

DONNA WARD

An inch at a time...

I was kissing him, William McIness. No one was more surprised than I, but there we were. He was tall, slim, wearing an old flannel chequered shirt and blue jeans. His face was soft, haloed by his red hair. And he had that slightly broken look in his eyes. You know the one, the one that spreads across his face most of the time now. Of course, he's entitled to it now, but I knew it back then, too.

He and I were leaning into the cream wall of the Fitzroy bedroom back in the days of *Sea Change*. He was kissing me back, too, in a relaxed innocent kind of way, in a, this is the usual way of things, kind of way, the kissing in the bedroom on a winter Saturday while the sun leans in obliquely and the kids are out in the street playing with the other kids, selling lemonade for all they're worth to passers by, kissing-while-the-cyclists-race-through-the-trees-along-the-bike-path kind of way.

He was kissing with domestic comfort, I was kissing with intent. In this moment William McIness' whole world was going to change, and he didn't even know it, but I did.

That was a goodbye kiss, I said when we finished.

What? he said in that way when his cheeks fill with a puff of air and he gets an extra dose of stunned woundedness on his face.

He didn't understand.

For the first time, I did.

I can't keep all your bones bound together anymore, I said. You'll have to do it yourself.

And, having said it, I knew that somehow it was my kissing that had kept him together.

That seems a long time ago. These days my reality is different. He's gone, the kids are gone. I'm in Fitzroy, though, and outside the neighbours' kids still persevere with their lemonade ambitions, the traffic of cyclists still passes through the trees and, on a sunny day, even in winter, I leave the front door open to catch echoes of the domesticity of others.

My life is quiet. So incredibly quiet. I write, I read, almost all my conversations are on email, or Facebook, or twitter. All that business is as silent as cyclists in gridlock at peak hour. My head's a whirl at the end of the day and, if I do happen to talk with someone on the phone, I could swear I'm shouting.

My house is quiet. It's double glazed, double insulated, double anything that keeps the weather out and the power bills down. There are some unaccounted-for sounds, perhaps they're ghosts, maybe possums, or cats, or birds on the roof, maybe it's just the house stretching into or out of itself.

My neighbourhood is extraordinarily quiet as well. Apart from the birds which, as they nest on a summer's night, can get so loud I have to turn up the news on the TV, and the two jack russells down the road who occasionally get out on the high terrace and bark at anything or anyone they see, and from there they can see for blocks and blocks. The cyclists get quite a lot of their attention. Oh, and there are the young Queenslanders who've moved in four houses down, and who informed me they had the right to make as much noise as they wanted until midnight. They thought 'as much noise as they wanted' meant more noise than a disco with special licences in a nightclub strip. Well, I sent the Environmental Protection Authority around to have a little chat with them about the hours (10 pm on a Friday night, as it turns out) and the extent of fines for non-compliance (more than they earn in a year, if they're not careful) and how the police can confiscate 'offending' machines if they don't comply.

But it's not just quiet in my house, which is also my workplace these days, it's quiet in my soul. And it's not just because William's not there, it's because all those who've visited since *Sea Change* days have now left. I'm not referring to my close friends, I'm speaking of those I've kissed in the bedroom, so to speak, those with whom I've set up intimacies, domesticities, allowed in their children, and their ex-wives, or a wife, in one instance.

One of these, a man with a wife, an ex-wife, a lover, a tribe of children and a litany of 'friends', left some time ago. The space he left was flooded with blooded rage, obsessive cursing, the carving of wooden dolls and chanting. These things, too, have left now. He and his stories are gone, being told elsewhere, I suspect, to some other 'friend', but not here. Now my soul is silent, again.

But, right in the middle of this storming rage I was in Albany, in Western Australia, in a pub, a little, well quite a lot, drunk, standing in front of William. I kid you not. He was wearing a denim shirt, shorts and holding a beer. He had grown into himself, shall we say?

Not as slight as in the old days. He was in town to talk about his new book. It's true, I was in town to see him, but more importantly I was trying to break away from my recently acquired habit of spell-making.

There were two things that came from that night. I saw William's bones, all fractured and aching, more than they'd ever been in the *Sea Change* days. He had reason now. He has had tragedy writ large and I wondered if any kisses could ever hold those bones together, and I wondered if it was possible that he had drawn on his future when acting in *Sea Change*.

The second thing that came from that night was that William said I had a great name. The kind of name, he said, that Dean Martin would use in a song. He had a thing about Dean Martin, mainly because his dad had a thing about Dean Martin. And that night, there on the stage, right in front of me as I sat in the front row, he laughed about naming his characters after people he knew in real life. The evening whirled on before I could warn him off using mine.

The next day I woke in my room by the sea that breaks around you like a champagne spar. The blooded obsession was back. And I knew it had to stop. And I knew the only person who could stop it was me. What to do?

And there it was. I would create a mantra, a talisman of words to protect me from the wounding. It was a collection of words, silly words, ridiculous really, but words that made me laugh, giggle in fact, a little bundle of words I could say anywhere, anytime, whenever I discovered myself obsessing over how 'he' had hurt me, 'he' with the wife and the ex-wife, the lover, the children, 'he' with the life I was once part of, 'he' who had left me in silence:

William McIness get out of the shower
You've been there for over an hour
Singing my name
In a Dean Martin vein
William McIness get out of the shower

Perth is a five hour drive from Albany, and every hour of those five hours I said that silly little mantra at least twenty times:

William McIness get out of the shower
You've been there for over an hour
Singing my name...

In a Dean Martin vein

William McIness get out of the shower

Melbourne is a three and a half hour flight from Perth, and every minute of those three and a half hours I leaned back into the seat, closed my eyes and muttered.

I told a friend of mine, I shouldn't have, but I thought it was so clever to come up with something so completely whimsical, something so beyond any possibility it could only heal my bleeding. She worried I would transfer my obsession from one bundle of bones to another.

I didn't.

It was months and months since I'd repeated the mantra; months and months since I'd thought of 'him' who abandoned me to this soul-silence. Six or even eight months, I'd stopped counting, which is a good sign in itself. So, I was very surprised to dream of kissing William. Yes, sorry, that bit was a dream, but it says reams about my capacity to hold wounded men together with my embrace.

A dream is a dream and mostly they stay in the night, but sometimes they slip through into the day. This dream, of kissing William when he was young and un-wounded, when life on a winter Saturday afternoon was about domesticities, slipped through into my day. My Saturday, in fact. The front door was open, the kids down the street were playing, the cyclists cycling, the jack russells having a bit of a bark, and the Queenslanders, no doubt, were wishing they'd rented a house in the suburbs. The winter sun was glossing the bedroom and I was putting the fresh white bedding on my bed when I felt William standing there, young, blue-jeaned, ready for a kiss. I didn't go over to that spot on the wall by the window but, if I had, you would forgive me for doing so, his presence was so palpable.

That's the thing with living this physical and domestic and soul silence, another reality comes through. So, at last, as I stood in my freshly made bedroom, months away from turning sixty, I was able to say – I can no longer hold the wounded together with my kiss.

I was deeply pleased with this psychological insight. This inch of personal growth. For that's how it is, isn't it? An inch every lifetime? If only I had known not to try and hold all those wounds with kisses, back in the days of *Sea Change*, back in the nineties when I was in my forties with half a chance of patching together some kind of family.

Here I am, though, without the family, but with the insight.

That was a week ago when I was sealing William with a kiss. A week ago when the insight settled, so I found it curious yesterday when, as I was cooking mushroom risotto, I felt as if William had walked into the kitchen. As if he'd come home from work. It was so real I could smell the air conditioning in his coat, the traffic in his woollen scarf. He was all grown up, the way he is now – filled out, all encompassing, the kind of man who can hold me in my buxom state.

I want to take a moment to tell you how I live in this silence. I do talk to myself, it's true. It's more like chatting, as if someone's there to listen, not someone who cares, but someone who is witnessing. It's more as if I'm commenting to someone about what I need to do next, what I need for the mushroom risotto, for example. I'm largely muttering thoughts to myself, not to someone I imagine is there, such as the Prime Minister, or Mr Morrison, or George Brandis, when I'm giving them a piece of my mind, and that can go on for quite some time.

When someone walks into the room the way William did a week ago, someone who hasn't been conjured for the sake of a telling off, I feel them, smell them, see them. The psychoanalyst in me would like to dismiss these visitations as projected material, and maybe that's true, maybe this is what happens when you live this kind of silence, but there was something disturbingly real about William's presence as I was cooking the other night.

Today I am reading a novel. It is about a couple discovering they would never have children. I am sitting alone on the couch, the front door is open but there are no kids on their citron adventure. It is Sunday and Sundays are quiet around here because everyone is somewhere else visiting family, or some kind of family they have created for themselves. It is nearly mid-winter, the last slips of auburn cling to branches, the sun slinks yellow through grey trees and even the cyclists have thinned along the path.

My soul is quiet, my house is quiet, my street is quiet.

As I read I feel myself plummeting sentence by sentence into this couple's grief. One sentence more and I'm going to fall. And there it is, they come to that tragic yet beautiful moment: they don't need anyone else, anything else other than each other. I weep. William reaches over, holds me. I smell the wool in his jacket, the winter in his bones.