

1.

Her eyes halted on a face in a photograph. About to turn the newspaper page, her hand stopped and stayed poised in midair. The face reminded her of... *It couldn't be...* Penelope Knight glanced at the print underneath and felt the skin on her arms prickle as she looked again at a face that at one time had been almost as familiar to her as her own.

The words under the picture read, "Mrs Nancy Bester, head of the Melbourne branch of the controversial sect, The People of Light, after an unpleasant ordeal. Earlier today the sect place of worship, known as a Light House, received an anonymous telephone call threatening death in an hour. Police summoned to the scene think it was a prank call as they found nothing." Above the photograph were the words 'Bomb Scare'.

Penelope stared at the picture. Nancy would, like her, be well into her forties by now, but she was still unquestionably Nancy. She let herself absorb the 'Mrs' and the 'Bester'. So, she had married Patrick. At the time, deep down she knew it would happen but she had not wanted to have it confirmed.

When Mark Findlay, her cousin Linda's husband, brought her the newspaper saying, "It's an old one from the Australian consulate," she'd been sitting in the late afternoon sunshine in the courtyard of their Cape Town home.

Her hands trembled as the years rolled back and doors closed more than a quarter of a century ago threatened to open. With a quick gesture, she closed the newspaper, snapping the pages together and rose.

She hurried through the house and out of the front door. Mark and Linda were blurry outlines as she passed and she was oblivious to the looks of concern on their faces. She sped down the street, hastening away from she knew not what.

Her thoughts were still in turmoil when she returned an hour later. She had no idea where she had been – up one street and down another. Linda, closer to her than any sister, was waiting anxiously and with an effort, Penelope tried to pull herself together. There was a buzzing in her head and she had to concentrate to hear what her cousin was saying.

“Are you all right, Penn?”

“Yes.” Penelope started towards the courtyard. She wanted to see the paper again. She walked stiffly, cautiously, like a cat stalking something unknown. The courtyard was gloomy now, the sun behind Lion’s Head Mountain.

The garden table was bare, the newspaper gone.

She turned to Linda behind her. “Where’s the paper I was looking at?”

“It’s in the kitchen. I thought you’d finished with it.”

“There’s a photograph. I’d like to see it again.”

Linda was looking at her strangely. “I’ll get it.”

She was back with the paper a moment later. “It’s too dark to see out here. Come into the dining room.”

Penelope spread it open on the table and flipped through the pages until she found the photograph. Her gaze fastened on it, she said, “Does Mark still want the paper? Would he mind if I kept this from it?”

“Of course he wouldn’t. I’ll get you some scissors.” Linda rummaged in a dresser drawer and handed a pair to her.

As she cut, Penelope tried not to let her cousin see how much her hands were shaking.

Looking at the figure in the picture, Linda said softly, “I know that face... Penn, why is the photo upsetting you?”

Penelope was still for a moment. Then she looked up, “Nancy and I were friends at school. I didn’t know she’d gone to Australia and joined a cult.”

She saw that Linda was reading the few lines under the picture. She couldn’t stop her without being rude.

“Nancy?” Linda frowned, searching her memory. “She was a ballerina, wasn’t she? And used to go to the farm with you?”

Penelope nodded. Linda’s words hammered at the locked

doors in her mind, doors already rattling from the impact of seeing Nancy's picture.

"Have you seen her since school?"

"Once," Penelope answered reluctantly, "about eighteen months after we left. Not since then."

"And yet you recognised her from that photo? She couldn't have changed much. You knew her married name?"

"She wasn't married then." In a voice so low Linda had to strain to catch her words, she went on, "I knew Patrick Bester before she did." As she spoke she clumsily finished cutting out the picture and turned to go to her room, leaving Linda staring after her, shocked.

Although her cousin had never said anything, Linda was aware of the tensions in her marriage. But close as they were, she had never mentioned this Patrick who obviously was important to her. Her husband, Tom, died suddenly six months ago and Penelope had been with the Findlays ever since. Much too long, Linda worried, she should be starting to get her life back together by now.

Penelope lay on her back in bed, her eyes fixed on the shadowy ceiling as memories began to rise from those long ago days before she married Tom. A few disconnected images stood out sharply... Nancy walking out of the school gate for the last time, her fluid dancer's grace gone... mutilated paintings lying on the floor... a dust trail rising along a dirt road, tracing the route of a rapidly departing car. For the first time she began to understand that although Tom's death had magnified the sense of hollowness, of failure she couldn't shake off, its roots had been back when she knew Nancy. And even before that.

Slowly she drew herself up in bed and clasped her hands about her knees. That photograph was like a beckoning finger.

She got up and paced the room. A faint lightening at the window proclaimed it was nearly dawn. If she wanted herself whole again she would have to go to where it began.

But she was afraid. It would be dangerous to open up the past. As it was, she felt she was balancing on the edge of some

sort of breakdown. Acting on the message of the photograph would be like taking the end of a frayed string out of a labyrinth, if it snapped she would be lost.

Penelope paused at the window, oblivious to the smell of seaweed and the sad cry of the Green Point foghorn heralding a fog rolling in across Table Bay. But the alternative of doing nothing was just as bad – life was already one long night. She was shaken suddenly by the memory of the friendship she and Nancy had once shared. It had been based, she now saw, on the recognition that there was something different about them. They each sensed a secret in the other and it bloomed in the discovery that each had a unique gift. Together they had planned brilliant futures unaware that it was their way of denying hidden wounds.

A deep sadness crept through her as she realised she had forgotten what it was like to have sunlight in her soul. And knew she'd do almost anything to have it there again.

Despite the blank patches of grey in her memory where bright pictures should have been, she knew Nancy and Patrick weren't all of it. Behind them lurked a shadow so insubstantial it was sensed rather than seen, and like a trail, she saw that if she went after the clearly visible, the more distant behind it would come into view.

Or was she deceiving herself by creating non-existent scenarios to give herself a reason to track down Patrick? His face was blurred in her mind but as if it were yesterday she could sense the warmth of him, hear a laugh catch in his throat and feel the breathless love that flooded her being. Blue eyes alight with teasing made her tremble; his masculinity overpowered her. She had been so young and had taken out her heart without hesitation and given it to him.

Her growing desire to use the jolt the photograph had given to make herself whole again was crystallising in an urge to confront Nancy. It wasn't reasoned, just an instinct she felt drawn to follow.

The next day she told the Findlays she was going to Australia.

Mark thought it a great idea. "Simon's in Melbourne, you'll be able to meet him at last." Mark's civil engineer father and Australian mother had died in an accident when he was a child and he had been brought up by his much older half-brother.

Definitely not, thought Penelope. Mark was Linda's second husband and when they married two years ago Penelope had been visiting her twin son and daughter in England. A nasty strain of European 'flu delayed her return and she missed the wedding. Her mother went to it and afterwards wrote, "You'll never guess who Mark's half-brother is - Simon Quest! He's changed a lot, hard and bitter and Linda says he's going through a another divorce. He was unfriendly, too, and looked right through me. I could tell he hadn't told Mark and Linda he knew us, so I didn't say anything either. It would be better coming from you." Penelope had not yet told Linda that she'd known her brother-in-law a long time ago.

"I want to be on my own." Penelope touched Mark's arm. "So please don't tell him. Either of you." She looked at Linda.

Linda, thinking of the evening before, was troubled. And frustrated by her inability to help her beloved cousin through her grief. "Penn, I don't think it's a good idea to rush over there."

"I need to see Nancy, Linda, it's time to clear the air."

"You're sure it's not Patrick you're really going to see?"

"Butt out, Linda, you don't know anything about this!" Penelope immediately apologised. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean that. You've been so good to me. But I thought it through last night and this is a journey I have to make. I can't go on the way I am, Linda, you know that. You two have put up with me for long enough. It's time I got going again and this could help me move on. If nothing else, it is giving me a sense of purpose."

Linda said no more but watched Penelope carefully in the days leading up to her departure. And the more she watched her, the more concerned she was.

2.

Two weeks later Penelope was in Australia, driving a hire car down Sydney's long Parramatta Road, a map open on the passenger seat. It was taking her longer than she had anticipated to find her way out of this large city. At least they drove on the left here too, she thought.

She had decided to drive when Mark, who was making her bookings through his travel agency, told her that the connecting flights to Melbourne on the evening she arrived in Sydney were full. He'd have to put her on a flight the next day.

Penelope thought for a moment. "I think book me in a hotel overnight and hire a car for early the next morning, please. Driving will give me a chance to get a feel of the country. I can use my South African driver's licence, can't I?"

"It's a long way," warned Mark.

On her left was a sign pointing to the Hume Highway and Melbourne.

When she reached open country, she looked about her with the first real interest she had felt in a long time. She was a countrywoman and cities basically all looked alike to her, but out here she could breathe. The car was swift movement through vast space; the highway stretched forever in front and behind, a slate-blue line running between hills rolling outward to the horizon. Kilometre after kilometre of long grass, soft and cream, dotted with clumps of eucalypts and trees she didn't recognise. Where she came from the bush was shorter, denser. Once she saw two men on scrambler bikes herding sheep. The highway was good, dual most of the way and the traffic was light.

She stopped at a town called Goulburn for a hamburger and ate it while she stretched her legs walking about a pleasant

park off the main street. At the far end there was a war memorial to local soldiers who had lost their lives in the Boer War. It gave her a strange feeling to find a link with home in a place she'd never heard of in a country she had never before visited.

She found herself thinking of Tom, he'd have liked this countryside.

After the spring rains, Tom had been night ploughing to speed up crop planting. His place beside her in bed was empty when she woke one morning so she took the pickup and went looking for him. He was lying on the ground beside the tractor, next to the last gate on the road back to the farmhouse. Their doctor told her that even if she had found him earlier she wouldn't have saved him as his death was as much the result of a heart attack as of a night adder. Tom was fifty-four, overweight as well as a heavy smoker and the shock of a snake bite combined with the stress of trying to get home proved fatal.

He died so alone. The picture of Tom in the dirt beside the gate would be with her always, alongside the guilt that she had never been 'in love' with him. As the months went by, though, she couldn't shake free of a debilitating apathy. Not understanding why herself, she was unable to explain her behaviour to Linda and Mark. So she let them continue to think it was still her grief, but she could see they wondered why she was making no effort to leave and get on with life. They didn't know she clung to her cousin just as she had once before when Linda was too small to remember, herself not many years older.

Penelope's appetite left her and she threw the uneaten remains into a bin. In the car, she studied the map and decided to make for Albury on the border between New South Wales and Victoria before stopping for the night.

It was dark when Penelope got to Albury. She found a motel, had a snack at a café next door and went to bed early. She awoke to the sound of bird calls and lay in bed listening to them for a few minutes before getting up. They were louder and harsher than the ones she was accustomed to.

After a quick breakfast, she found a service station and filled up with petrol. It was only her second petrol stop and she was still uncomfortable using a self-serve pump. Back home she'd hand the keys and money through the car window to a usually cheerful African face. Penelope drove across the Murray River out of New South Wales and into Victoria.

The traffic became heavier the closer she got to Melbourne. One after the other, great trucks thundered down the highway, beside her, behind her, in front of her. She felt trapped among the hooting, squealing, roaring vehicles and her foot quivered on the accelerator. With her attention on her driving she could forget her apprehension of what she would find at her destination.