SKY

May I speak to you
Like we are close
And locked away together?

HAFIZ

Here she is, standing in the schoolyard. She is six years old, dressed in a crisp green uniform. Other children are on the swings and seesaw, but she has taken herself off to stand alone under the eucalyptus at the edge of the playground. She gazes up through its broad branches to the sky above.

Hello, she says. *I'm ready. Tell me what to do. Make use of me.*

She might have chosen to do this at the small church where she attends Sunday school, but instead she does it here, because it feels as if this big tree must have a direct connection to whoever is in charge.

Does anyone answer back? They do not. Yet she feels better for having declared herself willing to be of service. She has reported for duty.

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Physicists now know that 70 per cent of the known universe is dark energy. Dark matter is another 25 per cent. Once we thought we knew all about life, but it turns out everything we think of as reality is less than 5 per cent.

Crumpets and honey, hockey sticks, sailing boats, temples, shopping centres, literature, the pharmaceutical industry, mathematics, every scientific discovery, every plant, animal or virus below the sea and above, the planets and the stars we can name and all those we can't, this galaxy and the 200 billion other galaxies that comprise the known universe, everything that has been created, constructed, calculated, measured or observed by humans amounts to a mere fragment of existence. Ninety-five per cent is hidden from us, invisible, unknown, only to be imagined or sensed. Yet it's present everywhere, in every moment, in everything around us, and everything that *is* us.

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Believing and belonging occupy a great deal of human life. What to believe? How to belong? All of it is a mystery that we fill with stories.

Standing under that tree in my primary school playground is not my first memory, yet it remains vivid. I will grow up and travel the world, and I will travel the inner places of heart and mind, always curious. What is this thing called life? Why am I here?

For decades now, I've asked strangers if something ever happened that they couldn't explain. Something outside the normal. To my surprise, I discovered that everyone had a story of a guiding hand, a strange connection, a reassuring presence,

something life-saving or life-affirming, something more than a coincidence. Everyone had experienced something that gave them a sense that there was more to life than could be seen, touched or verified.

I could write a memoir about travelling, the writing life, or my love of baking cakes. But I'm still that girl under the tree who wants to get to the big conversation, to the heart of things. So here are some stories about life and death. About experiences that have no easy explanation, but which happened, nevertheless. The unknown, that 95 per cent – maybe it's an invitation for compassion. Life is a process of forgiveness for the choices we make in order to be ourselves.

FIRE

We do not 'come into' this world; we come out of it . . .

ALAN WATTS

Here is where memories begin.

My mother is on a ladder watering the roof of our orange-brick house with a hose. The house is newly built and overlooks a wide blue river. I live on an island at the end of the world, just a week's sailing from Antarctica, though I do not know this because I am only two and a half years old. I do know, however, that my mother standing on a ladder and watering the roof is not a normal thing.

I hear her gasp. The forested hill behind us has become a wall of flames, a ridge of leaping red and amber spiralling up into billowing clouds. It is 7 February 1967. The wind blowing across Tasmania, birthed in the lizard heat of Central Australia, has become a firestorm travelling at more than 130 kilometres an hour, dropping millions of sparks. There is no rural fire service in 1967, nor a volunteer service. There is a small fire station over the hill but it has only limited equipment.

I am delivered to the home of our neighbours down the street while my mother retrieves my two older brothers from school. A goat, a sheep and chickens are in the neighbours' laundry. In their lounge room, I sit beneath a clothes horse and breathe in the scent of drying linen as I eat a delicious oatmeal biscuit.

By 3 pm the sky is black and the city of Hobart has emptied. The temperature is 40 degrees. Across our sylvan state there are flames hundreds of feet high, fireballs, exploding gum trees, roaring wind, melting roads. The power is out and communications are down. My dad is home early from work. He and a friend go to fight a fire nearby, using sacks to beat back the flames. Mum and my brothers return and soon everyone in our small community gathers on the beach to stand in the sea. Huge particles of ash fall about us.

In one day, fires burn through some 652,000 hectares of land; 1300 homes are incinerated, and 7000 people become homeless; 64 people die and more than 900 are injured. It takes three months for the power to be reconnected across suburbs and rural areas.

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Our house does not burn down, nor do those of our friends and neighbours on the perimeter of the forest. Six months after the fire, I turn three, and six weeks after that, my mother gives birth to my sister. Now we are four children: two boys and two girls. My mother reads aloud to me as she breastfeeds my baby sister, turning page after page of Little Golden Books and *Mother Goose* until, one day, the words from her voice match the words on the page, and I am reading too.

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At age four I am at the kitchen table scrawling squiggly line after squiggly line across a page with a crayon. My mother asks me why I am ruining the butcher's paper she's given me to draw on.

'I'm writing,' I reply brusquely.

It is lucky that I begin writing early because I have a long way to go. I've done many jobs in my life, but writing has always been my favourite thing to do. It's also been the hardest. It's required the greatest discipline, the longest hours and the deepest commitment. Writing has said: *Look more closely, go this way, dig deeper, learn this, know yourself better.* It has been a pathway into the unknown, the fascinating, the heartbreaking and the wonderful. I give myself to writing and it bends me, sharpens me, whittles me and sculpts me.

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But first I am very young. My mother's voice is high and musical. She recites limericks, smokes cigars at parties and has an extensive repertoire of rude jokes. She loves The Goons, Monty Python and Walter Mitty. She makes her clothes from French *Vogue* patterns. She makes our clothes, too – even our school uniforms. Her sense of the ridiculous, her delight in the silly, is infectious. I am often in paroxysms of laughter. She can draw anything and make it look real. As a teenager she wanted to become a graphic artist, but there was no money for further study. When my younger sister begins kindergarten, my mother returns to work as a secretary. Along with a career, four children

and a husband, she bakes and cooks, sews, preserves, sings, embroiders, gardens, arranges flowers, decorates cakes, and makes kayaks and pottery. Only on Sunday night does she forsake her culinary wizardry and feed us cheese on toast or Heinz tomato soup. (Anything from a packet or a tin is a treat in our house.) She is slender, elegant, dark-haired and beautiful. She gets chest infections and her back is often sore.

My father is handsome, reserved and serious. Dad grew up poor and started full-time work at fourteen. In his twenties, he completed high school by attending night school. Later, much later, I will ask him why he stayed in the tax department for forty years when he wanted to do other things. He tells me that he was making a bridge for his children from the lower class to the middle class.

Dad loves reading and music. My mother loves music, too. She is an atheist while Dad is a Christian. He takes us to church while Mum stays home. He is an introvert while she is an extrovert. She leans politically right, he leans left. Mum is sunny while Dad can be moody. He whistles when he is displeased and retreats into silence.

From Monday to Friday, Dad catches the 7.45 am bus to work in the city. Until they build the new highway, the journey takes almost an hour. A bus returns him home again by 6.10 pm. I watch out for it and run down to meet him, walking home holding his hand.

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Childhood is kelp and sand, birds and sky, and boats pulled up from the tide. Rainy days are for reading in bed, playing

games, cooking, doing craft. If it is fine, we are sent outside to play. There are seasons, weekly library trips, the radio playing in the kitchen, the fire at night and the habit of growing things. Everyone in our cul-de-sac grows things. We have a vegetable garden that provides much of our food, and a Golden Delicious apple tree in our backyard. Roses of every scent and colour line our front boundary, as if our surname requires it.

Our house is the first on a new subdivision above a curve of beachside shacks. We are surrounded by farms, apricot orchards, paddocks and dams. Throughout the sixties and seventies, a new house is always being built, a new family moving in. Kerbs and bitumen arrive, washing lines and paling fences. Our neighbours are public servants, business people, stay-at-home mums, teachers, academics, architects and retirees. There is a small government primary school.

Both sets of grandparents live close by, as well as cousins from Dad's side of the family. We children roam the farmland that is yet to become suburbia, building forts in sandy embankments, climbing the seaside cliffs, catching tadpoles in the dams, kicking the footy on the oval, playing beach cricket, swimming in the sea, exploring rock pools and riding our bikes everywhere like mad things. In winter we take cardboard and slide down the icy paddock behind the house. Only rarely does it snow, down there so close to the sea, and when it does we are awestruck.

There are neighbourhood barbecues, bonfires and fireworks, fancy-dress parties and dinners where the adults walk between homes for various courses, my mother's laughter rippling on the night air. On hot days, Mum and her girlfriends lie on the beach, laughing and chatting, rolling their eyes at the habits of

their husbands, while we children swim, play and listen. There are Boxing Day gatherings down the street where a television broadcasts the start of the Sydney to Hobart yacht race. Days later these yachts sail up our river to the finish line. We watch them from our house, taking turns at the telescope. We do not own a television. Books and games, music and friends, the radio and the outdoors are our entertainment.

My brothers and I, and children who live along the way, walk to school together, a kilometre and a half each way. No one locks their doors. We are welcome in everyone's houses. We must be home by the time the streetlights come on.

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The River Derwent is an enormous river travelling more than 200 kilometres from its birthplace in the highlands until it passes through Hobart beneath the watchful gaze of Mount Wellington. It can appear benign, but the river is quixotic, changing from calm to asperous in moments.

From our house, I watch the sun rise on the river's far shore washing the sky in tangerine, vermilion, peach and gold. Throughout the day, clouds stride in from the west, full and white, lean, brindled, feathered. On breathless mornings, the river is liquid satin. In winter it is wreathed in a high rolling fog. Full-moon tides crash below my bedroom window, low tides leave sand flats that mirror the sky. Seagulls and shorebirds wander the water's edge. Mount Wellington, always in view, changes from grey to blue to mauve throughout the day, until sunset turns the mountain into a silhouette. Every day there

is a breeze, or many breezes. Tasmania is a place of endlessly changing weather.

As a child, I love the sea. I often spend dawn and dusk with my grandfather, waiting for the tug on my handline that signifies flathead, perch and, sometimes, a stripy trumpeter. I am mesmerised by light catching on ripples, by birds sliding across the sky and wind bringing its own shadow.

Solitude becomes my friend early: reading in bed late into the night; drifting on the swing in the backyard staring at clouds; sitting on the rocks by my grandparents' boatshed or on the shore below the family shack. At night I pull back the curtains to watch the moon rise over the river and wonder at all those stars. Every night I listen to the waves, the ceaseless metronome of my early years.

One day, when I am five, my mother mentions that her family came to Tasmania from Scotland a long time ago. I ask her where Scotland is. She says it's on the other side of the world. There is a globe in the lounge room which I love to spin, my fingers tracing the countries and oceans. For the first time, I grasp that I am at the bottom of this globe. Scotland is a long way away, far over the curve. I decide that as soon as I am grown up, I will go there.

All this lies at the heart of who I will become.