



**THE JOURNEY OF A CREATIVE WOMAN
ROARING TO LIFE IN A MAN'S WORLD**

NIKKI
Dissolve
GEMMELL

**FROM THE AUTHOR OF
THE BRIDE STRIPPED BARE**

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*To all the women who've taught me
how to live over the years.*

*Thank you for lifting and supporting me.
I feel the strength in your arms.*

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The men in your life have never known how forensically you watch them. How you observe, scrutinise, marvel. Coldly. They are always prey. You have been doing this since you were fourteen or fifteen, when you began to know them in a different way; when they started to circle. They didn't realise how keenly they were watched. All the males who had so much power over your future.

You could not tell them that what they were imposing upon you felt inauthentic. Cruel. All the rules they were expecting you to adhere to, all they wanted you to be. To a teenage girl trying to navigate her way through a brave new existence it felt like fraud, of a monstrous, unfathomable kind. Because it seemed that they wanted you to be someone else. Your father, brothers, male teachers, early boyfriends, uncles: they all seemed to be expecting something different, and were trying, subtly, to change you. Shape you.

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As you grew up you knew instinctively that you had to hide who you really were, as a survival tactic. Because the thumb of expectation pressed down upon you during those teenage years and into your twenties. And you wondered what lay beyond, when the great weight of that thumb was released, if ever it would be. You could scarcely imagine.



It doesn't matter who he is, this one you have in your sights now. There's no need to know his name, just that he is a writer. That's all. Let's call him W, for convenience sake. You're in your mid-twenties and want to be a writer yourself. But you do not consider yourself one, do not have the confidence to claim this mighty word for yourself. He is one loudly, smoothly, indubitably.

During this time Paul Keating is prime minister and Bill Hayden governor-general. In Spain, Christopher Skase is fighting against extradition in a Majorcan court and a fossil tree – the extraordinary Wollemi Pine – is found by a bushwalker, hidden in a pocket of bushland west of Sydney. The films *Muriel's Wedding* and *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* are released amid much joy and national chuff. And among the crop of new Australian novels are Tim Winton's *The Riders*, Richard Flanagan's *Death of a River Guide*, Peter Carey's *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith* and John Birmingham's *He Died With a Felafel in His Hand*. Muscular books all, sucking up the oxygen of fiction's new

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release schedule and spoken of as instant classics. It seems no one thinks to ask: where are the women?

W inhabits this world comfortably. It is a wonder to you. Perhaps this is one reason why you fall for him, quickly and completely, so soon after you meet.



‘I can’t do it.’

W is speaking softly, as if through thick, bubbled glass, in an innocuous Indian restaurant in Sydney’s Kings Cross. Just four humble little words from the man you are about to marry. The chapel is booked. The bridesmaids organised. The first fittings have been carried out on an (audaciously iron grey) wedding dress. And W is the man you have invested all of your future in.

You have given up the town you’ve loved living in, for him; you’ve stopped trying to grab hold of a writing life, for him. And with these four hesitantly spoken words you feel your future disintegrating. Everything you had planned. All your certainties. Confidence. Resolve. You feel your entire self dissolving in this moment, the person you had so carefully created until this point.

‘I can’t go through with it. The wedding.’

You feel yourself becoming someone else, as you listen. Because in that moment all the foundations of a successful, shared existence of creativity have crumbled beneath you and you’re not sure what will hold you up now, if anything. You’ve never known a failure like this.

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Humiliation. Mortification. Never known the violence of such a blindsiding. And stretching before you now is an endless, stubby world of aloneness and unloveability. Accompanied by a sense of having no idea what has just happened and a self-hatred at not being able to see. Anything.

Your cheeks burn with flame amid this very public rejection; your eyes sting. You will not be able to walk past this Indian restaurant for years afterwards. Yet in this moment you also feel a glimmer of the person you are meant to be. A girl, a woman, angry and flinty and determined and knowing. It is the person you really want to be but are never allowed to. Because there feels like such a violent disconnect between who you present to the world, and who you really are.

But first you have to back yourself away from the abyss opening up beneath you, a deep well of despair and self-revulsion that you want to be swallowed up by, and never emerge from. And you're not sure, in the reeling days afterwards, that you'll ever get to become that female you really want to be. Not sure if you'll ever have the courage for it. Because self-doubt is the cloak you've wrapped yourself in your entire life until this point.



Life can change in the sliver of a moment at a nondescript neighbourhood restaurant. It's what you do in the swirl of afterwards that defines you, how you carry yourself. It's

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what you do in the days that follow that can shape the rest of your life.

The abyss is beckoning. How can you face the world now? Your family, so joyful at your good fortune after so many years of restless singledom; your friends all seemingly firming into their settled lives; your colleagues who'd farewelled you so joyously, so recently, from the town you've loved more than any other in your life.

'I can't go through with it.'

He can't do the life so carefully planned together, the kids you'd both dreamed of, the house of books and coffee and laughter and clamour; your very own giggle palace. He stumbles through his explanations as if it's a reflection on who you are, the person you've so carefully been until this point. And now you're found wanting; the ideal of womanhood you thought you were meant to be. W tells you the wedding is happening too fast, despite eight months of preparation, he says it's too rushed and the 'money thing' between you is too uncertain. You're the regular wage-earner, with a job as a reporter for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, he is a freelance writer. He says to wait a year and then see. Still go out, but just see if this can work. If it's what you both want, really. Then he waits for an answer.

You do not give it on that nondescript Tuesday night. You see before you, in the reeling silence, snatches of many things. The patterns repeated of your single mother and twice-married grandmother. The young woman

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fundamentally unloveable, too focused on her job and wage and the image of perfection she's created and cannot shake. The woman who's not attractive enough. Too interior, closed, odd and, above all, that ugly word: driven.



Many people around this crumbling young woman assume she has a healthy, almost obnoxious sense of self-belief, and it often feels like the world wants to bring her down a peg or two because of it. If only they knew. The insecurity, self-doubt, unease, the constant questioning. All you see right now is a girl too removed from normality; a girl who'll never be able to have and hold a man. All your self-loathing feels justified and has just been confirmed by the actions of this man; this older writer who's backing away, fast, from your future. And after all, if he doesn't love you enough – then why should you, or anyone else? You feel, overwhelmingly in this moment, wrong. But you've always felt somehow wrong. The world has repeatedly told you this.

Yet on this ragged night you also catch a glimpse of the woman you've never been. A woman contemplating the cage door and stepping out tentatively into an obscurity that's the beginning of an entirely new person. The one you've always wanted to be, perhaps, if you were ever brave enough. And if you were ever given enough anonymity to experiment. To loosen. But you've spent your entire life being conditioned to be a successful young lady, of the type

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men around you approve of. A young lady who's obedient and meek and calm, good and refined and quiet. Why be anything but that?

Yet, yet, why be that?