

# Angel

Colleen McCullough

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**Friday,**

**January 1st, 1960 (New Year's Day)**

How on earth can I get rid of David? Don't think that I haven't contemplated murder, but I wouldn't get away with murder any more than I got away with the bikini I bought myself with the five quid Granny gave me for Christmas.

“Take it back, my girl, and bring home something one-piece with a modesty panel across the business area,” Mum said.

Truth to tell, I was a bit horrified when the mirror showed me how much of me that bikini put on display, including sideburns of black pubic hair I'd never noticed when they lurked behind a modesty panel. The very thought of plucking out a million pubic hairs sent me back to exchange the bikini for an Esther Williams model in the latest colour, American Beauty. Sort of a rich, reddish pink. The shop assistant said I looked ravishing in it, but who is going to ravish me, with David Bloody Murchison hovering over my carcass like

a dog guarding a bone? Certainly not David Bloody Murchison!

It was up over the hundred today, so I went down to the beach to christen the new costume. The surf was running high, pretty unusual for Bronte, but the waves looked like green satin sausages—dumpers, no good for body surfing. I spread my towel on the sand, slathered zinc cream all over my nose, pulled on my matching American Beauty swim cap, and ran towards the water.

“It’s too rough to go in, you’ll get dumped,” said a voice.

David. David Bloody Murchison. If he suggests the safety of the kids’ bogey hole, I thought, girding my modesty-panelled loins, there is going to be a fight.

“Let’s go round to the bogey hole, it’s safe,” he said.

“And get flattened by kids bombing us? No!” I snarled, and launched into the fight. Though “fight” is not the correct word. I yell and carry on, David just looks superior and refuses to bite. But today’s fight produced a new rocket—I finally got up the gumption to inform him that I was tired of being a virgin.

“Let’s have an affair,” I said.

“Don’t be silly,” he said, unruffled.

“I am *not* being silly! Everybody I know has had an affair—except me! Dammit, David, I’m twenty-one, and here I am engaged to a bloke who won’t even kiss me with his mouth open!”

He patted me gently on one shoulder and sat down on his towel. “Harriet,” he announced in that toffee-nosed, super-genteel Catholic boys’ college voice of his, “it’s

time we set a wedding date. I have my doctorate, the C.S.I.R.O. has offered me my own lab and a research grant, we've been going out together for four years, and engaged for one. Affairs are a sin. Marriage isn't."

Grr!

"Mum, I want to break off my engagement to David!" I said to her when I got home from the beach, my new costume unbaptised.

"Then tell him so, dear," she said.

"Have you ever tried telling David Murchison that you don't want to marry him any more?" I demanded.

Mum giggled. "Well, no. I'm already married."

Oh, I *hate* it when Mum is funny at my expense!

But I battled on. "The trouble is that I was only sixteen when I met him, seventeen when he started taking me out, and in those days it was terrific to have a boyfriend I didn't need to fight off. But Mum, he's so—so *hidebound*! Here I am of an age to consent, but he doesn't treat me any differently than he did when I was a mere seventeen! I feel like a fly stuck in amber."

Mum's a good stick, so she didn't start moralising, though she did look a bit concerned.

"If you don't want to marry him, Harriet, then don't. But he is a very good catch, dear. Handsome, well-built—and such a bright future ahead of him! Look at what's happened to all your friends, especially Merle. They take up with chaps who just aren't mature and sensible like David, so they keep getting hurt. Nothing comes of it. David's stuck to you like glue, he always will."

“I know,” I said through my teeth. “Merle still nags me on the subject of David—he’s divine, I don’t know how lucky I am. But honestly, he’s a pain in the bum! I’ve been with him for so long that every other bloke I know thinks I’m already taken—I never have an opportunity to find out what the rest of the male world is like, dammit!”

But she didn’t really listen. Mum and Dad approve of David, always have. Maybe if I’d had a sister, or been closer in age to my brothers—it’s *hard* being an accident of the wrong sex! I mean, there are Gavin and Peter in their middle thirties, still living at home, shagging hordes of women in the back of their van on top of a waterproof mattress, partnering Dad in our sporting goods shop and playing cricket in their spare time—the life of Riley! But I have to share a room with Granny, who pees in a potty which she empties on the grass at the bottom of the backyard. Pongs a treat.

“Think yourself lucky, Roger, that I don’t chuck it on next-door’s washing” is all she says when Dad tries to remonstrate.

What a good idea this diary is! I’ve encountered enough weird and wonderful psychiatrists to realise that I now have a “medium through which to vent frustrations and repressions”. It was Merle suggested I keep a diary—I suspect she’d like to peek in it whenever she visits, but no chance of that. I intend to store it propped against the skirting board underneath Granny’s bed right in line with Potty.

*Tonight's wishes:* No David Murchison in my life. No Potty in my life. No curried sausages in my life. A room all to myself. An engagement ring so that I could chuck it in David's face. He said he wasn't giving me one because it's a waste of money. What a miser!

**Saturday,  
January 2nd, 1960**

I landed the job! After I sat my finals at the Sydney Tech last year, I applied to the Royal Queens Hospital X-ray Department for a position as a trained technician, and today the postie brought a letter of acceptance! I am to start this Monday as a senior X-ray technician at the biggest hospital in the Southern Hemisphere—*more than a thousand beds!* Makes Ryde Hospital, my old alma mater, look like a dinghy alongside the *Queen Elizabeth*. From where I am now, I should never have done my training at Ryde Hospital, but at the time I thought it was a brilliant idea when David suggested it. His elder brother, Ned, was a registrar there—a friend at court. Hah! He acted as my watchdog. Every time someone male gave me a come-hither look, Ned *Bloody* Murchison warned him off—I was his brother's girl, so no poaching on taken preserves! In the early days I didn't mind, but it became a colossal bog as I grew out of my teenage uncertainty and humility, started thinking occasionally that X or Y looked like he'd be fun to go out with.

Training at Ryde did have one advantage, though. It takes two hours on public transport to get there from Bronte, and studying on public transport beats trying to study in the Purcell residence, between Granny and Mum watching television and the men usurping the whole evening to wash the dishes while they yarn cricket, cricket, cricket. Clint Walker and Efreim Zimbalist Junior in the lounge room, Keith Miller and Don Bradman in the kitchen, and no doors between all this and the only spot to study, the dining room table. Give me a bus or a train any day. Guess what? *I topped everything!* Highest marks possible. That's why I got the job at Royal Queens. When the results came out, Mum and Dad nagged a bit because when I'd finished at Randwick High, I refused to go to Uni and do a degree in science or medicine. Topping X-ray rubbed my lack of ambition in, I suppose. But who wants to go to Uni and suffer the slings and arrows of all those males who don't want women in men's professions? Not me!

**Monday,  
January 4th, 1960**

I started work this morning. Nine o'clock. Royal Queens is so much closer to Bronte than Ryde! If I walk the last mile-and-a-bit, I only have a twenty-minute bus ride.

Because I applied at Tech, I'd never been to the place before, only gone past it on a few occasions when we

went south to visit someone or have a picnic. What a place! It's got its own shops, banks, post office, power plant, a laundry big enough to contract out to hotels, workshops, warehouses—you name it, Royal Queens has got it. Talk about a maze! It took me fifteen minutes at a fast clip to walk from the main gates to X-ray through just about every sort of architecture Sydney has produced for the last hundred or so years. Quadrangles, ramps, verandahs lined with pillars, sandstone buildings, red brick buildings, lots of those ghastly new buildings with glass on their outsides—stinking hot to work in!

Judging by the number of people I passed, there must be ten thousand employees. The nurses are wrapped up in so many layers of starch that they look like green-and-white parcels. The poor things have to wear thick brown cotton stockings and flat-heeled brown lace-up shoes! Even Marilyn Monroe would have trouble looking seductive in opaque stockings and lace-up flatties. Their caps look like two white doves entwined, and they have *celluloid* cuffs and collars, hems mid-calf. The registered nursing sisters look the same, except that they don't have aprons, flaunt Egyptian headdress veils instead of caps, and wear nylons—*their* lace-up shoes have two-inch block heels.

Well, I've always known that I don't have the temperament to take all that regimented, mindless discipline, any more than I have to put up with being maltreated by male Uni students protecting masculine turf. Us technicians just have to wear a white button-

down-the-front uniform (hems below the knee), with nylons and moccasin flatties.

There must be a hundred physios—I *hate* physios! I mean, what are physios except glorified masseuses? But boy, are they up themselves! They even starch their uniforms *voluntarily*! And they all have that gung-ho, jolly-hockey-stick-brigade air of superiority as they nip around smartly like army officers, baring their horsey teeth as they say things like “Jolly D!” and “Oh, supah!”

It’s lucky I left home early enough to make that fifteen-minute walk yet still arrive at Sister Toppingham’s office on time. What a tartar! Pappy says that everyone calls her Sister Agatha, so I will too—behind her back. She’s about a thousand years old and was once a nursing sister—still wears the starched Egyptian headdress veil of a trained nurse. She’s the same shape as a pear, right down to the pear-shaped accent. Fraughtfulleh-fraughtfulleh. Her eyes are pale blue, cold as a frosty morning, and they looked through me as if I was a smear on the window.

“You will commence, Miss Purcell, in Chests. Nice, easy lungs at first, don’t you know? I prefer that all new staff serve an orientation period doing something simple. Later on we shall see what you can really do, yes? Jolly good, jolly good!”

Wacko, what a challenge! *Chests*. Shove ’em against the upright bucky and get ’em to hold their breath. When Sister Agatha said Chests, she meant OPD chests—the walking wounded, not the serious stuff.

There are three of us doing routine chests, me and two junior trainees. But the darkrooms are in furious demand—we have to hustle our cassettes through at maximum speed, which means anyone who takes longer than nine minutes gets yelled at.

This is a department of women, which amazes me. Very rare! X-ray technicians are paid the male award, so men flock to X-ray as a profession—at Ryde, almost all of us were men. I imagine the difference at Queens is Sister Agatha, therefore she can't be all bad.

I met the nurses' aide in the dreary area where our lockers and the toilets live. I liked her at first glance, a lot more than any of the technicians I met today. My two trainees are nice kids, but both first-years, so a bit boring. Whereas Nurse-aide Papele Sutama is *interesting*. The name is outlandish—but then, so is its owner. Her eyes do have upper lids, but there's definitely a lot of Chinese there, I thought when I saw her. Not Japanese, her legs are too shapely and straight. She confirmed the Chinese later on. Oh, just the prettiest girl I've ever seen! A mouth like a rosebud, cheekbones to die for, feathery eyebrows. She's known as Pappy, and it suits her. A tiny little thing, about five feet tall, and very thin without looking as if she's out of Belsen like those anorexia nervosa cases Psych sends me for routine chests—why on earth do teenage girls starve themselves? Back to Pappy, whose skin is like ivory silk.

Pappy liked me too, so when she found out that I'd brought a cut lunch from home, she invited me to eat it

with her on the grass outside the mortuary, which isn't very far from X-ray, but Sister Agatha can't see you from X-ray as she patrols. Sister Agatha doesn't eat lunch, she's too busy policing her empire. Of course we don't get the full hour, especially on Mondays, when all the routine stuff from the weekend has to be squeezed in as well as the normal intake. However, Pappy and I managed to find out a great deal about each other in just thirty minutes.

The first thing she told me was that she lives at *Kings Cross*. Phew! It's the one part of Sydney that Dad put out of bounds—a den of iniquity, Granny calls it. Riddled with vice. I'm not sure exactly what vice is, apart from alcoholism and prostitution. There are a lot of both at Kings Cross, judging by what the Reverend Alan Walker has to say. Still, he's a Metho—very righteous. Kings Cross is where Rosaleen Norton the witch lives—she's always in the news for painting obscene pictures. What *is* an obscene picture—people copulating? I asked Pappy, but all she said was that obscenity is in the eye of the beholder. Pappy's very deep, reads Schopenhauer, Jung, Bertrand Russell and people like that, but she told me that she doesn't have a high opinion of Freud. I asked her why she wasn't up at Sydney Uni, and she said she'd never had much formal schooling. Her mother was an Australian, her father Chinese from Singapore, and they got caught up in World War Two. Her father died, her mother went mad after four years in Changi prison camp—what tragic

lives some people have! And here am I with nothing to complain about except David and Potty. Bronte born and bred.

Pappy says that David is a mass of repressions, which she blames on his Catholic upbringing—she even has a name for the Davids of this world—“constipated Catholic schoolboys”. But I didn’t want to talk about him, I wanted to know what living at Kings Cross is like. Like any other place, she says. But I don’t believe that, it’s too notorious. I’m *dying* of curiosity!

**Wednesday,  
January 6th, 1960**

It’s David again. Why can’t he get it through his head that someone who works in a hospital does not want to see some turgid monstrosity of a Continental film? It’s all very well for him, up there in his sterile, autoclaved little world where the most exciting thing that ever happens is a bloody mouse growing a bloody lump, but I work in one of those places where people suffer pain and sometimes even die! I am surrounded by gruesome reality—I cry enough, I’m depressed enough! So when I go to the pictures I want to laugh, or at least have a good old snuffle when Deborah Kerr gives up the love of her life because she’s in a wheelchair. Whereas the sort of films David likes are so *depressing*. Not sad, just depressing.

I tried to tell him the above when he said he was taking me to see the new film at the Savoy Theatre. The word I used wasn't depressing, it was sordid.

"Great literature and great films are not sordid," he said.

I offered to let him harrow his soul in peace at the Savoy while I went to the Prince Edward to see a Western, but he gets this look on his face which long experience has taught me precedes a lecture that's sort of a cross between a sermon and a harangue, so I gave in and went with him to the Savoy to see *Gervaise*—Zola, David explained as we came out. I felt like a wrung-out dishrag, which isn't a bad comparison, actually. It all took place in a Victorian version of a giant laundry. The heroine was so young and pretty, but there wasn't a man worth looking at within cooe— they were fat and *bald*. I think David might end up bald, his hair isn't as thick as it was when I met him.

David insisted on taking a taxi home, though I would far rather have walked briskly down to the Quay and grabbed the bus. He always lets the taxi go outside our place, then escorts me in up the side passage, where, in the dark, he puts a hand on either side of my waist and squishes my lip with three kisses so chaste that the Pope wouldn't think it sinful to bestow them. After which he watches to see I'm safely in the back door, then walks the four blocks to his own house. He lives with his widowed mother, though he's bought a roomy bungalow at Coogee Beach which he rents out to a family of New

Australians from Holland—very clean, the Dutch, he told me. Oh, is there *any* blood in David’s veins? Never once has he put a finger, let alone a hand, on my breasts. What do I have them for?

My big Bros were inside, making a cup of tea and killing themselves laughing at what had gone on in the side passage.

*Tonight’s wish:* That I manage to save fifteen quid a week at this new job and save enough by the beginning of 1961 to take that two-year working holiday to England. Then I’ll lose David, who can’t possibly leave his bloody mice in case one grows a bloody lump.

**Thursday,  
January 7th, 1960**

My curiosity about Kings Cross is going to be gratified on Saturday, when I am to have dinner at Pappy’s place. However, I shan’t tell Mum and Dad exactly whereabouts Pappy lives. I’ll just say it’s on the fringe of Paddington.

*Tonight’s wish:* That Kings Cross isn’t a let-down.

**Friday,  
January 8th, 1960**

Last night we had a bit of a crisis with Willie. It’s typical of Mum that she insisted on rescuing this baby cockatoo

off the Mudgee road and rearing it. Willie was so scrawny and miserable that Mum started him off on a dropper of warm milk laced with the three-star hospital brandy we keep for Granny's funny little turns. Then, because his beak wasn't hard enough yet to crack seed, she switched to porridge laced with three-star hospital brandy. So Willie grew up into this gorgeous, fat white bird with a yellow comb and a daggy breast caked with dried porridge. Mum has always given him his porridge-and-brandy in the last of the Bunnyware saucers I had when I was a toddler. But yesterday she broke the Bunnyware saucer, so she put his dinner in a bilious green saucer instead. Willie took one look, flipped his uneaten dinner upside down and went bonkers—screched high C without letting up until every dog in Bronte was howling and Dad had a visit from the Boys in Blue, who arrived in a paddy wagon.

I daresay it's all those years of reading whodunits sharpened my deductive powers, because, after a hideous night of a screeching parrot and a thousand howling dogs, I realised two facts. One, that parrots are intelligent enough to discern a saucer with cute little bunnies running around its rim from a saucer of bilious green. Two, that Willie is an alcoholic. When he saw the wrong saucer, he concluded that his porridge-and-brandy had been withdrawn, and went into withdrawal himself—hence the racket.

Peace was finally restored to Bronte when I got home from work this afternoon. I'd grabbed a taxi at

lunchtime and dashed into the city to buy a new Bunnyware saucer. Had to buy the cup as well—*two pounds ten!* But Gavin and Peter are good scouts, even if they are my big brothers. They each donated a third of the two-and-a-half quid, so I'm not much out of pocket. Silly, isn't it? But Mum so loves that dippy bird.

**Saturday,  
January 9th, 1960**

Kings Cross is certainly not a let-down. I got off the bus at the stop before Taylor Square and walked the rest of the way with Pappy's directions memorised. Apparently they don't eat very early at Kings Cross, because I didn't have to be there until eight, so by the time I got off the bus it was quite dark. Then as I passed Vinnie's Hospital it began to rain—just a drizzle, nothing that my frilly pink broly couldn't handle. When I reached that huge intersection I believe is the actual Kings Cross, seeing it on foot with the streets wet and the dazzle of all those neons and car lights rippling across the water was completely different from whizzing through it in a taxi. It's beautiful. I don't know how the shopkeepers avoid the Sydney Blue Laws, because they were still open *on a Saturday evening!* Though it was a bit disappointing when I realised that my route didn't lie along the Darlinghurst Road shops—I had to walk down Victoria Street, in which The House is situated. That's what

Pappy calls it, “The House”, and I know she says it with capital letters. As if it is an institution. So I admit that I hiked past the terraced houses of Victoria Street eagerly.

I love the rows upon rows of old Victorian terraced houses inner Sydney has—not kept up these days, alas. All the lovely cast-iron lace has been ripped off and replaced by sheets of fibro to turn the balconies into extra rooms, and the plastered walls are dingy. Even so, they’re very mysterious. The windows are blanked out by Manchester lace curtains and brown-paper blinds, like closed eyes. They’ve seen so much. Our house at Bronte is only twenty-two years old; Dad built it after the worst of the Depression, when his shop started making money. So nothing’s happened in it except us, and we are boring. Our biggest crisis is Willie’s saucer—at least, that’s the only time the police have called on us.

The House was a long way down Victoria Street, and as I walked I noticed that at this far end some of the terraced houses still had their cast-iron lace, were painted and well kept-up. Right at the end beyond Challis Avenue the street widened into a semicircular dead end. Apparently the Council had run out of tar, because the road was cobbled with little wooden blocks, and I noticed that within the semicircle no cars were parked. This gave the crescent of five terraced houses which filled it an air of not belonging to the present. They were all numbered 17—17a, b, c, d and e. The one in the middle, 17c, was The House. It had a fabulous front door of ruby glass etched in a pattern of lilies

down to the clear glass underneath, the bevels glittering amber and purple from the light inside. It wasn't locked, so I pushed it open.

But the fairytale door led into a desert waste. A dingy hall painted dirty cream, a red cedar staircase leading upward, a couple of fly-dirt-speckled naked lightbulbs on long, twisted brown cords, awful old brown linoleum pitted from stiletto heels. From the skirting boards to a height of about four feet, every single bit of wall I could see was smothered in scribbles, aimless loops and whorls of many colours with the waxy look of crayon.

“Hello!” I yelled.

Pappy appeared from beyond the staircase, smiling a welcome. I think I stared quite rudely, she looked so different. Instead of that unflattering bright mauve uniform and hair-hiding cap, she wore a skin-tight tube of peacock blue satin embroidered in dragons, and it was split so far up her left leg that I could see the top of her stocking and a frilly lace suspender. Her hair cascaded down her back in a thick, straight, shining mass—why can't I have hair like that? Mine is just as black, but it's so curly that if I grew it long it'd stick out like a broom in an epileptic fit. So I hack mine really short with a pair of scissors.

She led me through a door at the end of the passage beside the stairs and we emerged into another, much shorter hall which went sideways and seemed to end in the open air. It held only the one door, which Pappy opened.