

## **North Shore Ladies' Book Club**

**by Scribblehead**

“So how convincing do you think it is as a representation of life in 11<sup>th</sup> Century Japan?” asked Debby, moving the conversation along. “Anyone want to admit the dumbest question is actually the one going through our minds as we’re reading it?”

“I think you can tell that Dalby’s done a lot of research,” volunteered Theresa after a pause. “She’s spent a long time in Japan. She’s really a scholar of Japan.”

“Yes, but don’t you find with historical fiction you’re always torn between letting your imagination free to take you into that world, and reminding yourself it’s a work of fiction? This is Dalby’s fantasy about *Murasaki’s* world.” offered Jean, garnering considered ‘hmms’ from the ladies.

“I find I keep reminding myself, when we’re talking about a representation of the times, historical fiction is always about the nobility’s history but for most people life was nothing like this. We’re looking into the world of a small group of elites,” added Hannah, getting nods.

“Exactly,” agreed Andrea, “reading Dalby I kept being reminded of Sharon Kay-Penman.”

“Oh absolutely,” said Breanne, “I got that too.”

“Sharon Kay-Penman?” quizzed Wendy. “What did she write?”

“Exactly,” said Vicki.

“Oh I don’t think she’s bad,” said Debby.

"I love this stuff," clarified Andrea. "I got absolutely swept up in Murasaki's world. I was disappointed every time I had to put it down and I got depressed when I reached the end of the book." There was general agreement among the ladies.

"It was interesting in the author's notes Dalby said she was able to glean pieces of Murasaki's life through *Genji*. Early in the book when Dalby goes into detail about interactions between women I expected it to be all about developing character. As the novel went on more and more of this 'background' didn't actually go anywhere. Then I figured it was there simply to elaborate or authenticate Murasaki's experience with genuine extracts from her diaries – like the descriptions of rituals or the descriptions of the clothing. Toward the end of the book I found myself skimming over these increasingly long psychoanalytical sections about the women's relationships, and it occurred to me that these were actually Dalby trying to analyse something in her own experience, possibly from her time as the world's only Westerner to become a 'Geisha'. So in the notes when Dalby says she can glimpse the historical Murasaki not only through the surviving fragments of her diaries but also '*in refraction through The Tale of Genji*', couldn't we apply the same logic in reading Dalby's work?"

The other ladies blinked, frowned, or looked blank a few moments as Jean brought this characteristically rotund analysis to a close.

"You know I never thought of that," said Theresa.

"Crikey, Jean," said Vicki in her broad *strine*, "you been poppin' the bloody Omega 3s again haven't you?"

"I'm really keen to read some of Murasaki's stuff now. Anybody read *The Tale of Genji*?" asked Andrea. Nobody had.

“Something we could look at adding to the reading list for the future,” suggested Debby, looking at the ladies with raised eyebrows.

“There are a few different translations, some of them apparently more literal and some of them more imaginative. I personally like the idea of a more recent and slightly more literal translation,” said Jean.

“Hmm... let's look into it and discuss it at the next meeting,” said Debby, beginning to wrap it up. “Speaking of which - I just want to run over arrangements for the trip to the Hunter Valley. Jean, you're driving up and taking Wendy and Hannah?”

“Yes, and don't be late, Hannah,” said Jean, much to the other ladies' amusement and to Hannah's chagrin. Though she was often on time for their monthly meetings, more than a couple of times when the ladies went on an outing Hannah had difficulty finding a particular café, garden or gallery. Her greatest navigational mishap however was when she travelled half way across Sydney to a different suburb altogether.

“I put the damned thing into the GPS I tell you,” she protested amidst a few chuckles. “Hey I'm not the only one,” she said, and a couple of ladies had to admit with a smile that yes they too had trouble finding their way on occasion.

“Okay now Breanne, you and Vicki are coming from work, and I'm collecting Andrea and Theresa on the way.” Debby scrolled around on her iPad. “So we'll meet at 4pm at *Café Bocelli*, which is just off the Highway on Berowra Waters Road. It's less than two hours drive from there so we should have time to check in and freshen up before dinner. The restaurant looks great. I made a reservation for 7:30.”

“The whole resort looks great,” said Andrea.

“Yeah,” agreed Breanne. “Really secluded.”

“Mmm... I'm going to be massaged from head to toe morning noon and night,” said Jean, closing her eyes and imagining the ecstasy.

“*Immerse yourself in the tranquillity of The Pokolbin Mountains Winery Resort and Health Spa.*” said Wendy, reading from the brochure that Debby was handing out.

“I'm glad you like it, ladies. It's not so far out of the way, the winery tours will pick up there.”

“Ooh Yeah!” said Vicki whooping it up.

“Now if Wendy and Theresa can just pick up it'll be a really worthwhile weekend,” said Breanne with a grin. Theresa smiled broadly and gave Breanne a wink, while Wendy blushed and fiddled with her mobile phone.

It was settled.

Décor was not especially chic and parking not especially obvious but the café on Berowra Waters Road had a reputation for great coffee and oversized portions of Italian staples. Debby, who couldn't take caffeine sipped on a strawberry milkshake, Theresa a skinny latte, and Andrea was gulping down her second macchiato when Jean called. Debby held up her iPhone to show the others the caller id.

“What's the bet? – ‘We'll be late, Hannah's still getting ready’.” said Andrea.

Theresa rolled her eyes.

Debby answered with a very musical “Ye-s?” She listened for a moment, nodded to her two companions then said, “You're kidding, Breanne and Vicki will get here before you.”

“Err... Wendy's not coming,” said Jean at the other end.

“What?” Theresa and Andrea saw Debby frown. “What’s wrong?”

“She doesn’t want to go too far away from the kids.”

“I thought the ex had them this weekend? We scheduled this trip around it.”

“I know I know. She just wants to be nearby,” said Jean, already exasperated from trying to reason with Wendy.

“Is she there? Put her on,” said Debby crossly.

“Hi Deb,” Wendy said sheepishly.

“Hi Wen’. What’s up?”

“I just don’t feel right going away and leaving the kids.”

“I thought Rob had them this weekend.”

“He does. I’m just worried he might use it against me.”

“Use it against you? In what way?” Andrea stopped flipping the pages of the fashion magazine in her hand and Theresa put down the fork next to her raspberry torte and tuned in.

“Just up and leaving town for the weekend, his solicitor...”

“Wendy, the Family Court is behind you. It’s his weekend to look after the kids. He never thinks twice about going away with the new Mrs.”

Wendy held back a gasp and steadied her bottom lip. “But what if something happened to one of the kids and I was two hundred kilometres away?”

“About a hundred and sixty, and what do you think might happen to the kids?”

“I don’t know. Leo’s playing football tomorrow... anything.”

“You don’t trust their father to deal with it?”

“It’s not that.”

"I'm going away and leaving my boy with his father," said Debby, "Vicki's leaving her kids with theirs. Andrea's even leaving her kids with that meat-head of a husband she's got." Andrea reached over and pinched Debby on the arm. "Oawe," she winced.

"I just don't feel right about it," Wendy finally said.

Debby considered a few moments. "Wen, you've got to start getting on with your life. There is nothing wrong with going away with a bunch of friends for the weekend. You're not abandoning your children. In fact you'll be doing your kids a favour when you become a fully functioning member of society again. Now please, jump in the car with Jeanie, come on up here and we'll have some fun, I promise. You need this!"

"I just... I just don't feel up to it this weekend."

"Is everything ok? Has anything else happened you want to talk about?"

"No... just the usual."

After another pause Debby said "Ok. Well you look after yourself. And if you change your mind, or if you just need to talk give me a call. Ok?"

"Ok, thank you."

By now Breanne and Vicki had arrived at *Café Bocelli*. With the weather closing in the ladies were keen to press on. It was agreed the others would go ahead and Jean and Hannah would meet them at the hotel instead of the Berowra rendezvous.

Distant thunderclaps punched through the overcast sky, dark and heavy to the north as the ladies set out.

"I think she'll be ok," said Hannah, finally on the way with Jean. "It's going to take a while. What's it been, a year?"

“People just need to get on with it and stop moping around,” said Jean frowning at the recollection of her own ex-husband, David. Smartest thing she ever did, leaving him. She dropped a hundred kilos of dead weight overnight, a few of those from her thighs, and five years later she looks and feels twenty years younger and climbs into bed with a man who doesn't go there to snore, fart or pick his nose.

Twenty kilometres ahead Vicki and Breanne also discussed Wendy's change of heart.

“Poor dear,” said Vicki.

“I think its ok for her to change her mind about coming and we shouldn't make a big deal of it,” said Breanne. “She just has to work through this her own way and there's no point anyone thinking they know what's best for her.

“I can't imagine Peter ever leaving me,” Breanne contemplated. “Eaten by a shark maybe. Falling off a train after his office Christmas party, distinct possibility. But walking out? I think I'd be devastated.”

“That man would never leave you. You're a friggin' hottie. What are ya', about a size nine?”

“Oh pllllease!”

“Still, poor dear. Imagine moving back in with your mum and dad at 29 with two kids?”

“Oh god no,” Breanne squirmed.

“My old man's a cranky old fart,” said Vicki. “I dunno who'd be more traumatised – the kids or me. Hey have you got any music?”

Breanne opened a compartment in the centre console and said, “Help yourself. Avoid the ones down that side though, that’s Peter’s bogan stuff.”

“They’d been together since high school,” explained Andrea to Theresa and Debby in the front car. Andrea had brought Wendy along to the book club when they were next door neighbours, before her marriage came to an end. The marriage had been floundering in all of the ways they are most prone – under the strain of financial over-commitment, one partner who worked too many hours and another consequently trapped at home with the children and no freedom to any life of her own, longstanding depressive tendencies of probable post-natal origin resulting in an inescapable cycle of chronic apathy, weight gain, mood swings, and the complete destruction of libido; one partner who dulled his senses with habitual beer drinking and endeavoured to satiate what was left with internet pornography, where someone had thoughtfully and conveniently placed a pop-up to an adult dating site, offering the promise that the void in his still young potent life might be filled.

After a year of secret liaisons concealed by out of hours office meetings, colleagues’ farewells and bosses’ birthday dinners, even sick leave from work, a third party’s original interest in “A short term fling, long term affair, cybersex, conventional sex, oral, anal, outdoors and BDSM” had given way to something altogether more wholesome. Despite her initial intentions the third party could not prevent herself from wanting more and more. Robert, either not seeing the ensuing train wreck or by now powerless to prevent it simply sat with the status quo. The third party forced his hand

however with a succession of well placed clues for wifey, culminating in a phone call to a mortified Wendy.

Typical in such a situation, Robert's dilemma lay in his commitment to his children. Between the two women he was faced with the choice between a gaping physical and emotional hole in his life on the one side, and an eagerness to please and persistent demonstration of affection, even genuine love on the other. In the end he passively allowed himself to be taken possession of.

"So how are you going nowadays, Theresa?" asked Debby, noticing the silence from the back seat.

"Hmm?" said Theresa, looking dreamily out the window into the rain and mist hanging over the national park. Debby didn't elaborate. "It's not the same situation," Theresa finally offered. "Brad and I weren't married and we didn't have a mortgage or two kids to fight over. After nine years all we had was a shared electricity account." Her attention shifted again out the window into the haze over the sandstone and eucalypt wilderness.

Debby turned up the radio so she could hear it over the rain thudding heavily into the windscreen. *'...the bureau has issued a warning for thunder storms, gale force winds and possible hail in coastal areas from Smokey Cape to Ulladulla. A flood warning is in place for the Macleay, Hastings, Camden Haven and Manning Rivers. A grazier's alert is current for the Southern Highlands and South West slopes and plains... four metre swells and heavy onshore winds as a low pressure system over the Tasman...'*

"We picked our weekend to go to the Hunter," said Andrea.

Traffic slowed sharply as the downpour became torrential and sheets of water flooded across the road. Despite the conditions someone in a Commodore and even a b-double semi trailer speed past the ladies in the forward cars at full tilt.

“Friggin’ lunatics,” said Vicki. “Someone’ll get killed.”

Forty minutes later there was plenty of relief in both of the front cars as they took the Cessnock exit off the freeway and settled into sparser traffic and a less dangerous pace. Breanne moaned as Vicki reloaded the stereo with another CD plucked as torturously from Peter’s 80s rock collection.

From Oakey Creek the GPS took the ladies into Pokolbin Mountains Road, a dirt road which, considering the conditions caused more than a little trepidation. Into the hills the road wove round slippery bend, through muddy causeway and over rattly corrugated rise for several tense kilometres until a sign, almost obscured through the deluge and foggy windows, announced the entry to the Pokolbin Mountains Winery Resort and Health Spa. A loud thunderclap gave them a jolt. They turned into a well groomed blue metal gravel road, one car behind the other, and drove a further few kilometres through wild forest before a wide concrete driveway opened up before them leading in under a portico big enough for both cars. A few sighs of relief escaped as the roar of heavy rain lifted from the turret of one car, and the stereo ceased in the other.

The ladies peered in through large pane glass automatic doors into the broad foyer of the hotel.

“Phew!” said Debby. “I don’t know about you but if that keeps up tomorrow I’m doing my wine tasting tour right here in the hotel.”

The ladies found the reception desk abandoned. With no valet parking or doorman in sight they unloaded their luggage. Some of the ladies took positions on fresh cream Italian leather sofas decorating a corner of the foyer and a couple were just going to see if they could raise some assistance when a belligerent voice started coming toward them from deep at another end of a hallway. "Tell him to get it done by seven, no ifs or buts about it," the man was saying over his shoulder to someone behind him as he trudged down the hallway toward the reception area scowling. Suddenly noticing the ladies waiting he pulled up momentarily in surprise. Then, forcing a smile he said, "So sorry, have you been waiting long?"

"No, just got here," said Debby.

"Right," said the man, giving the group a glancing appraisal as he slipped behind the reception desk. "How may I help you?"

"North Shore Ladies' Book Club, we have four junior suites booked. We got a little bit held up on the roads, sorry. Just atrocious this weather," said Debby with an amiably incredulous wide eyed grin.

"What?" said the man only half paying attention. "Yes, yes," he added disinterestedly, barely looking up from his computer monitor to cast an eyebrow if not an eye toward the rain bucketing into the world outside. "Yes here we are. Four junior suites," he said, scanning his monitor completely emotionless. "We don't have four suites available. I've given you two suites, plus two pairs of adjoining garden view rooms. Rooms 17 and 18 you'll find at the very end of this corridor to your right in the Mount View Wing, and rooms 32-33 and 29-30 about half way along this corridor to the left in the Garden Wing. Breakfast is available from 7:00 am until 9:30 am in the dining room.

The *Cave à Vin* restaurant will open at 6:30 for dinner and in-room dining closes at 10:30 pm. Will you be paying for the rooms all together?"

"Yes."

"I will need to get an imprint from the credit card you used to book and a drivers license," he rattled off monotonously.

"Will our cars be alright there for now?" Debby asked.

"Huh?" said the man, looking up from his monitor then at the entryway Debby motioned towards. "Oh. Sorry, we're a little understaffed just at the minute, what with the weather, so I don't have anyone to park the cars for you. If you drive straight ahead along the driveway and turn left at the end of the building you'll find a covered parking area."

"Can we wait for a break in the rain?"

"Just as soon as you can. Other guests will need to get in and out," he said, feigning a smile.

Debby issued the ladies with swipe cards for their hotel room doors. Dumping her bags once inside her own room she picked up her mobile to call Hannah. Frowning, she looked up from the display and said, "Theresa, do you have any mobile phone signal?"

Theresa who'd collapsed onto a crisp bed in the adjoining room moaned and reached over for her handbag. Blinking down at her mobile phone she said, "Nuh, not a single bar. Who are you with?"

When the other ladies confirmed a similar lack of coverage Debby used the phone in her room. Hannah's number went straight to voice mail and Jean's was either switched off or out of range. That could mean they're almost here, Debby figured.

The ladies met in the cocktail bar before dinner. The lack of mobile phone coverage proved quite a novelty. Vicki found a couple of payphones near the internet café and operating them was surprisingly nostalgic. Husbands, partners and kids had been contacted and updated. Jean and Hannah had not, and as the drenching thunderstorms continued a few of the ladies began to worry.

“Kids in the bath, husband watching the football,” said Andrea, last to come back from the payphones. Theresa had no-one to report to.

“Aaah, life goes on without us,” said Vicki blissfully, enjoying the relaxing glow of Bloody Mary she’d half consumed.

“What do you want to drink, Andrea? I’ll get Michael here to fix you up,” said Breanne grinning and motioning toward a fit young drinks waiter mixing her a Mojito at the bar. Vicki sniggered and elbowed Breanne, who puckered.

“A glass of Chardonnay’ll be fine thanks,” said Andrea. Sitting down and moving close she began speaking under her voice. “Have you noticed anything strange about the staff?”

“I’ve noticed there aren’t many around,” observed Debby.

“I overheard one of the other guests on the phone. Apparently there was an altercation this afternoon.”

“An altercation?” exclaimed Theresa. “Between who?”

“Shh...” said Andrea, almost whispering. The ladies leaned closer.

“Oh no,” said Debby, half burying her face in her hands, starting to feel terribly responsible. Wendy’s situation, the treacherous weather, Jean and Hannah MIA... While

the ladies all agreed the hotel was pretty swank, Debby had felt uneasy since arriving and sensed at least a couple of the other ladies did too.

“Between the hotel manager and staff,” continued Andrea. “Half the staff walked out apparently.”

“Oh no oh no,” said Debby, now fully burying her face in her hands.

“That would explain the surliness of the guy at reception,” said Theresa.

“Well let’s just have a good time anyway,” said Breanne.

“I’m with you,” said Vicki, raising her glass.

“I just wish Jean and Hannah would arrive,” said Debby. Even allowing for the weather they were at least an hour late.

“Are you waiting on some friends?” interrupted a man ordering a drink.

“Yes,” said Theresa. “We’re starting to worry.”

“Where are they coming from?” asked the man.

“Sydney.”

“Oh. Well they’re probably held up on the F3. There’s been a big accident. It was on the news,” he motioned toward a doorway into the adjoining Sports Bar.

“An accident?” exclaimed Debby.

“Virtually guaranteed in these conditions,” he nodded. “Too many idiots on the road. Double fatality this time apparently,” he said, slipping his change into his wallet and grabbing a freshly poured beer from the counter. “Looked horrendous on TV.”

“What sort of car was involved?” asked Debby.

“Not sure,” he said. “Several apparently. Just carnage.”

The ladies followed the man into the sports bar which was almost deserted. Neither of the news channels had the story on. It was time to make their way to the restaurant for dinner.

The table had been set for eight, making absentees especially apparent. Conversation over the menu was subdued, it was not the vibrant active dinner party they'd planned. Their monthly meeting was supposed to begin over this meal and continue over after dinner drinks, Rodney Hall's *Love without Hope* was up for discussion, but once they'd ordered talk inevitably turned to Wendy's sorry situation. "She's lost a lot of weight," someone said hopefully. They all spruiked the positive signs. In the back of each of the ladies' minds however other calculations were being repressed – two kids, living with your parents, no home of your own and no job with which to pay for one, no recent work experience, a few extra pounds, chronically depressed. Wendy's prospects were not bright by any stretch.

Talk turned to the third car and Debby and Theresa took the opportunity to try phoning again, with the same result. They stuck their heads in the sport bar. The story came on and the footage showed the headlights of a traffic snarl as far as the camera could see from the helicopter. Footage of the wreckage through the rain in the fading daylight showed at least three cars in various stages of disintegration, one of them a white hatchback with a completely mashed front-end. Debby's heart dropped.

"What's up?" said Andrea seeing the grey look on their faces when they returned to the table. Entrées had begun arriving.

"I'm going to call Hannah's husband," said Debby changing direction, nauseous.

Only four tables in the restaurant were occupied, one by the now over-dressed man from the sports bar. Seeing the concern at the ladies' table he put down his knife and fork and came over to ask if everything was ok. Frank was in sales, viticultural machinery. Most of his clientele were in the Hunter region. He motioned across the breadth of their table - practically all of the machinery used to make the wines in the ladies' glasses had been supplied by him.

“Well done,” said Breanne. “Theresa was just commenting how well manufactured this Chenin Blanc is.”

Amid grins from the other three, Theresa who'd been preoccupied with the accident footage she'd just seen looked up at Frank who was standing adroitly beside their table, found a warm smile for him and said, “Yes Frank, particularly hygienic these Hunter Valley wines, I was just thinking.”

Frank himself got a laugh out of this. Before returning to his meal he said he hoped the ladies' friends were ok and he was sure they'd arrive later tonight frazzled by the traffic ordeal and in need of a warm nightcap.

Debby tried Jean's mobile again, and was just punching in Hannah's number when the lights went out and the hum of the hotel's heating system stopped, leaving the place silent and dark. She fiddled with the phone receiver but nothing. AND it had taken her coins!

The cranky man from reception walked past with a torch, his scowl still evident even in silhouette through the darkness.

“What's happened?” she called out.

“Huh,” he said taken by surprise. He hadn’t seen her in the payphone alcove. “What does it look like?” he said trudging away and disappearing through a doorway that for a brief moment said ‘Staff only’ in the torchlight.

When her eyes adjusted, by the green glow of ‘Exit’ signs and occasional lightning flashes Debby stumbled her way back to the restaurant where waiters were lighting candles. Breanne and Vicki who were by now merry enough that it was all part of the adventure were mainly concerned that mains had not yet arrived. Theresa had been handed responsibility for the greater part of the conversation with the sports bar man who had again found reason to move into the ladies’ periphery. Andrea asked Debby what news from civilisation. They both wished they could relax into the thrill of adventure like Vicki and Breanne.

Frenetic activity was going on by torchlight in corners of the hotel. Doors were opening into the storm outside.

“Normally this place should automatically failover to the generator. There must be a problem,” said Frank

The cranky man with a young kitchen-hand in tow came barging through the restaurant dripping wet and half bent over in his now characteristic full body scowl, and as he went past Debby caught the flash of the badge on the jacket he was now wearing – ‘Hotel Manager’. He barged through the swinging doors into the kitchen where the glow was no brighter than in the dining area. The doors still swung as raised voices began to emanate from within.

“I’m TRYING to get the fucking thing going.”

Muffled response.

“What do you mean you’re leaving?”

More muffled responses.

“Just finish the fucking orders then get out and don’t come back.”

The hotel manager barged back out through the restaurant.

“Having trouble with the backup generator?” Frank asked.

“Just be patient, we’ll have this sorted out shortly,” he said, sidestepping Frank and not breaking stride.

“If you need a hand I’m a qualified mechanical engineer,” said Frank as the manager stomped away. “You’d think they’d have a maintenance person on site in a hotel this size,” he said, sitting down at the ladies’ table, clearly ruffled at the rebuff. He loosened his necktie and stared at the daffodil in a tiny vase at the head of the unused table setting.

“It’s okay Frank,” said Theresa, reaching out and patting his arm. “The guy just seems a bit stressed.”

Suddenly in a flurry of activity everyone’s meals arrived at once right across the restaurant. The chef and his kitchen-hand came through the swinging doors, paper hats still on their heads and scorched tea-towels still hanging from their waists, walked up to the maître de and announced a change to the dessert menu for this evening – he’d left a tub of vanilla ice cream on the bench. They then disappeared through the same doorway the hotel manager had minutes before.

A reference to *Fawlty Towers* passed the lips a patron at another table.

“Mmm, this risotto is bloody beautiful,” said Vicki, coming up for a slurp of wine.

Breanne picked over her fish frowning. “My sole’s a bit rare.”

"I'm Debby by the way," said Debby who was absent during Frank's self-introduction.

"Hi. Frank," said Frank, offering a deal-clinching handshake.

"Frank, would do us a favour?" said Debby.

"Sure," said Frank. Nothing was too difficult. Customer Service will deal with the detail in his wake.

"Would you go out there and give the hotel manager a hand to get that generator going?" said Debby, giving him her mateyest best football coach pat on the shoulder. "I don't think the bloke can handle it on his own."

"Well I can give it a go," said Frank, suddenly focused, ready to go into action.

"I'm right with you," said Debby. Reaching down she shuffled through her handbag and pulled out a small torch and umbrella. "Take these," she said. "Girls, anybody else got an umbrella?" Theresa obliged and Debby and Frank disappeared in the direction the scowler had gone.

The ladies remaining began critiquing the meals, finding them technical excellent but in varying stages of preparation and ultimately earning a thumbs down. Only Vicki's risotto made the cut.

"Maybe Wendy knew something we didn't," commented Theresa.

"She's probably curled up in front of a good movie enjoying peace and quiet without the kids, some chocolate..." Breanne speculated.

"More likely cried herself to sleep with a couple of valium," said Theresa.

Out in the weather Debby and Frank found the manager in a shed scowling at an over-sized pull-start on the side of the generator. Their under-sized umbrellas had been

impotent in the heavy wind and rain so they presented as a pair of drowned rats as they pushed open the door bearing the sign 'Staff only. Keep out.' The manager looked up from his toil, too flummoxed to protest their intrusion.

"Need a hand?" said Frank. The manager exhaled a deep breath in resignation. Frank opened up the diesel tank, looked inside and said, "Hand me that torch." Frank began looking the machine over. He followed the fuel line until he came to a switch, turned it, went around to the pull-start the manager had been tugging then reached beside it and turned a key which said 'Ignition'. The beast fired into life and the shed lit up, along with the carpark outside.

Drenched, Debby and Frank returned to the restaurant to a round of cheers. Amid plenty of back-slapping Debby said, "Let me be the first to buy this man a beer."

Just then Jean and Hannah peered in through the doorway.

"What on earth happened to you?" exclaimed Jean looking at Debby. Debby jumped for joy, wrapping a big wet hug around a pair of fresh overcoats.

"We couldn't raise anyone at reception then we heard the commotion down here," explained Hannah. "What's going on?"

"Long story," said Andrea.

Vicki who was by now practically combustible with high octane alcohol came over all teary and started mauling her newly arrived friends and bawling, "We thought you were dead."

Breanne had procured a couple of clean bar-mats and began patting down Frank and saying, "You're *such* a nice man. Here, Theresa, help me dry Frank off."

Checked in, freshened up and sitting in the pianist-less piano bar with their friends, Jean and Hannah began relating their ordeal. Debby was resigned that the agenda was out the window, the book club meeting she'd planned for tonight postponed. Talk turned the prospect of a winery tour tomorrow and the ladies all agreed, Vicki in absentia from her bed, that they were up for it. If only poor Wendy were with them.

When day broke the storm had passed. Jean and Breanne had decided they were going to indulge in a swim and a massage after breakfast. The ladies from the Mount View Wing arrived at the dining room to find the others already there.

"No hot breakfast sorry ladies. There's a note," said Theresa, pointing a vegemite encrusted bread-knife toward a table by the wall where toasters, marmalades, tea-bags, breakfast cereals and barely enough milk had been dumped.

Jean read aloud – "Kitchen is closed due to unforeseen circumstances. Please help yourself to a complimentary breakfast."

"Storm damage to the roads, staff can't get through," said Frank who'd just arrived in the doorway. "Trees down all over the place. Pokolbin Mountains Road's cut in several places apparently, but the access road in here is worse. Completely blocked off by a landslip. They're calling it a once in a generation storm."

"Well what do we do?" said Breanne.

"Nothing much we can do. The SES is out all over the place. We just have to hold tight and wait til they get through."

"Oh no oh no oh no," said Debby feeling a faint sense of seediness become a full blown migraine in an instant.

"Well how long do they reckon?" asked Jean.

Frank shook his head and collapsed into a chair. "How long's a piece of string? We're advised to stay put because they're not sure if there'll be any more landslides."

It didn't take long for Debby to ignore the directive and two cups of rooibos tea later she bundled into the car with Jean, Theresa, Andrea and Hannah in tow. Breanne waded in the indoor heated pool while Vicki sat by the poolside nursing her head.

Things were as reported. Right from the gates they were assailed by storm debris - fallen trees, garden furniture, children's toys... They got five hundred metres down the road before stopped by a sufficiently large tree. They climbed out and looking ahead beyond the tree they indeed saw the landslide, completely cutting off the secluded valley and its only access road.

Returning to the hotel it took another two cups of tea before Hannah suggested they should use the opportunity to convene their meeting.

"I found incredible symbolism in the animals," said Jean. "What do you make of that chapter where poor Doctor Parker's dropped dead of a heart attack trying to save Shoddy, and Vernon's right there on her tail when this massive bull just saunters lazily through the foggy field, utterly immovable in its course."

"To the Celts the bull symbolised not only physical strength and power, but wealth, luxury and provision," chimed in another hotel guest who'd taken up position in a windowed alcove with yesterday's newspaper.

"Yes. And there's all the obvious associations we make through the zodiac sign," continued Jean.

"My Nan's a Taurus and she's a bloody pain," offered Vicki.

“Hey!” said Breanne giving Vicki a kick. “We’re the best.”

“The ancient Sumerians thought the bull was a symbol of guardianship and protection and they had statues of them at the entry to their temples to ward off nefarious people,” summed up Jean.

“Well that certainly suits the scene in the book,” said Hannah.

“The animals,” offered Theresa, “are Shoddy’s world. It’s rural, as opposed to say Vernon or especially Russell Savage. It’s the old dichotomy of Australian literature, city versus the bush, and the bush always gets the gong. For all his creativity Hall isn’t immune to his literary environment.”

By midday when the power went out again the literary discussion was laboured. Frank syphoned fuel from his Toyota into the generator. Debby wandered the hotel perusing artworks. She stopped at a framed map of 1960s vintage. Peering hard in the half light she made out the valley and a farmhouse. Nearby, over a ridge to the Northeast was a winery, nowadays a major tourist stop. Across that ridge was a tiny line. Debby moved in to make it out and straining she read, “Fire trail.” She frowned quizzically a moment before swivelling and making for reception. She found the bedraggled hotel manager, previously in a permanent hunch, now in a crumpled stoop over the counter.

“Which way’s North?” she asked energetically.

Outside she looked toward the ridge. There it was - an overgrown but faintly perceptible track. She marched back into the hotel where she found the ladies gravitating toward a lunch of marmalade and peanut butter sandwiches on yesterday’s bread.

“Find something to wrap them in, girls,” she ordered.

At first Vicki and Breanne were reluctant to take on a bushwalk, but when Debby put the distance into perspective by comparing it to a lap of the Macquarie Shopping Centre, with a cellar door and restaurant at the end, they came around.

The ladies set out in cool, windy, overcast but dry conditions. Debby estimated an hour and a half's walk.

Brian Daniels crawled out from under his ute, shook his head, cupped his hands over his mouth and exhaled. "Now you're fucked," he said to himself, slumping against the tray. Looking ahead he said, "What were you thinking?" He'd broken an axle trying to push the tree out of the way, obviously too big. He'd been frantic, desperate to get through to his crops, survey the damage and see what could be salvaged. He started to sob. Hope suddenly disappeared as the reality dawned that this was the storm that would end him.

His 30<sup>th</sup> birthday had come and gone and he'd never imagined this is how life would be. There had been a girl once, long ago moved on to the city. He'd stuck with olives because it was more mechanised, he didn't have to depend on other people – itinerant workers, a partner, a non-existent wife and kids. But all that machinery was expensive and the debt...

He hears a vehicle in the distance, straightens up and pats away his tears. He watches it navigate fallen trees, hopping the smaller ones, bounding ditches on the side of the road, big V8 turbo diesel revving and roaring, weaving its way toward him. A smartly dressed woman pulls up, wearing make-up, and her long fair hair's tied back. He guesses she's a classy lady from one of the big wineries. She offers to take him on to his farm. He points to the tree blocking the way.

She steps out and assesses the tree, looks at the winch on her bulbar, raises an eyebrow at Brian and says, "Nothing to lose."

They spend a good half hour attempting to winch the tree aside but it's no good. The tree is just too big. Re-finding last vestiges of forlorn hope Brian starts to snap away at smaller limbs, "If we could make it a bit lighter."

The lady rubs the back of her hand daintily against her sweating brow, walks around to the back of her vehicle and opens the wagon doors.

"Good onya, dad," he hears her say back there before marching back to join him at the tree. He blinks in amazement as he looks down at a chainsaw in her glamorous hands. "Know how to use this?"

They spend another half hour cutting limbs off the tree and dragging them away. Despite all this effort the winch fails to do anything more than rock the tree off its prostrate haunches and back.

In a last ditch effort they find enough rope between them to secure the sorry tree at a number of strategic points to her bulbar. With Brian offering directions she backs up slowly to take the strain. Then she puts it in low and slowly lets out the clutch.

Four big tyres spin, rocks fly and acrid rubber smoke fills the air. The tree moves, at first tentatively and then suddenly un-anchored she drags it boisterously right out of the way. Brian laughs heartily and the lady smiles as she reaches down to pull on the handbrake.

When they get on the road he asks her where she's come from. "Thornleigh", she says.

“Aah. A North Shore lady, hey?” says Brian. That explains the Turrumurra tractor, he thinks, and the intoxicating feminine aroma within it.

When she drops him at his letterbox Brian shakes the lady's soft hand. Apart from the odd visit to the brothel in Rutherford after a good harvest, Brian hasn't felt a lady's touch in years. He imagines hand creams, face creams, body lotions and other female paraphernalia with names like Shiseido and Loreal, purchased in a big department store with a platinum credit card handled between elegant nail-painted fingers and underwritten by a tall husband in a dark blue suit. North Shore ladies are such ladies, he thinks.

Forty minutes beyond the first gate the rain came bucketing down and the thunder the hikers had been tracking fearfully in the distance was suddenly upon them. Handbag sized umbrellas were virtually useless in the conditions as the wind at the top of the ridge was double it had been in the valley. They all jumped as lightning cracked so near not merely the earth but the air shook around them. Hannah and Theresa both screamed and tears began streaming down most of the faces.

Drearly the man pointed through the doorway where it had begun to drizzle, up through the haze toward a fully forested mountain ridge made colourless by the dark angry sky. She looked back at him and frowned.

Five minutes later she came to a heavy padlocked gate. She squinted through the rain at the sign. ‘Fire trail. Emergency vehicles only.’

She backed up and said, "Sorry," before ramming the gate, dragging a post twenty metres across the debris before it let go and she bounded over it.

"No you don't go under a tree, everyone knows that. It's one of the fundamentals."

"Well we can't stay out here in the open," argued Debby and Jean as the other ladies shivered.

"Shhh. What's that?" interrupted Theresa.

The ladies quieted and listened. Was that? Yes, over the hammering rain and between thunderclaps – a vehicle. Which direction? It was getting closer, back down the trail where they'd come. The ladies moved to the side of the track, huddled and shivering as the roar of the engine got louder until a large four wheel drive bounded a rocky outcrop running through the track, two wheels in the air, and landed in soft earth with all four wheels spinning and mud flinging this way and that. They didn't stop to ask and began clambering in as it slid to a halt beside them.

"Two of you over the back," yelled the driver.

"Wendy! Wendy! Where did you come from?" exclaimed the ladies, still getting themselves upright into seats.

A tangle of hugging arms and kisses filled the car.

"I," Wendy tried to explain while being choked from every direction, "changed my mind and borrowed dad's car..."

When Hannah finally arrived at the bistro in Pymble the ladies presented Wendy with a special gift to show their appreciation, a gold necklace with a heart-shaped genuine ruby

pendant. Jean's speech summoned the virtues of all of the classic heroines in literature. She reckoned Wendy stacked up. Debby said a few words about why she established the book club, how she'd hoped to find likeminded ladies to forge new lifelong friendships, and how she'd never imagined such a courageous demonstration of it. Wendy blushed, looked down and fiddled with her mobile phone.