

Prologue

Her name is a beautifully proportioned stream of syllables, it is perfect. I don't remember ever speaking her full name out loud and once I was in love with her, I held the sequence of sounds that is her name in too much reverence to utter them. I simply called her Kate.

Part I

Chapter 1

Euan arrived breathless before the front door of his friend's house. Liam's wife opened the door in response to his frantic knocking.

'Hmm,' she said. Her hand remained on the door handle as she blocked his entrance.

'You've taken your time.' She moved aside to allow him into the hallway. She shut the door slowly and turned to face the anxious Euan.

'Have they been here long?' he asked.

She watched him and then slowly announced, 'They haven't arrived yet.'

She smiled at the shudder of relief that passed through Euan's body. She brushed her dead-straight dark hair away from her thin face and then pointed Euan into the house with a little dance of her fingers as if sweeping him before her. She followed him into the lounge. Euan fussed as he tried to decide where to sit. His choice would determine where he was

when he greeted Clare. Liam's wife watched his indecision like she was an older sister, benevolent but who would also enjoy the sport of his embarrassment.

Euan was a plain looking New Zealander. He was not ugly but he was a young man who could be called handsome on the rare occasions he dressed well and a buoyant mood hijacked his features. He had asked his friend Liam to arrange a dinner so that he could meet Clare, a long haired blonde from upstate New York, studying in New Zealand on a scholarship.

Euan had delayed rushing too early to Liam's house by distracting himself with busy but meaningless work. He had been too successful and had forgotten about the dinner until he was late. Euan was flustered as he stood in the lounge room, the worry that he would be embarrassed before Clare and the other invited guests remained with him.

'You haven't met this girl yet, have you?' Liam's wife asked.

'No.' Euan did not look at her, his eyes flicked from an armchair to a couch to the hard backed chair next to a writing table. Two of the options would declare that he was waiting expectantly, the other that he had been surprised by the guests.

'Liam said she's an exchange student, only here for a year or two,' she said. 'I guess a long term relationship is not uppermost in your mind?' She smiled sarcastically.

Euan gave up deciding on a place to sit and his body slumped with disappointment at his indecisiveness. He looked at Liam's wife.

'I hope there aren't expectations about all this,' he said. Euan ignored the insinuation of only a sexual interest in Clare.

'You don't want an audience? It's the price you pay if you don't want just the two of you,' she said.

'As long as you and Liam don't act like an audience,' Euan said. 'And expect a good performance.' His nervousness made him combative.

Liam's wife watched him shuffle nervously in the middle of the room.

'Just be normal, that's all,' she said. Euan heard compassion in her advice. 'I'll go and tell Liam you're here.' She left.

Liam and his wife's rented house was cramped and dingy. Their furniture was made of dark wood with stern patterned, old fashioned coverings. Euan was reminded of oppressive, forced, childhood visits to his grandmother's home. Liam's windows were covered in heavy curtains, like the stifling ones at his grandmother's, that could close out a mid-summer day, turning beach weather into midnight. Euan stood in the centre of the room and waited. When the doorbell sounded Liam put his head in through the opened door.

'Time to be impressive. You ready?' Liam asked. Euan's face creased. Liam laughed as he left.

Euan thought of possible opening gambits. He decided they were all inadequate and by elimination he was left with a standing, silent and stationary strategy. At least, he thought,

he would not destroy the evening in the first minute. He frowned at his feet and paced half a step in one direction and then the other.

People spend their lives dreaming and planning their great moments but prefer as the time draws close to defer until their plans are better prepared. Euan regretted asking Liam to organise a dinner to meet Clare as he heard voices in the hallway. He knew, with no doubt, that he would look stupid.

Three guests entered the room. They were preceded by Liam like they were prospective purchasers led by a real estate agent. Euan was the embarrassed owner who had not had time to flee. He lifted his face as the group entered the room and was genuinely startled by their presence as if he never really expected that moment to arrive.

'Here he is,' Liam flourished. 'The waiting physicist.' Liam laughed. He enjoyed the sport of Euan's discomfort.

Euan was introduced to the guests. The other two were a couple. Euan had already met Hamish, a big-boned, large-nosed, red-haired post-graduate geology student and he had seen Kate on campus but she had not noticed Euan. Clare's greeting was distracted. She had not been warned that there would be a potential partner for her and she was annoyed with Hamish and Kate, but she immediately absolved Euan of blame when she registered his shock. She thought he was as surprised as she was.

Euan's first, close-up impression of Clare was physical, overwhelming and involuntary. She had pinned her long hair back, on one side only, with a silver and aqua-blue clip. It was subtle and beautiful. With one visual movement her blue eyes and blond hair were

joined. She smiled at Euan with genuine joy as if they shared a common difficulty. Euan thought vagina.

Chapter 2

‘Yes, as I said, I have a scholarship to do a Masters but then I have to go back home again,’ Clare said to Euan.

Euan had been flustered by his unexpected vision and had not listened as Clare had been introduced. He asked a question to which Clare had already provided the answer. Liam slyly rubbed Euan on the back as if to commiserate with him that he had failed with Clare at the outset of the evening. However, Euan’s distraction matched Clare’s, for different reasons, and his initial nervousness endeared him to her.

‘Yes,’ Clare added. ‘Going home will be sad, because I’ve made good friends already but, I miss my family. Still, that’s not for awhile. Not until I pass, that is. Maybe the end of next year.’

‘She’ll pass,’ Hamish interrupted. He eyed Euan and Liam as if to challenge them to disagree. ‘I’ll make sure of that. She’s got a great subject for her thesis and her supervisor doesn’t muck around. She’ll be finished before she knows it.’

Clare was, also, studying geology and Hamish thought she needed his protection against slack academic supervisors and predatory New Zealand males. Hamish wondered if Euan

was one of those males and had arranged the evening to capture Clare but Euan's nervousness and surprise decided Hamish against that.

'I don't know about that,' Clare said with diffidence.

Clare half-smiled at Hamish's quick defence. She looked down at Euan's feet to hide her embarrassment and her annoyance with Hamish. She had recently become Kate's friend, through meeting Hamish in the geology department, and was unable, as yet, to ask Kate to stem Hamish's over-protectiveness.

Clare watched Euan's feet shuffle nervously, as if they were trying to dodge her gaze. She smiled as if his feet were an entertainment. She decided that she liked him.

'Why don't you all sit down,' Liam's wife said when she came into the room and had been introduced. The group that had not moved from the middle of the lounge room. 'Liam will get you something to drink and I'll go back and check on dinner.'

'Do you need help?' Clare asked.

'No, but thanks for asking,' Liam's wife said and looked pointedly at Euan as if she had expected the offer of assistance to come from him.

Euan was quick to sit on the wooden chair next to the writing table, he did not want to sit next to Clare, not yet. He preferred to watch her from a safe distance. His vision had unsettled him. Liam gossiped with Hamish about the University, and the two women and Euan listened until Liam's wife re-entered the lounge room. Her face scowled when she saw that Liam had done nothing about drinks.

'All right then,' she sighed as she accepted domestic responsibility for the evening. 'We can just start dinner if you like,' she said with resignation.

Clare and Euan sat opposite each other at the dining table. Clare became comfortable with Euan the longer she talked and Euan became comfortable with Clare the longer he listened. He had dismissed his sexual image and was eager to hear her stories of American family and college life. He thought she was nice but he quickly decided that she was no Beatrice. That settled him and lightened his mood. He was young enough that his goal remained a relationship with the perfect, idealised woman. However, meeting that woman would be too daunting outside dreams. He thought of Clare's insignificant faults and that put him at ease.

That April day had been warm and it usually takes just one last cold-front of Antarctic air, usually in April, to extinguish the memory of summer. During the meal the windows rattled as the wind came out of nowhere. Branches brushed against the outside of the house. It started raining heavily. The last vestige of summer was shrugged off and the path to winter begun. The last warm day was over and the days of cold winds, bare branches and snow on the mountains had arrived.

The conversation was overrun by the sound of bad weather. Euan smiled, revelling in being sheltered and secure inside the dining room like he was surviving an outside hostility.

'That must be the change,' Liam's wife said.

'Where do you go skiing?' Clare asked Euan.

He told her he had never been.

Clare was surprised, she wondered how someone so close to such a treasure, as the New Zealand ski-fields, had reached adulthood without skiing. She construed Euan's disinclination as a sign of seriousness, which she positively added to his diffidence. She decided that she had a new goal, to change Euan into the man she wanted. He was close, she thought, although she knew little about him. What was required was a little loosening up and some exposure to activities she assumed he would enjoy.

'The University has its own lodge, right on the mountain. Kate has told me how good it is. I can't wait until there's snow. The three of us have booked every Wednesday and Thursday from the last week in May.' She paused as an actor does. 'Why don't you come with us? When there's enough snow.'

Euan did not know where her request came from. He assumed she wasn't asking for immediate sex, that a larger group of people would be involved and that she was simply being friendly. However, he thought, she had asked and he could not for the life of him see how that was not positive.

Euan, for the first time, cut into the chicken dish Liam's wife had prepared as Clare made her surprising request. The meal was cooked in a ginger sauce and Euan thought, momentarily, of the ginger plants that grew outside his rented home. He lived in a one-room apartment that was underneath a two-storey family home. Through floor to ceiling windows he overlooked an overgrown, private backyard garden. The family, who lived overhead, never frequented the garden. He assumed they were afraid of embarrassment

by the bubble-like view of his life, worried about discovering him masturbating or with a woman, or quite simply that they not want to intrude on his privacy. The family's existence was unimportant to Euan and in the evenings, when they walked overhead, there was a drumbeat of footsteps that signalled normal lives Euan ignored.

The plan of his one-roomed apartment, minus a separate bathroom, was rectangular with the windows on the long side. Against the wall, opposite the floor to ceiling windows, was a couch that pulled out to become a bed. In the early mornings, when he slept, he often had the rising sun in his eyes. It probed inside his room to prod him awake, to interrupt when his dreams were driven by his almost conscious mind. Those dreams were, mostly, of women and he was always disturbed before any particular woman's face was clearly defined. The woman, or women since he did not know if his dreams were of the same one, was slightly blurred but he knew she was perfect, except for one small, inconsequential blemish that would prove her humanness. The searchlight of the rising sun washed his dreams in red, fading the form of the unknown woman as the light filtered through his eyelids.

In dreams he would never admit to, he would stand before that almost-perfect woman and shield her from the arrows of attackers. He would die a noble and painless death but, after his death, he would accept her gratitude for his ultimate sacrifice. He would steer the dream and her gratitude to include sexual favours. The consummation of gratitude that would force a resurrection would be interrupted by the morning sun. Euan would roll over and try to continue the story telling but the conscious act of rolling over would wake him enough to intrude life outside his dreams, like water fills a sinking ship.

Euan cut off a bite-sized piece of the chicken and saw some of the colour of the morning sun through his eyelids. The meat as opaque white on the outside but pale and uncooked on the inside. He knew people ate raw fish and that some liked their meat rare but Euan was unsure if uncooked chicken was safe to eat. It oozed. The heat from the oven had barely reached the middle. What to do? His thoughts raced in a frenzy. If he was alone with Liam and his wife the chicken would have gone back to the kitchen. No questions asked. However, he was with three people he didn't know. Euan was unsure if Liam's wife would be demonstrably upset that her dinner was being criticised after she had received no help. He had arrived late and had been ungrateful after she had gone to the trouble of preparing a meal to help him meet Clare. The uncooked chicken would be partly, maybe mostly, Euan's fault. Should he eat the chicken anyway? He could hide the rawness by covering it in sauce. What if he ate the chicken and then someone else's chicken was also uncooked? Would he look foolish? He could plead that he did not notice but it was obvious that his chicken was uncooked if he did not disguise it. Euan over-reacted. He raced forward through an imagined lifetime of loss caused by a single inappropriate response. What if Clare was the dream girl whose features he could never see clearly? Hindsight is what he wanted. Too many lifelines depended on his single moment of decision. He was not confident enough to bluff his way through an embarrassment. He was certain that Clare would withdraw her offer to take him skiing. He thought a mistake would be fatal and his clumsiness over an under-cooked chicken would end everything with Clare before it started. The chicken piece stared at him with its unblinking, pale, seeping eye, goading him to make the wrong decision. It was infused with the ghosts of failure as it tempted him to make a choice.

Euan genuinely believed he was on the cusp of a major life choice, that once made would lead his life in one of two opposite directions. He did not know that lives are lived out of simple choices that are of no consequence when made, and can only be judged in retrospect. Should he eat the chicken or not? He remembered similar circumstances but each had occurred when he was not responsible for his actions. He was a child, he was with relatives and there was food he did not like or was unaccustomed to eating. His behaviour could be explained by a parent and he was allowed the leniency of childhood. Familial patriotism excuses most excesses. However, Euan was supposed to be grown up. Decisions were his own and with that freedom came the possibility of failure. Euan wanted the dinner with Clare to be the beginning of something important but the specifics to be forgotten.

He masked his indecision and embarrassment and ate the chicken. He told Clare he would love to try skiing.

Chapter 3

Euan did not sleep well that night. He fussed and analysed the outcomes that would lead to embarrassment, if he asked Clare to go out with him. He worried that he had misconstrued her interest and attention and that she was, really, only being friendly in a situation she had no option of quitting. In the early hours of the morning, as he tossed and turned in bed, he decided he could not bluntly invite Clare out and risk the embarrassment of refusal. Euan convinced himself that Clare's interest was imagined. His

own warm feeling of safety and friendship had been caused by the sound of the heavy rain and not by Clare, his feelings for her had not been reciprocated. He re-played the evening in his mind, sifting information from inconsequential moments. Were his feelings the whole script? He did not know but, as he lay in his bed, he thought they might have been. His realisation did not help him sleep, as he continued to wonder if he should risk embarrassment after all.

An hour before dawn he decided to do something about his sleeplessness. He resolved, for the sake of his own peace of mind, to call her that day and ask her to join him for something small and unimportant, like a quick coffee in the cafeteria, or to meet at a lunchtime concert. If she refused him, then she was the one who was reading too much into his, friendship-only, request and he would indignantly tell her so. It was then only a simple case of avoiding the area of the University near the Geology department for a few weeks. He could do that. He could avoid the main cafeteria as well. He could go elsewhere for lunch. He could restrict his visits to the main library and use only the Physics library. It would be easy. He let himself sleep, having set up a face saving strategy after an embarrassing defeat. His failure was catered for and he did not once think of success.

Each following morning Euan woke with optimism. He thought, today I will talk with Clare. He would arrive early at his office at the University but it would be too early to call her, she would not be there yet. He would need a coffee first; he would have to finish a piece of work; there were errands to run; he was busy; he was not in the mood. The mornings would disappear and the afternoons would have a different set of excuses and as the day wound down his excuse would be that it was getting too late to call. He did not

know where she lived and had not asked for her home telephone number. In any case, to call her in the evening had an obvious relationship-starting connotation. However, he would go to bed each night optimistic that he would call her the next day.

The days repeated. Looking, in retrospect, for the perfect opportunity became an end in itself. He would look back at the day just passed, usually when the “too late to call” excuse began, and find times that would have been perfect. ‘Yes, eleven am was the right time. I had fixed that problem, I was feeling good and that’s when the geology department finishes their communal morning tea. I should have called her.’ There were many such chances that went begging and Euan would make a mental note to remember that time the next day but something would interfere with the execution.

He fell into depression. He wasn’t going to call Clare. He’d left it too long and the memory of the evening at Liam’s faded.

Euan was saved from embarrassment.

The weather followed Euan’s mood and became single-minded, brooding and dark. It was not officially winter but it was cold and there were early and heavy dumps of snow on the mountains. For the first time Euan took an interest in televised weather bulletins. He watched the images of children rugged up and throwing snowballs and enthusiastic cross-country skiers taking advantage of clear slopes before the lifts opened and they were consigned to back country trails.

A few weeks after the dinner at Liam’s, Euan went to an evening gathering of graduate students hoping to see Clare. She wasn’t there. Kate was.

'Where have you been?' she asked him. 'I expected you to be a regular visitor at home by now.'

'What?' Euan was mystified.

'Were you listening at all?' Kate asked.

'When?'

'At the dinner.'

'I don't understand,' Euan said. He was genuinely confused.

'I guess you really don't,' she said with surprise. 'Clare and I just started sharing a house. You really didn't hear us talking about that?'

Euan shook his head.

'It seems a waste. Your friend Liam went to all that trouble after, I assume, you asked for his help, and you don't follow it up,' she said.

Euan sounded like an errant child as he complained that Kate's insight into his premeditated intentions for Clare were false.

'Just call her,' Kate said, ignoring his hollow complaints. 'Or go and see her.' Kate was mystified how Euan had not noticed the positive impression he had made on Clare. She, also, did not understand how he had missed the interest she had shown in him.

Kate pointed out a young man on the other side of the room. 'Do you know Michael?' she asked.

Euan said that he didn't.

'You'd like him,' she said. She took Euan by the arm and led him across the room. Euan liked the feel of being controlled by a beautiful woman.

Michael was tall and thin with long dark hair. He had a dry sense of humour that he used so often that it was difficult to know if he was being humorous or naive. Kate introduced the two young men and turned to leave. Euan protested her departure, he wanted to grill her for more information on Clare.

Kate laughed at him and shocked him by giving him a quick kiss on the cheek. He withdrew his face at the surprise action as if Kate had been attempting an attack.

'Just call her. Call her tonight,' she said and then left Euan with Michael as she went to join another group of students.

'She likes you,' Michael said.

'What?' Euan said with annoyance as he watched Kate walk across the crowded room.

'Kate told me you played guitar?' Michael asked.

Euan played classical guitar, for personal pleasure. Michael had aspirations of a professional music career. The two men showed off their musical knowledge like it was an intellectual arm wrestle. They tested each other on Beethoven, Britten and Bach and soon realised their music interests were complementary and their knowledge similar. Their competition ceased and thirty minutes after meeting they had become friends.

Euan had a long-term goal to play all of the Bach Lute Suites but he procrastinated. He had some success as he ploughed through the notation but had stalled at a few of the hardest passages. He talked of those difficult passages and as Michael made suggestions, Euan thought of the similarity between mastering the Lute Suites and his attempt at a relationship with Clare. They were both goals he wanted but he was unwilling to risk failure in one and embarrassment in the other. He wanted the achievements without the effort of attainment. He was inspired and convinced, as he listened to Michael, that the safety of failure after inaction was no safety at all.

Michael invited Euan to a lunchtime concert, that he and a few musicians were giving at the University the next day. Euan viewed the invitation as his first step towards a less risk adverse lifestyle. To begin with, as far as music was concerned and, if he was able to act on his new inspiration and confidence, Clare as well. It was late when Euan left the graduate gathering and after looking unsuccessfully for Kate, he hurried home ready to follow her advice and call Clare. He picked up his telephone and realised he had not asked Kate for her home telephone number and, in any case, it was probably too late to call Clare, she may have gone to bed. He decided he would call her at work, the next day, after the lunchtime concert.

That would be the perfect time to call, he thought.
