

Trust: Extract by Kate Veitch

from Chapter 9: The Book Club Meeting

Tonight, the members of the book group had gathered in the comfortable Eltham home of Denise, a primary school teacher, whose attractive adolescent daughters had wafted through several times collecting iPods and homework and compliments from the visitors before being told by their mother affectionately to clear off. On the long wooden table amid the water and wine glasses, the nibbles and dips, sat copies of that month's book, *Without A Backward Glance*, a novel about a troubled family where the mother had walked out on her husband and four young children in 1967 and not been seen again for forty years.

'Well now, what did you all think of my choice?' asked Denise, displaying her copy in what Susanna recognised as a teacherly gesture. *Show and tell.*

'Well, it was certainly easy to read,' Susanna offered. 'I gobbled it down in a couple of nights.'

'Same here,' said the youngest of their group, Amy, who was doing an MA in Australian Literature. 'A page-turner. Pretty lightweight.'

'But does "easy to read" necessarily mean lightweight?' Denise asked with a smile. 'I think this novel deals with some quite *heavy* issues.'

'Maybe, but the characters were absolutely *awful*,' said Jo, the patisserie owner, who always brought strong opinions to their meetings as well as her delicious cakes. 'The mother!' She shuddered with revulsion. 'I hated her right from the beginning. How could any mother just walk out like that on four little children?'

'Are you *kidding*?' cried Andrea, a potter struggling to restart her career now her kids were in school. She'd had an exhibition a few months ago; Susanna and Jean had attended and each loyally bought a piece. 'How could she *stay*? She was suffocating! All through that opening scene I was thinking, run, girl! *Run.*'

'How can you possibly say that, Andrea? Run off and destroy her own children's lives? She was a monster, incapable of love.'

Voices were becoming heated. Susanna and Jean, sitting across the table from each other, exchanged a careful look.

'But *did* she destroy them?' asked Denise, in a tone encouraging rational discussion and civilised debate. 'What would they have turned out like if the mother had stayed, do we think, given that she was so miserable?'

'They each already had certain character traits, that's made clear,' said Miriam, Jean's recently retired doctor friend.

'That's right. Life isn't all black or white, Jo,' said Andrea. 'Nor are people. Every character in this book has flaws; that's what I like about them. They're flawed people, but they're not *bad*.'

'Abandoning your own children isn't *bad*?'

'What should she have done, then? Just let herself be stifled, because she was a mother?'

'No one *made* her have four kids, did they! And besides, she didn't have to stay at home. Why didn't she just go out and get a job if she wanted one? That's what *we*'ve done,' Jo said, with a confirming glance around the table.

'You think she could have done that so simply?' asked Jean.

'I doubt she would've had many opportunities,' Miriam said thoughtfully. 'Not in the sixties.'

'In 1967, women in Australia had to resign from the public service when they got married. *Had* to. Did you know that?' Jean said. Puzzled heads were shaken. 'Contraception was still something you only talked about in whispers, and virtually impossible to get unless you were married. And terribly expensive. If you were pregnant and desperate enough, you risked your life to have a backyard abortion. No government assistance for single mothers.' Some of the younger women were looking startled, but Jean went on. 'Women couldn't get loans on their own, not without a male guarantor, not even to buy a fridge, let alone to buy a house or start a business.'

'Really? That sounds ... unbelievable,' said Amy, the MA student.

'Nevertheless, it's true,' Miriam confirmed. 'A lot's changed. You know, the only reason I was able to study medicine was because the Whitlam government abolished university fees in the early seventies. My family would never have paid for a *girl* to go to uni.'

There was a stunned silence. Jean looked around at the quietened faces. 'I'm sorry, I didn't mean to lecture. I just thought I could add to the context. Of the novel, I mean.'

'So, you agree that she was right, Jean?' said Andrea confidently. 'The mother was right to leave.'

Jean frowned. 'No – not at all. Duty trumps pleasure, especially when it comes to family. She was selfish and immature. She had no stickability.'

'But creative self-fulfillment isn't just pleasure! It's hard work,' said Andrea, with anguish in her voice, and Susanna thought of her handsome pots and what was required to make them, the time and energy squirreled away from the endless duties of domestic life.

‘But no one suffers if you don’t express your creativity, whereas if you neglect your family, they *do* suffer,’ said Jean firmly.

No one but Susanna seemed to hear Andrea mutter, ‘But if you can’t be creative, *you* suffer. Or doesn’t that count?’

‘That’s what I believe, at any rate,’ concluded Jean.

‘I agree!’ said Jo. ‘That woman was so selfish, my god! And at the end, the way all her kids just forgave her – it made me want to throw the book across the room. She didn’t deserve one *shred* of forgiveness.’

‘Ah,’ said Jean. ‘Forgiveness.’

‘And what do we all think of forgiveness, as an issue?’ asked Denise in that bright teacher’s voice.

There was a silence.

‘Well, it’s a good thing, of course, isn’t it?’ said Amy. ‘It’s what you’re supposed to do.’

‘It’s healthy,’ said Andrea.

‘Yes, not forgiving people gives you cancer,’ said Fiona, who’d been quiet, as she often was, all evening. ‘Or is it stress that does that?’

‘But in the book, they made it out to be so *easy*,’ Jo griped. ‘I don’t see how those kids could possibly have forgiven their mother so easily, not after all that.’

‘What do you think, Mum?’ asked Susanna curiously.

Jean took a sip from her glass, and put it down. ‘I’m afraid I don’t know much about forgiveness,’ she said quietly.

Jean was so quiet in the car on the way home that Susanna wondered if she might have fallen asleep. About halfway back to the retirement village, however, her mother said suddenly, ‘Actually, the marriage bar for female public servants was lifted a year earlier, in 1966. I’m afraid I misled you all, for dramatic effect.’

‘Uh-huh,’ said Susanna, amused at this confession. ‘I think that’s permissible, under the circumstances.’

‘You know, when I first I got a prescription for the pill, our local chemist wouldn’t fill it unless Neville came in and said I had his approval.’

‘Good heavens!’ Susanna shook her head. ‘Mum, I’m ashamed to say I didn’t know half of what you told us. It makes me think, if *my* generation doesn’t know about how things really were for women, and so recently, then what about the next one? It’s scary. A lot of my students think feminism’s a dirty word, or at least hopelessly old-fashioned.’

‘Except for Miriam, those women tonight have all grown up being able to *assume* their right to an education, a career.’

‘Yes. None of my students, girls or boys —’

‘They couldn’t even *imagine* what it was like!’ Jean interrupted her, the vehemence and hurt in her voice shocking Susanna. ‘Having to watch both my brothers – and neither of them *half* as bright as me – go off to university. While I had to go to secretarial school, and learn shorthand and typing.’

Susanna glanced quickly at her mother’s familiar profile, backlit intermittently by the streetlights. ‘I know, Mum. That’s part of what’s changed,’ she said cautiously.

‘I should have been a lawyer!’ cried Jean. ‘Not a legal secretary. I would’ve been twice the lawyer Bob was!’ Bob was her older brother, dead now, in whose law firm she’d worked for more than forty years. ‘Do you know, Susie, even Bob thought I shouldn’t keep working after I got married. And especially after you and Angela were born. It was only because of your father’s health, and that we were so short of money.’

‘Mum, that’s not the only reason,’ said Susanna firmly. ‘It’s because you were a really *good* legal secretary. The best! You know that, and Uncle Bob knew that too.’

‘Oh yes,’ her mother conceded. ‘A good secretary.’ She crossed her arms and sighed. ‘Fat lot Bob’s partners cared: once I turned forty they started pressuring him to hire some pretty young girl, like they had. But Bob wouldn’t. He trusted my opinion on a lot of things more than theirs.’

‘I’ll bet. And with good reason.’

‘This is why I wanted you to have a proper career, Susanna,’ said her mother, placing a hand briefly on her forearm. ‘To have security, and not be dependent on favours. And to be given a bit more respect, for heaven’s sake, than a secretary.’

‘And all those paid holidays, don’t forget,’ said Susanna, attempting to cheer her mother up with a bit of flippancy.

‘*And all the holidays!*’ Jean agreed. Some lightness returned to her voice. Complaining was not, after all, something she approved of. ‘You wouldn’t have got any paid holidays as an artist, darling, would you?’

‘Oh Mum, I would never have made it as an artist, it was just a teenage fantasy. You knew that. You got me to see what good sense it made to be a teacher, otherwise I could’ve just drifted off into —’

‘*You would never have drifted,*’ said Jean sharply. Angie; Angie was the one who’d drifted. ‘The artist’s life wouldn’t have suited you; you were always too responsible.’

And now I only know how to be a teacher; I’ve completely forgotten how to be an artist. That awful clutch of panic started to wring Susanna’s insides. Her breath came shallowly. *I’m responsible for this exhibition and I just have the one idea, and I still don’t how to get started.*

‘Oh, Susie, I had another thought,’ Jean said, turning toward her. ‘About your exhibition. This might sound odd, but what if you were to attend a life drawing class? It would give you impetus, don’t you think? And ... confidence.’

Instantly, Susanna’s tension ebbed. It was uncanny how well her mother knew her. *Better than anyone else.*

‘I think you’re right,’ she said. ‘Maybe I need to *not* be a teacher for a few hours a week, at least. Focus on *my* creative flow.’ She drove in through the pillared entrance of the retirement village, past the quiet rows of units with their tailored gardens, and swung smoothly into the parking space beside Jean’s small car. ‘Mum?’

‘Yes, dear?’

‘Thank you. For everything.’

They looked at each other, not needing to smile.

‘You’re more than welcome,’ said Jean softly. ‘I always enjoy my evenings with you, Susie.’

‘Me too,’ Susanna said as her mother opened the door of the car. ‘Because I’m with my best friend.’