

THE YEAR BUDDY HOLLY DIED

She's the quiet one, skin of unusual pallor, the bluest of eyes. Her chestnut hair is drawn back with a clip. She wears her grey school tunic as if it were a sail, allowing it to blossom over her bosom, before gathering it in at the waist. I admire her because she goes about her business with purpose, paddling the everyday. The rumour is she's planning to join the convent. She's certainly holy. I find her alone the church quite often, kneeling in front of the statue of the Virgin Mary or moving from one Station of the Cross to the next. I watch her, eager to discover her secret. We don't hear much about her once she's gone down to Melbourne. Just that she and the other girl from our school have settled in well. They'll be received into the order in late September. If I were to back one as a trainee nun, Vera's the one I'd choose. The other is too much of a tomboy, so good at rounders that she can hit the ball right over the convent. She'll prove too much to handle.

The announcement comes eighteen months later at school assembly. Mother Bertrand is standing beside the rostrum, face flushed, mouth opening and closing as though an important thing has to be said and she can't quite find the words. "Vera Hannaford's coming home," she finally gets out, her eye sweeping the class, watching for our reaction. "She's had to leave the novitiate because of ill health." Vera has been Sister Xavier for the last twelve months so I wonder whether slipping back into her original name will be as hard as a lizard trying to return to an old skin. Most of all, I wonder whether she'll feel a failure, but this isn't the sort of question you can ask. We hear on the grapevine that Vera has been troubled for months with blinding headaches, that she'd never be able to cope with the demands of religious life. I don't see her round town once she comes back home. We boarders sometimes go down the street to buy ice creams or bags of broken biscuits, making the long trek back up to the convent over the river and along the path to the side of the bridge. The river is sandy and shallow here and seems to be carrying silt from somewhere upstream. It has all

sorts of stories, this river, for which it has no language except the ones the red gums and the wild cockatoos speak. I see Vera at church sometimes, sitting with her parents, head bowed. I'm making more and more visits to the church now, too, enjoying the afternoon quiet. The sanctuary lamp flickers. A part of me is offered something here.

The year is 1959. There's a lot happening. I'll be studying for my final exams and my sister's travelling overseas for the first time. She'll leave at Easter on a P&O liner. But there are things to think about before then. My mother and father, younger brother and I take a holiday at the beach. We've left the harvesting and the sheep feeding and everything else behind for a while. Each morning, my mother bumps down the cliff face on her backside, eager to be in the surf before the sun comes up. She's a different person when breathing sea air into her lungs, light-hearted and carefree. My spirit sails its own skiff in response. My brother and I explore Shelly Beach and the blowhole. Sometimes, too, the petrified forest, on a beach far out of town. The news comes through at about nine p.m. on a Friday, just after we've finished our fish and chips. It's the regional broadcast. Dad has primed the Tilly lamp well and the cottage is full of light. There's no sound except the announcer's voice and the crashing of waves. Light touches every familiar object until we hear with shock that there's been a drowning in the town where I go to boarding school. A twenty-one year-old girl has lost her life swimming in the local water hole. She and a female bank colleague were there together after work. I try to imagine it - the panic, the car lights, the raised voices, the cries for help, then, the dread and the awful realisation. Three days later, the paper names her as Vera Hannaford. Of course, she'll be buried in the local cemetery. There's a yawning cave inside me now, one filled with stalactites and stalagmites, all dripping with moisture. I won't be able to be at the funeral but I'll be thinking of Vera and the family, praying for them, too. I'm wondering whether her life will just sink into history like moisture through limestone. Who'll ask the real questions about her death? Most of all, is there a link between it and the chapter of her life just spent in the convent? If so, just what are the implications for me? I've already spoken to the nuns about joining

up next year. I can't believe it when, a week or two later, Buddy Holly and his band members are dead too, killed in that awful plane crash in America. The song soon at the top of the charts is "Three Stars" and it's dedicated to the rock 'n roll trio. I sing the verses over and over to myself:

*"Look up in the sky, up towards the north,
There are three new stars brightly shining forth,
They're shining so bright from heaven above...
Ritchie, you were just starting to realise your dream,
Everyone calls me a kid but you were only seventeen,
Now, almighty God has called you, oh, so far away..."*

When I get to that bit, I'm not sure whether it's Ritchie or myself I'm singing to, because God is calling me as well. He's calling me, oh so far away and I'm wondering whether, just like in the song, everyone will miss me. Will they send their love?

I book into the motel by the river. The hill where the convent used to stand is to my left, its surface marked by sheep tracks and an ancient Scout badge. Part of me feels at home. This place holds eight years of my life. I back myself up against a gum tree and settle among fallen bark. Duck feathers float by. The corellas flutter and screech. My mind is in neutral. The river starts to tell me that I may have come looking for missing pieces of myself. I climb up to where the convent used to stand. The only things I recognise now are the cement steps that led to the side entrance and the line of gum trees inside the boundary. I wander about looking for a pencil stub maybe, or a school badge. Finally, I find the skull of a tiny bird and a papery white cocoon, its occupant gone. Both feel as though they belong to me in some way, so I put them in my pocket. When I walk through the cemetery gates, history leaps up at me. Schoolmates' graves here, the nuns' communal grave there, Sister Joseph's name on the top of the list, emblazoned in gold letters. Sister Joseph used terrorise

me when she appeared, dementia-driven, at the curtain separating the boarder's part from the nun's. Finally, I come to Vera, enshrined in marble and stone. The memorial stone says:

"VERA HANNAFORD, January 19, 1959."

I experience again the sense of horror I felt that day, the cave with its stalactites and stalagmites. Did she really drown though, I wonder, or was it suicide? The rumour at the time was that she might have had a tumour on the brain. So much is unanswered, unexplained.

My nephew says he'll drive us across Victoria for lunch in our home town. It's a madcap idea, a five hour trip each way and who knows whether we'd get there before the pub stops serving meals? He insists though and we become caught in the grip of the adventure. We steam into town right on two o'clock and the pub door's shut fast. Not a soul around. I hammer on the door and a woman answers, a lady about seventy-five years old. I say we've come all the way from Melbourne for lunch and she throws the door open saying, "Come on in then! We can't send you back hungry." Her daughter will prepare a meal if we wait. The older lady introduces herself as Betty saying: "I think I might have gone to school with you. I'm Vera's sister. Vera Hannaford. Do you remember? You're Marion Withers, aren't you?" "Yes, I'm Marion and I remember you now, too. You're Betty. You were the eldest. Vera came next and there was also a younger sister. You know, I was back in the town about two or three years ago and I visited the cemetery and found Vera's grave. The memory of that awful day has never faded from my mind." Her eyes mist over. "Thanks for doing that. Yes, it was a shock alright. My parents never got over it really, Mum in particular. She'd never answer the phone afterwards, not for the rest of her life. The police didn't come out to the farm to tell us the news. They just rang up. That's how it was done in those times, I suppose. You know, I remember Vera standing in the hallway that morning before she left for work. She was wearing a white dress she'd made for herself on Mum's old Singer. It had little, pink rosebuds all over it and it was so beautiful. She looked happy and relaxed." Her words drop into that questioning part of my soul. So

Vera was happy then after she left? She'd moved on and wasn't just skulking around the edges of things. The blanket I might have placed over both Vera and myself now seems to lift. I'm not even sure Betty knows I've recently left the convent myself but that is irrelevant really. "Did they ever discover why she drowned? I remember hearing she might have had a tumour on the brain." "No tumour, no. We were told that it was just that the day was so hot and the river water cold. She dived in, never came up. Who knows? She might even have hit her head on a rock. "

So, these were the simple facts. Vera joined the convent, left and was tragically drowned. End of story. It mustn't have mattered to her that she couldn't go on being a bright shiny star like Buddy Holly. Maybe, I'll find pink rosebuds in the future, too? Then suddenly I realise I've already had them. A friend gave me a bunch the day I moved into a unit on leaving the convent. All I was aware of that day were bare white walls and the second hand furniture which seemed impregnated with someone else's story. It felt as though so much of my own life had been scooped out and that I had nothing much to show for those years. Then, there on the mantelpiece were those salmon pink rosebuds. They would gradually, begin to unfold.