
Opening Extract from...

The Dressmaker

Written by Rosalie Ham

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The DRESSMAKER

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'The sense of being well-dressed gives a feeling of inward tranquillity which religion is powerless to bestow.'

Miss C.F. Forbes quoted by Ralph Waldo Emerson
in *Social Aims*

Travellers crossing the wheat-yellow plains to Dungatar would first notice a dark blot shimmering at the edge of the flatness. Further down the asphalt, the shape would emerge as a hill. On top of The Hill sat a shabby brown weatherboard, leaning provocatively on the grassy curve. It looked as if it was about to careen down, but was roped to a solid chimney by thick-limbed wisteria. When passengers approaching Dungatar by train felt the carriage warp around the slow southward curve, they glanced up through the window and saw the tumbling brown house. At night, light from the house could be seen from the surrounding plains – a shaky beacon in a vast, black sea, winking from the home of Mad Molly. As the sun set, The Hill cast a shadow over the town that stretched as far as the silos.

One winter night, Myrtle Dunnage searched for the light from her mother's house through the windscreen of a Greyhound bus. Recently she had written to her mother but when she received no reply, she summoned the courage to phone. The curt voice at the telephone exchange had said, 'Molly Dunnage hasn't had a phone on for years, she wouldn't know what a phone was.'

'I wrote,' said Tilly, 'she didn't reply. Perhaps she didn't get my letter?'

'Old Mad Molly wouldn't know what to do with a letter either,' came the retort.

Tilly decided she would go back to Dungatar.

I

Gingham

A cotton fabric varying in quality depending
on the type of yarn, fastness of colour and weight.
Can be woven into a range of patterns.
A durable fabric if treated appropriately. Various
uses, from grain bags and curtains to house dresses
and suits.

Fabrics for Needlework

Chapter One

Sergeant Farrat patted his policeman's cap, picked a thread from his lapel and saluted his neat reflection. He strode to his shiny police car to begin his evening drive around, knowing all was well. The locals were subdued and the men asleep, for there was a chance of victory the next day on the football field.

He stopped his car in the main street to peruse the buildings, silver-roofed and smoky. Fog tiptoed around them, gathering around gateposts and walls, standing like gossamer marquees between trees. Muffled conversation wandered from the Station Hotel. He studied the vehicles nosing the pub: the usual Morris Minors and Austins, a utility, Councillor Pettyman's Wolseley and the Beaumonts' imposing but tired Triumph Gloria.

A Greyhound bus rumbled and hissed to a standstill outside the post office, its headlights illuminating Sergeant Farrat's pale face.

'A passenger?' he said aloud.

The door of the bus swung open and the glow from the interior beam struggled out. A slim young woman

stepped lightly into the fog. Her hair was lush about her shoulders, and she wore a beret and an unusually cut overcoat. 'Very smart,' thought the sergeant.

The driver pulled a suitcase from the luggage boot and carried it to the post office porch, leaving it in the dark corner. He went back for another, then another, and then he pulled something else out – something with a domed cover with 'Singer' printed in gold letters across its side.

The passenger stood holding it, looking over to the creek then up and down the street.

'Oh my pretty hat,' said Sergeant Farrat, and shot from his car.

She heard the car door slam so turned on her heel and headed west, towards The Hill. Behind her the bus roared away, the tail-lights shrinking, but she could hear the footsteps approaching.

'Myrtle Dunnage, my, my.'

Myrtle quickened her pace. So did Sergeant Farrat. He inspected her fine boots – *Italian*? he wondered – and her trousers, definitely not serge.

'Myrtle, let me help you.'

She walked on, so the sergeant lunged, wrenching the domed box from her hand, spinning her around. They stood and stared at each other, the white air swirling around them. Tilly had grown into a woman while Sergeant Farrat had aged. He raised one pale hand to his mouth in embarrassment, then shrugged and headed for his car with the luggage. When he'd thrown the last of Myrtle's suitcases onto the back seat, he opened the passenger door for her and waited. When she was in he swung the car about and headed

east. 'We'll take the long way home,' he said. The knot in the pit of Tilly's stomach hardened.

They glided through the fog and as they rounded the football oval, Sergeant Farrat said, 'We're third from the top of the ladder this year.'

Tilly was silent.

'You've come from Melbourne have you?'

'Yes,' she answered flatly.

'Home for long?'

'Not sure.'

They drove back through the main street. When they passed the school hall she heard the childhood cries of Friday afternoon softball games and shrieks and splashes from swimming carnivals at the creek. When Sergeant Farrat turned the library corner towards The Hill, she smelled the library's waxed lino floor, and saw a flash of wet blood on the dry grass outside. Memories of being driven to the bus stop all those years ago by the same man rose up, and the knot in her stomach turned.

Finally the police car ground its way to the top of The Hill and stopped. She sat looking at her old home while the sergeant looked at her. Little Myrtle Dunnage had alabaster skin and her mother's eyes and hair. She seemed strong, but damaged.

'Does anyone know you're coming, Myrtle?' asked the sergeant.

'My name is Tilly,' she said. 'Everyone will know soon enough.'

She turned to look at Sergeant Farrat's expectant face in the foggy moonlight. 'How is my mother?' she asked.

He opened his car door. 'Your mother … doesn't get out these days,' he said, and climbed from the car. The fog resting around the veranda moved like frills on a skirt as the sergeant moved through it with Tilly's suitcases. He held the heavy dome. 'You've a lovely sewing machine, *Tilly*,' he said.

'I'm a seamstress and dressmaker, Sergeant Farrat.' She opened the back door.

He clapped his hands. 'Excellent!'

'Thanks for the lift.' She closed the back door on him.

As he drove away, Sergeant Farrat tried to remember the last time he'd visited Mad Molly. He hadn't seen her for at least a year, but knew Mae McSwiney kept an eye on her. He smiled. 'A dressmaker!'

Molly's house was dank and smelled like possum piss. Tilly felt along the dusty wall for the light switch and turned it on, then moved through the kitchen to the lounge room, past the crusty old lounge suite to the fire-place. She put her hand to the ash. It was stone cold. She made her way over to her mother's bedroom door, turned the knob and pushed. A dull lamp glowed in the corner by the bed.

'Mum?'

A body stirred under piled blankets. A skeleton head wearing a tea cosy turned on a grubby kapok pillow. The mouth gaped like a charcoal hole, and sunken eyes gazed at her.

Molly Dunnage, mad woman and crone, said to her daughter, 'You've come about the dog have you? You can't have him. We want to keep him.'

She gestured at a crowd of invisible people around her bed, 'Don't we?' She nodded at them.

'This is what they've done to you,' said Tilly.

A mitten, stiff and soiled, came from under the blankets. Molly looked at her skinny wrist. 'Half past four,' she said.

Tilly unpacked the bottle of brandy she'd bought for her mother and sat on the back veranda looking down at the dull forms of Dungatar at slumber. She wondered about what she had left behind her, and what she had returned to.

At dawn she sighed and raised a glass to the small grey town and went inside. She evicted snug families of mice from between the towels in the linen press and spiders from their lace homes under light shades. She swept dust, dirt, twigs and a dead sparrow from the bath and turned on the taps to scrub it. The water ran cold and brown and when it flowed clear and hot, she filled the bath, then added lavender flowers from the garden. She tugged her mother from her crusty bed and pulled her tottering towards the bath. Mad Molly cursed, scratched and punched Tilly with Daddy Long Legs limbs, but soon tired and folded easily into the water.

'Anyway,' she snapped, 'everyone knows red jelly stays harder longer,' and she cackled at Tilly with green gums and lunatic eyes.

'Give me your teeth,' said Tilly. Molly clamped her mouth shut. Tilly pressed Molly's forearms across her chest, pinning her, then pinched her nostrils until Molly opened her mouth to breathe. She prised the

teeth out with a spoon and dropped them into a bucket of ammonia. Molly yelled and thrashed about until she was exhausted and clean and, while she soaked, Tilly stripped the beds. When the sun was high she dragged the mattresses out onto the grass to bake.

Later she tucked Molly's scrawny frame back into bed and spooned her sweet black tea, talking to her all the while. Molly's answers were maniacal, angry, but answers just the same. Then she slept, so Tilly cleaned out the stove, gathered kindling from the garden and lit a fire. Smoke ballooned up the chimney and a possum in the roof thumped across the beams. She threw open all the doors and windows and started flinging things out – an ancient sewing machine and a moth-eaten dress stand, a wringer washing machine shell, old newspapers and boxes, dirty curtains and stiff carpet pieces, a couch and its ruined chairs, broken tables, empty tin cans and glass bottles. Soon the little weatherboard house stood stump deep in rubbish.

When Molly woke, Tilly walked her all the way down to the outhouse where she sat her on the toilet with her bloomers around her ankles and her nightie tucked up into her jumper. She tied her hands to the toilet door with her dressing gown cord so that she would not wander off. Molly bellowed at the top of her old lungs until she was hoarse. Later, Tilly heated tinned tomato soup and sat her mother in the sun – emptied, cleaned and wrapped in jumpers, gloves, cap, socks, slippers and blankets – and fed her. All the while Mad Molly prattled. Tilly wiped her mother's sauce-red mouth. 'Did you enjoy that?'

Her mother replied formally, 'Yes thank you, we

always do,' and smiled graciously to the others attending the banquet, before vomiting over the strange woman she thought was feeding her poison.

Again Tilly stood on the veranda, the breeze pressing her trousers against her slim legs. Below her, smoke circled from beneath a copper in the McSwineys' yard at the base of The Hill beside the tip. Strangers assumed the bent railway carriages and dented caravans were part of it, but it was where the McSwiney family lived. Edward McSwiney was Dungatar's night cart man. He could negotiate every outhouse, every full dunny can in Dungatar – even on the blackest, windiest nights – without spilling a drop. During the day he also delivered things, riding around on his cart with his middle son Barney and a bunch of kids hanging off the back.

Little Myrtle used to watch the McSwiney kids playing: the oldest boy, a few years younger than herself, then three girls and Barney, who was 'not quite finished'. He was crooked, with an upside-down head and a club foot.

The town itself rested in the full glare of the morning sun. The railway station and the square, grey silo sat along the railway line, whose arc held the buildings against the bend of the Dungatar creek, like freckles on a nose. The creek had always been low, choked with willows and cumbungi weed, the flow sluggish and the water singing with mosquitos. The pioneer founders of Dungatar had allowed a flood plain along its inner curve, which was now a park of sorts with a community

hall in the middle, Mr and Mrs Almanac's low damp cottage at the eastern end opposite their chemist shop, and the school at the western edge, where Prudence Dimm had taught the children of Dungatar for as long as anyone could remember. The main road followed the curve of the park, separating it from the commercial strip. The police station was situated out along the road to the east, half-way between the cemetery and the town's edge. It was not a busy road and there were few shops at its kerb, the chemist shop, then the Station Hotel, and then A and M Pratt, Merchant Supplies – a general store which sold everything anyone needed. The post office, bank and telephone exchange were housed together in the next building, and the last, most western building was the shire office and library combined. The houses of Dungatar, dotted behind the commercial strip, were dissected by a thin gravel road that ran to the football oval.

The green eye of the oval looked back up at Tilly, the cars around its edge like lashes. Inside, her mother stirred and called, and the possum thumped across the ceiling again.

Tilly went to the dress stand lying on the grass. She stood it up and then hosed it down, leaving it to dry in the sun.