

“I’ve made you a flag,” Gen announces. She’s holding a scrap of fabric. “Actually. It wasn’t me. Pam did it. She’s the one with the sewing kit.” She holds out the colourful stripes of the rainbow. Josie takes it and admires the stitching.

“It’s exactly the right size,” she marvels.

“Well, yes. Didn’t you notice her with her ruler while Sam was making us coffee? We thought she looked dodgy as all get out.” Josie laughs.

“Well, now you mention it, I just thought she was admiring them. That’s hilarious!” Josie takes the flag and threads the folded edge onto the string that hangs along the front of the caravan. She’s made a flag each week, her Covid craft project, embroidering images and quotes that reflect where they are, things that capture what’s happening in their increasingly small world as time passes. Josie’s personal favourite is one depicting Bri and Jamie’s house with the garden in late bloom as it was in May when they first arrived. She loved creating the lavender blooms and the last roses. A second one in more muted fabrics is nearly ready to hang, the leafless skeletons of the trees over Acorn St conjuring more than just the seasonal shift. There’s a plain blue flag with the North Face logo on the top right quadrant. A passenger ship. The word ZOOM white on a black background. Stick figures of herself and Tessa on either side a fence with a love heart in between them. The outline of the state of Victoria (done in chain stitch, Josie is a bit embarrassed by such a controversial act but Sam says it’s ‘art’). It’s her version of a Buddhist prayer flag only less religious. At least, that’s what Josie tells herself.

“It’s the Pride progress flag,” Gen says. Josie nods.

“I didn’t know that’s what it was called.”

Gen looks at it. "It still feels weird to be able to hand it to you so openly," she says abruptly. Josie tilts her head questioningly. "The flag. It used to be something sort of secret. Like a secret handshake or something that only those who needed to know understood. It used to be something to hide. I used to be someone who had to hide." Josie pulls out the camp chair and unfolds one for Gen and they sit together. "You know, I grew up in Bendigo."

"I didn't know that. I thought you only moved here a few years ago." Gen nods.

"That's right. From Melbourne. But I'm from here originally. I was married once and had a couple of kids." She stares fixedly at the grass beneath her chair and worries at a weed with the toe of her shoe.

"You've got kids?" Josie is a bit surprised at this. They've come to know each other so well over the weeks but Gen has never mentioned the existence of any children before.

"A boy and a girl. They're grown up now. I don't see them." She glances at Josie. "It's a long story. But what else are we going to do while we wait for the world to open up but tell stories?" Gen's voice is low. She breathes deeply. "You know what it's like living here, Josie. You have to fit in. I did everything I could to fit in. I even pretended to be straight."

Josie sits back in her chair abruptly with her hand over her mouth.

"I know, shocking, isn't it? It wasn't easy. But I had to. It wasn't safe to be 'not straight', you know?" Gen hunches over further, wrapping her arms around her knees tightly. "You remember what it was like, don't you? The homophobia? Gay people were hounded out of town. Or worse. Better not to come out. If I'd been wiser

I would have just left my husband, told him I was having an affair with a guy, and moved away then. But, nope, not me. Too trusting. I should have known better. It was too early, Joey.”

Josie’s mind is whirling. Thoughts of those last moments with Paul are vivid.

*Two empty wine glasses and a bottle of red on the table, a charcuterie platter almost untouched. Clothes strewn across the floor. A double bed. Josie stares. His back is to her, hairless and smooth. A tattoo on his right shoulder. It had been a long time since she’d seen him naked. In sleep he is relaxed and calm, peaceful almost. The couple on the bed snuggle closer, Paul nuzzles the neck, kisses it, murmurs something. They turn together and the lover’s arm snakes protectively around Paul’s waist. Josie stares. A hairy arm with big hands and strong fingers. She cries aloud and Paul’s eyes snap open.*

“What are you doing here? Get OUT!”

“I remember.” Josie reaches over and lays her hand on Gen’s shoulder. “What happened?”

“He kicked me out. Got full custody of the kids. I even lost my job. They didn’t come out and say it to my face but I know it was because they found out. Lesbians were not cool back then, Joey, not cool. So I went to Melbourne.” Gen lifts her head and chances a glance at Josie. “It was a long time ago. But I met Pam and got a cat and an apartment and we were happy down there where it was ok to be ourselves. I can’t tell you how much of a relief it was to stop hiding. It almost made it worth losing everything, you know?”

“What made you come back?”

Gen releases the grip on the knees and leans back into the chair. "There were a few things that happened," she muses. "I heard that my ex had moved away from town. My mum and dad needed to go into care and so I was up and down the Calder visiting and sorting things out. The first few trips terrified me, to be honest. I spent the whole time looking over my shoulder, just waiting for someone to realise and for the anger to start again. It just never happened. I wouldn't say Bendigo was suddenly perfect but something had changed. Shops had the progress flag stickers in their windows. I saw two guys holding hands and people still stared but no-one said anything. When mum died I inherited the house. We needed a change so we moved up." Gen looked up and down the street. "Back in the house I grew up in, I would never have imagined it. And I love it! That's the real surprise."

"You're right. We've all changed, haven't we?"

"And in such a relatively short time," Gen added. The Bendigo I left, had to leave, and the Bendigo we moved to are two completely different places. I'm glad I got the chance to see the place grow up. Imagine if I'd missed it. Pam thinks I was exaggerating about how bad it was. I'm glad she doesn't really know."

Josie leaves her hand on Gen's shoulder and they sit in silence for a few more minutes. Josie can't bring herself to tell Gen about Paul. She doesn't consider herself to be homophobic, look at her sitting her with her lesbian friend after all! But the feeling of shame lingers and now she is ashamed of feeling that, too. How is it, Josie wonders, that she can accept these two women are married but memories of Paul still make her feel ill? She wonders how things might have been different if Paul hadn't felt the need to pretend to be someone he wasn't. Then Paul might never have married her. She would never have been trapped in that life. The awfulness of

being rejected for a man, that wound might never have been inflicted on her. Josie does not allow herself to think about what might have been because it cannot be changed. She looks at the woman who is both neighbour and friend and smiles warmly.

“I’m glad you came back, too. Thank you for sharing your story with me. The sting never goes away, does it? And thank you for telling me you have children somewhere. We both know how that feels. The not-knowing.”

Gen looks at her gratefully and they both wipe their eyes.