his eggs around the beach shacks on a Tuesday morning, but it was Ricky who saw the potential in this arrangement. With just a little surcharge for each customer, he pointed out, Jordy and Bel would be able to go up a shelf in the confectionery display at the milk-and-paper shop that serviced the shacks in the summertime. Ricky even had a plan for avoiding suspicion when they spent their gains, sticking a plum in his mouth and saying *please* and *thankyou* and *eversomuch* to the shopkeeper, then making a big show of paying from his own pocket and sharing out the sweets between his poor and pathetically grateful cousins.

One time the three came home empty-handed and salmon-shouldered in the dinghy after a day's fishing, and Jordy had an idea which, had it been left to his own and Bel's devices, likely would have remained just a whim: to nick half of the snotties that were getting all stiff and slimy in a bucket Mr Carmichael had left unattended on the jetty. But Ricky was there, so before long the children had carried their haul up to The Point and cleaned the fish themselves, only cutting their fingers a handful of times in doing it.

They were busy swatting flies away from the drying fillets when Gran loomed in the evening light, and Bel and Jordy remembered—too late—what they’d forgotten to tell Ricky about trevally. Gran looked displeased, Ricky perplexed.

“Where did you get them, Richard?” asked Gran.

“We set…” Jordy started.

“Are *you* Richard? I said: Richard, where did you get them?”

“Just down off the Pigeonholes,” Ricky said, puffed with pride.

“The *Pigeonholes*? I see,” said Gran.

Bel and Jordy pulled faces, mimed twisting motions at the corners of their mouths, but Ricky resolutely held his grandmother’s gaze.

“And with handlines, I suppose?”

“Um…actually…” Bel said.

“Belinda!” warned Gran. “Go on, Richard.”

Ricky widened his eyes, threw back his head and gave it everything he had.

“Gran, you should have seen how they were biting! It was all we could do to keep up with them,” he said, pausing for effect and grinning triumphantly at his cousins. “We caught so many that we gave half a bucketful to Mr Carmichael for his dinner.”

So Gran and Auntie Boo went to work with a hearth brush each, and it was three bumsore kids who set off down to the Carmichaels with an enamel plate piled with fillets.

“How’d she know?” Ricky asked.

“Snotties don’t take a hook,” Bel said. “Or almost never. And we’d have had to be deeper than the Pigeonholes.”

“If you’re going to get trevally, it has to be with a net,” Jordy said.

“Jesus, you hung me out to dry, mate,” Ricky said. “We don’t even *have* a bloody net.”

“Yeah,” said Jordy, by way of an apology.

“Doesn’t matter,” Ricky said, catching his cousin in a headlock and giving him a decent knuckling. “I like Spam better than fish anyway.”

They were great times the cousins had that summer, and the next, but it would be a mistake to say they thought these days would never end. But neither did they ever

stop to consider that these summers couldn't go on forever. The impermanence of the world was well beyond their purview.

As it happened, Gran's heart gave out. It was midwinter, and she died on the bathroom floor of her house up in town with her teeth still sitting on the Laminex bench beside the basin. After that, Auntie Boo went into a home and The Point was sold out of the family, because there were nine kids to share it between and too few of them could agree on how to do it.

Fifty years later, Bel and Jordy again found themselves waiting for their cousin. By now the jetty was a narrow concrete pier made safe all around with Perspex barriers, and the ferry was a sleek white stinkpot with a pricey bar. The beachfront had become a jostle of corrugated iron and brick, each block having been subdivided and every building having gone higher or wider to capture a greater share of the view. There were shacks on the other side of the road now, and other roads and more shacks behind them.

The Point had become a restaurant, a "dining experience" that had been successfully pitched to interstate and overseas visitors who were capable of paying for the privilege. The chef was in every food magazine and on every lifestyle program, usually pictured out on the terrace with a basketful of fresh mussels, or else at his bench, massaging a glistening chunk of a cow that he was certain had plopped out of its mother's uterus within a specified, unfeasibly short radius of his kitchen.

Richard, who had not been Ricky for some decades, was bringing his wife down from Sydney to eat at The Point. She'd been dining out, he said, on the fact that The Point had once been her husband's grandmother's summerhouse. And bellyaching, he said, that she was the last among her friends to get down there for a meal. He wanted to show her the old place, and the sign on the approaching thoroughfare that read Devereux Lane. And he wanted Bel and Jordy to join them for lunch.

"Who does he reckon is going to pay for that?" Jordy had asked Bel when she told him the news.

"I suppose he expects we'll go Dutch," said Bel, who'd had concerns herself, and then been quietly relieved when her husband said he'd rather stick to his plan to go on a fishing trip with his mates.

“It’s all right for Richard, the cheeky bastard. His world’s got more zeros on the end of it than mine, or yours.”

After Gran had died, Bel and Jordy’s parents had rented out one of the ticky-tacky shacks on the beach for a week each summer. During these weeks, Bel and Jordy would look down the beach to the headland and see other kids scarpering barefoot up and down the path between the jetty and The Point’s garden gate. One year Bel struck up a friendship with the girl from The Point, but when she went up there to play it was all a bit much to see some other girl’s things in her cupboards, and she’d ended up in tears with the parents walking her back along the beach to the rent-a-shack.

As a teenager Bel dreamed of marrying a man rich enough to buy The Point back for her, but instead she married Dave—a carpenter with dark curling hair and big, blunt-fingered hands that looked like they could hold anything—and downgraded her dream to one where she worked hard enough to buy The Point back for herself. She and Dave had four kids, though, and they were always needing sports uniforms or their teeth straightened, and while Bel put away as much as she could it was always two steps forward, one step back, and when she’d saved enough for a summer house the best they could afford was a ticky-tacky shack on the beach.

It was a little fibro box, painted apricot, and sometimes when Bel looked at it she was filled with pride. Other times she was overcome with the shame of failure. Each time she looked up at The Point it stung her that there was no work that would be enough, nor hours left in her lifetime, to drag the past back through the eye of that particular needle.

Over the years The Point had changed hands many times, and colour too. It went from white to pink to yellow, then back to white, briefly, before it was painted a lurid shade of milkshake green. One year it sold at auction to a couple with a plan to turn it into a hotel. They ripped out the garden, except for the palm trees, and launched into a full-scale renovation. They knocked out a handful of internal walls and started painting over the milky green with a sandy beige, but only finished two sides before they ran out of money and left The Point lying dormant for almost a decade.

Then came the property boom, pushing up rates and the temptation for shack owners to sell out even higher. The milk-and-paper shop started opening all year round, selling blue cheese and boutique local wines, and everyone near Bel and Dave

subdivided or sold. Eventually they, too, were swept two blocks inland by all the money that was washing around. With Dave retired and no super to speak of, and Bel's income only just covering day-to-day things, they could hardly turn down the opportunity to have a little bit in reserve. They still had the smell of the ocean, and sand under their rugs, but could see water only from the window of the upstairs bedroom. Their river view was now a shallow slice of blue made triangular by the roofs of the houses across the street.

Being around Jordy always made Bel feel fortunate. After each of his divorces he'd ended up without a house to live in, and now he was avoiding the trap of settling for second best by settling for nothing at all. He slept at Bel and Dave's when he wasn't housesitting, or couch-surfing his way around the world.

"Never pay for anything you can get for free," he would preach to Bel, who was the one who paid the bill for the landline he used when he was out of credit on his mobile.

Jordy knew every parking dodge in the city, including the one where you grabbed a spot in the Town Hall car park, then avoided a ticket by giving your numberplate over the counter and claiming to be there on council business. He was famous for turning up at people's places at meal times; and for all the years that their mother spent withering in a nursing home, Jordy visited her at breakfast time and cleaned up whatever she left on her tray.

He wasn't all Scrooge. He lavished gifts on his own kids, and on Bel and Dave's, and at Christmas he'd bring a case of wine for the table, even if it was undrinkable plonk that would clutter the bottom shelf of Bel and Dave's pantry until they managed to use it up in cooking.

Bel looked over at Jordy where he stood on the pier, hugging his coat around himself. The ferry was late and the weather bitter; it was one of those snowy spring days when, as Jordy said, you could smell the penguin crap on the breeze. Jordy had rung The Point to check that the place was BYO and the girl he spoke to said of course, and would he care to avail himself of one of the special compartments in their cellar where they kept their customers' special wines, but Jordy said he'd probably be all right. And now, slung over his shoulder, was a bright-blue cooler bag that doubtless contained some species of bargain-table horse piss that would cost about a third of the

corkage at The Point. Bel wondered if it was too late too back out. She could have a sick grandchild, perhaps. Or a migraine.

“Here they come,” Jordy said, nodding to the white streak emerging from under the distant bridge. “*Richard*, hey? Suppose that was her work.”

Bel and Jordy had seen Richard a few times over the years, including at his wedding, where his bride had worn a slightly disgruntled look all day. Bel had put this down to it being the first time the poor girl had been around so many Devereuxs at once. Theirs was a family of loud, freckled men and gap-toothed women, many of whom had been blessed with the narrow waist and ballooning arse that in family parlance was known as the Devereux Derriere. Bel doubted this was what Monica had hoped to observe in the gene pool she was about to plunge into.

Bel fluffed her hair and wished she'd been able to buy something new to wear today, even if it was only a scarf. What she was wearing had looked okay in the mirror, but now she was out in the daylight she could see the pilling on her cardigan, and how the crispness had leached out of her supposedly slimming black pants. She always coloured her hair herself, and this time she'd missed a bit and left a flash of grey at the hairline behind her ear. She doubted anyone would notice, but she knew, and that was enough. All the while she was thinking about her clothes and her hair, she was also hating herself for being so superficial, and for being so susceptible to Monica's queenliness.

The trouble was, Bel couldn't even console herself that at least she had earned her own money, because Monica had done the same. There was no score upon which Bel could rate herself more highly. *Thirty days in the bun shop with your mouth sewn up played three bitches*, every time. Bel could only accept that she might actually be as dull, simpering and insignificant as she felt in the presence of Monica Devereux, who even had the last name that Bel had traded away in the transaction of marriage. These relentless bad thoughts started to hurt her head and, for a moment, Bel thought she had even managed to manifest that migraine.

Richard stepped off the ferry with his gap-toothed grin blazing, grasped Jordy's hand in both of his, then bent down to kiss Bel on the cheek. She wasn't ready for the kiss to the second cheek, and it landed slightly wetly on the corner of her mouth. This put Bel off balance, in the way that badly executed social kissing can be expected to do, but it also rattled one of her old chestnuts. The one about drifting away, down here on the island, getting left laughably behind. Just ever so briefly, Bel

wondered if everyone everywhere else kissed the second cheek these days, and she was just too Tasmanian to know it.

She'd adapted by the time Monica swooped in. Peck, peck. Left and right. Perhaps there was a particular order to the thing. Then Monica brushed her hand up and down Bel's upper arm and swung the shag of her variegated blonde hair to one side and said how was good to see her and asked was it always so cold. Bel could smell the sunshine—the Sydney Harbour stuff, all blue-and-white flags fluttering—on her skin.

“This is excellent olive oil,” Monica said, dipping her bread.

They were on the second floor, a simple, cavernous space in which every table seemed to float on the view. Industrial beams now kept apart the ceiling and the floor, although the varnished floorboards still mapped the rooms in which Bel and her brother and her cousin had once made their games. Downstairs, where Gran and Auntie Boo had centralised themselves, was now the engine of the restaurant, and upstairs—in what had once been the Devereux kids' bedrooms—the truly wealthy hosted their private dinner parties.

In Bel's wallet, along with her credit card, was a substantial amount of cash. She'd brought it along so she might avoid the embarrassment that occurred when restaurants refused to split a table's bill. Now that she looked at the menu and the wine list, she knew that it wasn't going to be enough. Not if she had more than one course, or more than one glass of anything but the very cheapest of the wines that came by the glass. Feeling teary, she began to think about accepting if Richard offered to pay. But then, how strenuously should she protest? Bel would still have to reach for her wallet and insist, and what if she did it just a shade too well and was still short?

“Really,” said Jordy, dunking a crust. “See, I reckon that it's just olive oil. Probably straight off the shelf at Woolies.”

Bel saw that Jordy had set his menu aside, having barely glanced at it. Hadn't he seen the prices?

Richard laughed. “Jordy's never been one for admiring the emperor's new clothes.”

Monica made a tight, irritated gesture towards smiling, but Jordy was undeterred. “Nella, my youngest, she says getting all obsessed with food is a middle-

aged thing. She reckons food is for people who've lost interest in sex," he said. "She's a trick."

The waitress reappeared. She was a girl of about Nella's age, with a thick plait of dark-gold hair and a tongue stud that made her lisp just a smidge. Bel took in her low-slung jeans and the way the sides of her feet almost fell out of her skimpy black flats, and wondered if these accoutrements were like handicaps. Maybe you were only truly beautiful, these days, if you were—like this girl—still lovely even when you'd done everything you could to make yourself look like you'd been dragged backwards through the ragbag.

The girl took Bel's and Richard's orders with an air of insolent politeness, and Bel noticed that she didn't have a notepad.

"I've read so much about the beetroot gnocchi that I'll *have* to have that to start with," Monica said. "And the kingfish to follow. Is that not too big? I'll need room for dessert, of course. I understand your dessert wines are *very* special."

Bel could feel it all getting out of control, the bill spilling onto a second page. Entrée, main, dessert, three kinds of wine. What if Monica and Richard decided it was easiest just to split the total four ways? Why hadn't she just told Richard and Monica to come over to the shack after lunch?

"And for you, sir?" the girl asked Jordy.

"Ah, nothing for me, thanks, love," he said.

"Are you sure, sir?" she said, frowning a little.

He tapped his fork on his wineglass.

"I'll stick with the grog for the minute," he said, winking in Monica's direction as he reached down into his cooler bag and pulled out a one-litre cask of white wine. He filled the generous scoop of his glass almost to the top and had a noisy slurp.

"Ahh.'Twas a fine month!"

You are his sister, not his keeper, Bel said to herself, touching a blessedly cold hand to her burning cheek. The waitress withdrew, cheeks dimpling from a held-back smile, and Bel noticed that Richard, too, was bottling a grin.

The three main courses arrived on plates so vast that they knocked rims across the table, and the food looked small and artful in their centres. Bel's stomach was so churned up from thinking about the inevitable moment when the bill was slipped in its

leather folder onto the table that she didn't feel like eating a bite of her quail. *Just relax*, she told herself. *That's what Dave would say. It's only money. We can go without next month.*

"I don't suppose you'd mind getting me a plate, would you, love?" Jordy asked the waitress.

This time the girl said nothing, but she came back with another great white disc in her arms and set it down at Jordy's place, then hovered curiously. Once she'd given up, he reached again into his cooler bag and extracted a Tupperware container that Bel remembered from their mother's house, it was that old. He peeled the green lid back, and while Bel had begun to feel as if she were watching a movie—all events predetermined, beyond her control—Monica seemed to believe that she could shut herself into a world bordered by her knife and her fork. She ate steadily, and Bel admired the determination with which she set out to enjoy her food.

In the container were a wedge of iceberg lettuce and triangles of ripe red tomatoes. There were slices of white bread that had been spread with a heart-attack's worth of butter, and a compact blue tin of Spam. Jordy tore back its rip-top lid to reveal the rounded rectangle of pale-pink pork product, and the waxy rim of white fat around its edges. He shunted the meat out of the tin and began cutting it into neat slices with the pocketknife that Bel knew he might just as readily use for cleaning out the black stuff from under his fingernails.

Bel felt the motion of the room slow, and still. And there they were, those twins of hers. Pride. Shame.

She looked to her cousin.

Monica dropped her voice into a register that meant business and said, "Richard."

"Go on," said Jordy. "Go on, mate."

Richard reached over the top of Monica's kingfish, sprinkled with threads of priceless saffron, and forked a slab of Spam.

"Don't you ..." Monica whispered, and he'd only taken one bite before she'd pushed back her chair and hissed at him so quietly that Bel heard nothing beyond *mortified* and *manners* and *unbelievable*. Then Monica was heading for the exit, arms crossed tightly across her chest. Bel could see the wait staff standing over at the bar, gesturing, conferring.

"Come on, Bel," Jordy said, holding out a slab of Spam on a fork.

“Quick,” Richard said, eyes sparking with mischief. “Come on, before they chuck us out.”

She took the pink meat in her fingers and put it into her mouth, where her teeth met with no resistance. It tasted of nothing, really, but in a good, reassuring way. Bel reached over and snaffled one of Jordy’s slices of buttered bread, and took a rip at the lettuce. One of the underling chefs had come up from the kitchen and was standing in his whites, peering over. Other diners were getting curious too, craning around to see.

“Spam,” Jordy said to the horrified woman at the next table. “Haven’t you heard? It’s the next big thing.”

His laugh set Richard off, and Bel, too. They laughed until they were laughing like children who were being tickled and couldn’t stop, their chest muscles hurting and their eyes leaking tears. There they were, the Devereuxs: the kids who knew where in this rambling old joint the tank full of terrapins used to stand, who remembered by heart the belching noise made by the old pull-chain toilet when it was out of water, who had climbed all over this very roof shovelling summer hailstones out of the gutters and melting them down in the big, double-handled saucepans. And even though the chef himself had arrived on the floor and was heading towards them with his mouth grimly set, he was—for the moment—a guest in the place that was theirs once again, and as far as they were concerned, he could eat Spam, or get stuffed.