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Also by Caroline Overington

I Came to Say Goodbye

Ghost Child

Caroline Overington



arrow books

When a young woman lives by herself, it's assumed she must be lonely. I'd say the opposite is true. In fact, if anybody had asked me what it was like when I first started living on my own, I would have said, 'It was perfect.' I was completely alone – I had no close friends, and nobody I called family – and that was precisely what I wanted.

The place I moved into was basically a shed, and it was built on a battle-axe block behind somebody else's house. The property itself was on Sydney's northern beaches. There was a family living in the main house, the one that fronted the beach. They owned the block and, like many Sydneysiders who had beachside property in the 1980s, they decided to make the most of it by carving a driveway down the side, building a granny flat out the back and renting it to me.

After the first meeting, when they gave me the keys and we talked about the rent, I had nothing whatsoever to do with them. They were a family – a mum, a dad and two teenage kids – living in the main house, and I was the boarder. I could get to my place without bothering them. I just walked down the driveway, opened my door and I was home. I had my own toilet, shower and enough of a kitchen, so there was no reason to go knocking.

Before I moved in, I bought four things. The most expensive was a queen-size sheet set in a leopard-skin print, with two pillowcases. I bought a box of black crockery, with dinner plates shaped like hexagons. I had

this idea, then, that I might one day have close friends who could come over for dinner. I also bought a new steam iron and ironing-board, these last things because it was a condition of my employment that my uniform be straight and clean.

I still remember the first morning I woke in my own place. I was seventeen years old. I padded into the kitchen in my moccasins, put the kettle on the stove top, and pressed the red button to make the flame ignite. I took the plastic cover off the new ironing-board and scrunched it into a ball. I was fiddling underneath the board, trying to find the lever that makes the legs stick out, when the kettle began to whistle itself into hysterics. I put the ironing-board down and took a cup from the crockery set, removing some of the cardboard that had been packed around it, and made a cup of tea – hot and sugary, with the bag taken out, not left in – and I thought to myself, 'This is just like playing house! I'm okay here. Things are going to be fine.'

When the family told the neighbours they'd rented out the granny flat, they probably wanted to know whether I was going to cause trouble – whether I was going to bring boys home and make a racket. But the answer was no, I was not. I amused myself in the granny flat by learning new and humble domestic tasks: sweeping the floor with a straw broom; bending to collect the mess in a dustpan and brush; buying garbage bags with two handles that tied at the top. My idea of a good

night was to eat Tim Tams in bed and to smoke cigarettes on the porch, although only after I saw the lights in the main house go out.

The owners would have said, 'Oh, she's the perfect tenant, like a mouse, so quiet, you never even know she's there.'

From time to time, I'd bump into the mum – not my mum, but the mum who lived in the main house. I'd be heading out to work and she'd be on the nature strip, getting shopping bags out of the boot of her car or something, and she'd smile at me – probably because everybody approves of hospital staff – and I'd smile back at her.

I didn't see much of the dad. Perhaps he'd decided that there was nothing to be gained from getting too close to the girl who lived in his shed. I had nothing much to do with the children, either. I was closer in age to them than to their parents, but really, what did we have in common? They came out from time to time, to jump on the trampoline and to sit under the pirate flag in the old tree house, but we rarely spoke.

I'd taken a job as a nurse's aide in a city hospital, and I'm sure my co-workers at first understood why I lived alone. I was new to Sydney so it made sense, at least in the beginning, that I wouldn't have many friends. After I'd settled, though, they must have wondered why I continued to live in a granny flat when I could easily have shared a city apartment with one of the other aides.

The noticeboard at work often had handwritten signs tacked up, advertising rooms for rent. 'Outgoing girl wanted to share FUN FLAT!' one of the ads said. The truth is, the things the other girls wanted to do – going to nightclubs, drinking Fluffy Ducks and Orgasms and Harvey Wallbangers – didn't sound like fun to me.

Of course, I wasn't famous then, far from it. I was just the quiet girl, the churchy girl that lived alone, prayed in the hospital chapel, and never socialised. I'm sure they all got a shock when photographs of me started appearing in newspapers, just as I'm sure the family I boarded with got a shock when journalists swarmed the granny flat, waving microphones on sticks.

I got a bit of a shock myself. I took refuge in my bed, hiding under the leopard-skin sheets, trying to fight the urge to *run*. Because, really, run where? There was nowhere to go.

I don't know how long I would have stayed under the covers if Harley hadn't turned up. He walked down the side drive, past the windows of the main house. I heard the mum rap on the glass. 'Hey, you,' she said. 'Off our property!'

Harley said, 'I'm not with the media. I'm Harley Cashman. Lauren's my sister.'

She would have been startled. For one thing, the mum knew me not as Lauren Cashman but as Lauren *Cameron*, which was the name I'd given her when I moved in. She didn't know I had a brother, either. I'd

told them what I used to tell everyone: 'I have no family.'

Harley knocked at my door and when I didn't answer, I heard him push it open. I didn't stir but I could feel warm sunshine pour across my bed.

Harley said, 'Mate, what *are* you doing? Everyone's looking for you.'

I didn't respond so he pulled back the doona and said, 'Lauren, seriously, this is ridiculous. Get up.'

I felt so frightened and overwhelmed that I wasn't sure that I could. I said to Harley, 'I can't.'

He said, 'Sure you can.'

We went on like that for a while, him saying, 'Come on, Lauren,' and me saying, 'Just go away, Harley,' until he said, 'Okay, look, I'm not going to hang around here forever. If you want me gone, I'm gone.'

It was then that I realised I didn't want him to go, not without me, not ever again. I rose from the bed, untangling myself from the sheets, and said, 'Okay, all right.'

'That's right,' he said. 'Get up, and let's get you out of here.'

I was wearing only a T-shirt and a pair of knickers.

'You're going to need to get dressed,' he said, and started picking up some clothes I'd flung onto the floor. Compared with him – with anyone – I was tiny. He held up a pair of my pants and said, 'How do you even get one leg in here?'

I snatched them away and went into the bathroom

to dress myself:

'Good on you,' he said when I emerged. 'Now, let's go.'

He ushered me to the door and we left the granny flat together, me with a jumper over my head in case there was a photographer still lurking, trying to get a picture. He'd parked his car on the nature strip. I couldn't see anything because the jumper was over my face so he guided me into the passenger seat. It was only once we'd started moving, once I was sure we were clear of the suburban streets and onto a freeway, that I took the jumper off, and said, 'Where are we going?'

Harley said, 'I've decided that you should meet the folks.'

I said, 'Whose folks?'

He said, 'Mum is gonna love you.'

I thought, 'Your mum. Not mine.'

I rolled the jumper into a ball and put it on the floor near my feet. I said, 'She doesn't even *know* me, Harley.'

He said, 'Mate, you're my *sister*. What more is there to know?'

I didn't answer. What more was there to know? What do any of us know? We think we know the basic facts about our lives: those are my parents and these are my siblings and this is my story, at least as I've come to tell it. But, really, how much of it is true?

Detective Senior Sergeant Brian Muggeridge

When I first met Lauren Cameron her name was not Lauren Cameron, it was Lauren Cashman. I don't know when she changed it, although I've got a pretty good idea why.

Lauren likes to tell people that she has no parents and no siblings. It isn't true. When I first met her she had a mother, a sister, and not one but two brothers, and all of them were called Cashman.

I met them on the evening of 11 November 1982. I remember the date because it was Remembrance Day and I'd been on parade since dawn with the old Diggers at the Cenotaph on the Barrett Estate. I was hoping to knock off early, but then I got a call to go out to the Cashman place on DeCastella Drive. A mum had called triple-O, screaming that her kid had been bashed, and

although a young constable was on her way to the scene, a more senior police officer was going to be needed.

The Cashmans lived in a Commission house – quite a few of the neighbours later made a point of telling me that when I went around taking statements from them. They said, ‘Those people, they don’t own here. It’s Housing Commission. They’re just renting.’

What did they mean by that? Not that the family was poor. There were plenty of poor people on the Barrett Estate. I don’t mean down-and-outs. We had quite a few old-age pensioners and a few single mums on the estate, but in those days, most people worked. We had labourers, hairdressers, panel beaters, and a good bunch of guys down at Barrett Glass. Nobody was flush. At a guess, the highest earner on the estate would have been the school principal, on something like \$45,000 a year. It was a ‘working-class’ estate in the proper sense of the word: people worked, although not for much.

So no, the neighbours didn’t mean ‘poor’. They meant something else, something that in those days was harder to define. These days, we wouldn’t hesitate. We’d say the mother was a bludger with four kids under six to three different blokes, none of whom were on the scene.

Anyway, I drove up to the house as fast as I could. I was in one of those white Commodores they gave coppers in those days. The idea was to give us the speed and the muscle we’d need to catch the crooks. Trouble

was, every bloke under thirty on the Barrett Estate had a white Commodore, and they souped them up to make them go faster. There were a couple of Commodores already parked in the driveway of the Cashman house when I got there. At first I thought they were both police cars, but on second glance it was pretty obvious that one of them wasn’t. The suspension had been lowered – in those days we used a beer can to check, and there was no way you’d get a VB under this car – plus the windows had been tinted. No, this one wasn’t a police car. This car belonged either to a man who lived in the house, or to a man who at least visited often enough to feel comfortable parking in the drive.

The ambulance was already there and I saw the paramedics leap from it and move like lightning across the lawn, the white soles of their shoes flashing. I got out of the car and made my way up the path, expecting to find the house in a state of chaos. I mean, that’s quite normal, isn’t it? If a kid has come a cropper and the parents have had to call an ambulance, well, you can expect a lot of noise. The parents will be screaming and crying and it’s my job to get them to settle down, so we can start figuring out what happened. But there was no panic in Lauren’s house.

The mother, Lisa, was in the kitchen with the young female police constable. Lisa was pale and extremely thin, a chain-smoker, with hair that had been frizzed and dyed red so many times you couldn’t tell what