

On a hot, cloudless January day, Frances Welty, the formerly bestselling romantic novelist, drove alone through scrubby bushland six hours north-west of her Sydney home.

The black ribbon of highway unrolled hypnotically ahead of her as the air-conditioning vents roared arctic air full-blast at her face. The sky was a giant deep blue dome surrounding her tiny solitary car. There was far too *much* sky for her liking.

She smiled because she reminded herself of one of those peevisish TripAdvisor reviewers: *So I called reception and asked for a lower, cloudier, more comfortable sky. A woman with a strong foreign accent said there were no other skies available! She was very rude about it too! NEVER AGAIN. DON'T WASTE YOUR MONEY.*

It occurred to Frances that she was possibly quite close to losing her mind.

No, she wasn't. She was fine. Perfectly sane. Really and truly.

She flexed her hands around the steering wheel, blinked dry eyes behind her sunglasses and yawned so hugely her jaw clicked.

'Ow,' she said, although it didn't hurt.

She sighed, looked out the window for something to break the monotony of the landscape. It would be so harsh and unforgiving out there. She could just imagine it: the drone of blowflies, the mournful cry of crows, and all that glaring white-hot light. Wide brown land indeed.

*Come on. Give me a cow, a crop, a shed. I spy with my little eye something beginning with . . .*

N. Nothing.

She shifted in her seat, and her lower back rewarded her with a jolt of pain so violent and personal it brought tears to her eyes.

‘For God’s *sake*,’ she said pitifully.

The back pain had begun two weeks ago, on the day she finally accepted that Paul Drabble had disappeared. She was dialling the number for the police and trying to work out how to refer to Paul – her partner, boyfriend, lover, her ‘special friend’? – when she felt the first twinge. It was the most obvious example of psychosomatic pain ever, except knowing it was psychosomatic didn’t make it hurt any less.

It was strange to look in the mirror each night and see the reflection of her lower back looking as soft, white and gently plump as it always had. She expected to see something dreadful, like a gnarled mass of tree roots.

She looked at the time on the dashboard: 2.57 pm. The turn-off should be coming up any minute. She’d told the reservations people at Tranquillum House that she’d be there around 3.30 to 4 pm and she hadn’t made any unscheduled stops.

Tranquillum House was a ‘boutique health and wellness resort’. Her friend Ellen had suggested it. ‘You need to *heal*,’ she’d told Frances after their third cocktail (an excellent white peach Bellini) at lunch last week. ‘You look like *shit*.’

Ellen had done a ‘cleanse’ at Tranquillum House five years ago when she, too, had been ‘burnt out’ and ‘run-down’ and ‘out of condition’ and – ‘Yes, yes, I get it,’ Frances had said.

‘It’s quite . . . unusual, this place,’ Ellen had told Frances. ‘Their approach is kind of unconventional. Life-changing.’

‘How exactly did your life change?’ Frances had asked, reasonably, but she’d never got a clear answer to that question. In the end, it all seemed to come down to the whites of Ellen’s eyes, which had become really white, like, freakily white! Also, she lost three kilos – although Tranquillum House wasn’t about weight loss, Ellen was at great pains to point that out, it was

about *wellness*, but, you know, what woman complains about losing three kilos? Not Ellen, that's for sure. Not Frances either.

Frances had gone home and looked up the website. She'd never been a fan of self-denial, never been on a diet, rarely said no if she felt like saying yes or yes if she felt like saying no. According to her mother, Frances's first greedy word was 'more'. She always wanted more.

Yet the photos of Tranquillum House had filled her with a strange, unexpected yearning. They were golden-hued, all taken at sunset or sunrise, or else filtered to make it look that way. Pleasantly middle-aged people did warrior poses in a garden of white roses next to a beautiful country house. A couple sat in one of the 'natural hot springs' that surrounded the property. Their eyes were closed, heads tipped back, smiling ecstatically as water bubbled around them. Another photo showed a woman enjoying a 'hot stone massage' on a deckchair next to an aquamarine swimming pool. Frances had imagined those hot stones placed with delightful symmetry down her own spine, their magical heat melting away her pain.

As she dreamed of hot springs and gentle yoga, a message flashed urgently on her screen: *Only one place remaining for the exclusive Ten-Day Mind and Body Total Transformation Retreat!* It had made her feel stupidly competitive and she clicked *Book now*, even though she didn't *really* believe there was only one place remaining. Still, she keyed in her credit card details pretty damned fast, just in case.

It seemed that in a mere ten days she would be 'transformed' in ways she 'never thought possible'. There would be fasting, meditation, yoga, creative 'emotional release exercises'. There would be no alcohol, sugar, caffeine, gluten or dairy – but as she'd just had the degustation menu at the Four Seasons, she was stuffed full of alcohol, sugar, caffeine, gluten and dairy, and the thought of giving them up didn't seem that big a deal. Meals would be 'personalised' to her 'unique needs'.

Before her booking was ‘accepted’, she had to answer a very long, rather invasive online questionnaire about her relationship status, diet, medical history, alcohol consumption in the previous week and so on. She cheerfully lied her way through it. It was really none of their business. She even had to upload a photo taken in the last two weeks. She sent one of herself from her lunch with Ellen at the Four Seasons, holding up a Bellini.

There were boxes to tick for what she hoped to achieve during her ten days: everything from ‘intensive couples counselling’ to ‘significant weight loss’. Frances ticked only the nice-sounding boxes, like ‘spiritual nourishment’.

Like so many things in life, it had seemed like an excellent idea at the time.

The TripAdvisor reviews for Tranquillum House, which she’d looked at *after* she’d paid her non-refundable fee, had been noticeably mixed. It was either the best, most incredible experience people had ever had, they wished they could give it more than five stars, they were evangelical about the food, the hot springs, the staff, or it was the worst experience of their entire lives, there was talk of legal action, post-traumatic stress and dire warnings of ‘enter at your own peril’.

Frances looked again at the dashboard, hoping to catch the clock tick over to three.

*Stop it. Focus. Eyes on the road, Frances. You’re the one in charge of this car.*

Something flickered in her peripheral vision and she flinched, ready for the massive thud of a kangaroo smashing her windshield.

It was nothing. These imaginary wildlife collisions were all in her head. If it happened, it happened. There probably wouldn’t be time to react.

She remembered a long-ago road trip with a boyfriend. They’d come across a dying emu that had been hit by a car in the middle of a highway. Frances had stayed in the passenger

seat, a passive princess, while her boyfriend got out and killed the poor emu with a rock. One sharp blow to the head. When he returned to the driver's seat he was sweaty and exhilarated, a city boy thrilled with his own humane pragmatism. Frances never quite forgave him for the sweaty exhilaration. He'd *liked* killing the emu.

Frances wasn't sure if she could kill a dying animal, even now when she was fifty-two years old, financially secure and too old to be a princess.

'You could kill the emu,' she said out loud. 'Certainly you could.'

Goodness. She'd just remembered that the boyfriend was dead. Wait, was he? Yes, definitely dead. She'd heard it on the grapevine a few years back. Complications from pneumonia, supposedly. Gary always did suffer terribly from colds. Frances had never been especially sympathetic.

At that very moment her nose dripped like a tap. Perfect timing. She held the steering wheel with one hand and wiped her nose with the back of her hand. Disgusting. It was probably Gary vindictively making her nose drip from the afterlife. Fair enough too. They'd once been on road trips and professed their love and now she couldn't even bother to remember he was dead.

She apologised to Gary, although, really, if he was able to access her thoughts then he should know that it wasn't her fault; if he'd made it to this age he'd know how extraordinarily vague and forgetful one became. Not all the time. Just sometimes.

*Sometimes I'm as sharp as a tack, Gary.*

She sniffed again. It seemed like she'd had this truly horrendous head cold even longer than the back pain. Wasn't she sniffing the day she delivered her manuscript? Three weeks ago. Her nineteenth novel. She was still waiting to hear what her publisher thought. Once upon a time, back in the late nineties, her 'heyday', her editor would have sent champagne and

flowers within two days of delivery, together with a handwritten note. *Another masterpiece!*

She understood she was no longer in her heyday, but she was still a solid, mid-level performer. An effusive email would be nice.

Or just a friendly one.

Even a brisk one-liner: *Sorry, haven't got to it yet but can't wait!* That would have been polite.

A fear she refused to acknowledge tried to worm its way up from her subconscious. No. No. Absolutely not.

She clutched the steering wheel and tried to calm her breathing. She'd been throwing back cold and flu tablets to try to clear her nose and the pseudoephedrine was making her heart race, as if something wonderful or terrible was about to happen. It reminded her of the feeling of walking down the aisle on both her wedding days.

She was probably addicted to the cold and flu tablets. She was easily addicted. Men. Food. Wine. In fact, she felt like a glass of wine right now and the sun was still high in the sky. Lately, she'd been drinking, maybe not excessively, but certainly more enthusiastically than usual. She was on that slippery slope, hurtling towards drug and alcohol addiction! Exciting to know she could still change in significant ways. Back home there was a half-empty bottle of pinot noir sitting brazenly on her writing desk for anyone (only the cleaning lady) to see. She was Ernest frigging Hemingway. Didn't he have a bad back too? They had so much in common.

Except that Frances had a weakness for adjectives and adverbs. Apparently she scattered them about her novels like throw cushions. What was that Mark Twain quote Sol used to murmur to himself, just loud enough for her to hear, while reading her manuscripts? *When you catch an adjective, kill it.*

Sol was a real man who didn't like adjectives or throw cushions. She had an image of Sol, in bed, on top of her, swearing comically as he pulled out yet another cushion from behind her

head, chucking it across the room while she giggled. She shook her head as if to shake off the memory. Fond sexual memories felt like a point for her first husband.

When everything was good in Frances's life she wished both her ex-husbands nothing but happiness and excellent erectile function. Right now, she wished plagues of locusts to rain down upon their silvery heads.

She sucked on the tiny vicious paper cut on the tip of her right thumb. Every now and then it throbbed to remind her that it might be the smallest of her ailments but it could still ruin her day.

Her car veered to the bumpy side of the road and she removed her thumb from her mouth and clung to the steering wheel. 'Whoops-a-daisy.'

She had quite short legs, so she had to move the driver's seat close to the steering wheel. Henry used to say she looked like she was driving a dodgem car. He said it was cute. But after five years or so he stopped finding it cute and swore every time he got in the car and had to slide the seat back.

She found his sleep-talking charming for about five years or so too.

*Focus!*

The countryside flew by. At last a sign: *Welcome to the town of Jarribong. We're proud to be a TIDY TOWN.*

She slowed down to the speed limit of sixty, which felt almost absurdly slow.

Her head swivelled from side to side as she studied the town. A Chinese restaurant with a faded red and gold dragon on the door. A service station that looked closed. A red-brick post office. A drive-through bottle shop that looked open. A police station that seemed entirely unnecessary. Not a person in sight. It might have been tidy but it felt post-apocalyptic.

She thought of her latest manuscript. It was set in a small town. *This* was the gritty bleak reality of small towns! Not the charming village she'd created, nestled in the mountains, with

a warm bustling cafe that smelled of cinnamon and, most fanciful of all, a *bookstore* supposedly making a profit. The reviewers would rightly call it ‘twee’, but it probably wouldn’t get reviewed and she never read her reviews anyway.

So that was it for poor old Jarribong. Goodbye, sad little tidy town.

She put her foot on the accelerator and watched her speed slide back up to one hundred. The website had said that the turn-off was twenty minutes outside of Jarribong.

There was a sign ahead. She narrowed her eyes, hunched over the wheel to read it: *Tranquillum House next turn on the left.*

Her heart lifted. She’d done it. She’d driven six hours without quite losing her mind. Then her heart sank, because now she was going to have to go through with this thing.

‘Turn left in one kilometre,’ ordered her GPS.

‘I don’t want to turn left in one kilometre,’ said Frances dolefully.

She wasn’t even meant to be here, in this season or hemisphere. She was meant to be with her ‘special friend’ Paul Drabble in Santa Barbara, the Californian winter sun warm upon their faces as they visited wineries, restaurants and museums. She was meant to be spending long lingering afternoons getting to know Paul’s twelve-year-old son, Ari, hearing his dry little chuckle as he taught her how to play some violent PlayStation game he loved. Frances’s friends with kids had laughed and scoffed over that, but she’d been looking *forward* to learning the game; the storylines sounded really quite rich and complex.

An image came to her of that detective’s earnest young face. He had freckles left over from childhood and he wrote down everything she said in laborious longhand using a scratchy blue ballpoint. His spelling was atrocious. He spelled ‘tomorrow’ with two m’s. He couldn’t meet her eye.

A sudden rush of intense heat enveloped her body at the memory.

Humiliation?



Probably.

Her head swam. She shivered and shook. Her hands were instantly slippery on the steering wheel.

*Pull over*, she told herself. *You need to pull over right now.*

She indicated, even though there was no-one behind her, and came to a stop on the side of the road. She had the sense to switch on her hazard lights. Sweat poured from her face. Within seconds her shirt was drenched. She pulled at the fabric and smeared back strands of wet hair from her forehead. A cold chill made her shake.

She sneezed, and the act of sneezing caused her back to spasm. The pain was of such truly biblical proportions that she began to laugh as tears streamed down her face. Oh yes, she *was* losing her mind. She certainly was.

A great wave of unfocused primal rage swept over her. She banged her fist against her car horn over and over, closed her eyes, threw back her head and screamed in unison with the horn, because she had this cold and this back pain and this broken bloody heart and –

‘Hey!’

She opened her eyes and jumped back in her seat.

A man crouched next to her car window, rapping hard on the glass. She saw what must be his car pulled up on the opposite side of the road, with its hazard lights also on.

‘You okay?’ he shouted. ‘Do you need help?’

For God’s sake. This was meant to be a private moment of despair. How deeply embarrassing. She pressed the button to lower the window.

A very large, unpleasant, unkempt, unshaven man peered in at her. He wore a t-shirt with the faded emblem of some ancient band over a proud solid beer belly and low-slung blue jeans. He was probably one of those outback serial killers. Even though this wasn’t technically the outback. He was probably on holiday from the outback.

‘Got car trouble?’ he asked.

‘No,’ said Frances. She sat up straighter and tried to smile. She ran a hand through her damp hair. ‘Thank you. I’m fine. The car is fine. Everything is fine.’

‘Are you *sick*?’ said the man. He looked faintly disgusted.

‘No,’ said Frances. ‘Not really. Just a bad cold.’

‘Maybe you’ve got the proper flu. You look *really* sick,’ said the man. He frowned, and his eyes moved to the back of her car. ‘And you were screaming and sounding your horn like you . . . were in trouble.’

‘Yes,’ said Frances. ‘Well. I thought I was alone in the middle of nowhere. I was just . . . having a bad moment.’ She tried to keep the resentment from her voice. He was a good citizen who had done the right thing. He’d done what anyone would do.

‘Thank you for stopping but I’m fine,’ she said nicely, with her sweetest, most placatory smile. One must placate large strange men in the middle of nowhere.

‘Okay then.’ The man straightened with a groan of effort, his hands on his thighs to give himself leverage, but then he rapped the top of her car with his knuckles and bent down again, suddenly decisive. *I’m a man, I know what’s what.* ‘Look, are you too sick to drive? Because if you’re not safe to drive, if you’re a danger to other drivers on the road, I really can’t in good conscience let you —’

Frances sat up straight. For heaven’s sake. ‘I just had a hot flash,’ she snapped.

The man blanched. ‘Oh!’ He studied her. Paused. ‘I always thought it was a hot *flush*,’ he said.

‘I believe both terms are used,’ said Frances. This was her third one. She’d done a lot of reading, spoken to every woman she knew over the age of forty-five, and had a double appointment with her GP, where she had cried, ‘But no-one ever said it was like this!’ For now they were monitoring things. She was taking supplements, cutting back on alcohol and spicy foods. Ha ha.

‘So you’re okay,’ said the man. He looked up and down the highway as if for help.

‘I really am perfectly fine,’ said Frances. Her back gave a friendly little spasm and she tried not to flinch.

‘I didn’t realise that hot flashes – flushes – were so . . .’

‘Dramatic? Well, they’re not for everyone. Just a lucky few.’

‘Isn’t there . . . what’s it called? Hormone replacement therapy?’

Oh my Lord.

‘Can you prescribe me something?’ asked Frances brightly.

The man took a little step back from the car, hands up in surrender. ‘Sorry. It’s just, I think that was what my wife . . . Anyway, none of my business. If everything is okay, I’ll just be on my way.’

‘Great,’ said Frances. ‘Thank you for stopping.’

‘No worries.’

He lifted a hand, went to say something else, evidently changed his mind and walked back towards his car. There were sweat marks on the back of his t-shirt. A mountain of a man. Lucky he decided she wasn’t worth killing and raping. He probably preferred his victims less sweaty.

She watched him start his car and pull out onto the highway. He tipped one finger to his forehead as he drove off.

She waited until his car was a tiny speck in her rear-view mirror and then she reached over for the change of clothes she had waiting on the passenger seat ready for this exact situation.

‘Menopause?’ her eighty-year-old mother had said vaguely, on the phone from the other side of the world, where she now lived blissfully in the south of France, when Frances had asked her. ‘Oh, I don’t think it gave me too much trouble, darling. I got it all over and done with in a weekend, as I recall. I’m sure you’ll be the same. I never had those hot flashes. I think they’re a myth, to be honest.’

*Hmmph*, thought Frances as she used a towel to wipe away her mythical sweat.

She thought of texting a photo of her tomato-red face to her group of school friends, some of whom she’d known since

kindergarten. Now when they went out to dinner they discussed menopause symptoms with the same avid horror that they'd once discussed their first periods. Nobody else was getting these over-the-top hot flushes like Frances, so she was taking it for the team. Like everything in life, their reactions to menopause were driven by their personalities: Di said she was in a permanent state of rage and if her gynaecologist didn't agree to a hysterectomy soon she was going to grab the littler fucker by the collar and slam him up against the wall, Monica was embracing the 'beautiful intensity' of her emotions and Natalie was wondering anxiously if it was contributing to her anxiety. They all agreed it was totally typical of their friend Gillian to die so she could get out of menopause and then they cried into their prosecco.

No, she wouldn't text her school friends because she suddenly remembered how at that last dinner she'd looked up from her menu to catch an exchange of glances that most definitely meant: 'Poor Frances.' She could not bear pity. That particular group of solidly married friends was meant to *envy* her, or they'd pretended to envy her anyway, for all these years, but it seemed that being childless and single in your thirties was very different from being childless and single in your fifties. No longer glamorous. Now kind of tragic.

*I'm only temporarily tragic*, she told herself as she pulled on a clean blouse that showed a lot of cleavage. She tossed the sweaty shirt into the back seat, restarted the car, looked over her shoulder and pulled out on to the highway. *Temporarily Tragic*. It could be the name of a band.

There was a sign. She squinted. *Tranquillum House*, it said.

'Left turn ahead,' said her GPS.

'Yes, I *know*, I see it.'

She met her own eyes in the rear-view mirror and tried to give herself a wry 'isn't life interesting!' look.

Frances had always enjoyed the idea of parallel universes in which multiple versions of herself tried out different lives – one

where she was a CEO instead of an author; one where she was a mother of two or four or six kids instead of none; one where she hadn't divorced Sol and one where she hadn't divorced Henry – but for the most part she'd always felt satisfied or at least accepting of the universe in which she found herself . . . except for right now, because right now it felt like there had been some sort of cataclysmic quantum physics administrative error. She'd slipped universes. She was meant to be high on lust and love in America, not pain-ridden and grief-stricken in Australia. It was just wrong. Unacceptable.

And yet here she was. There was nothing else to do, nowhere else to turn.

'Goddamn it,' she said, and turned left.