



‘Fairweather Beach 1979’

An excerpt from Kellie Jackson’s novel-in-progress

From a carefully curated life in London, Cate is called back to her native Australia where she grew up in the 60’s and 70’s, part of a working-class family in Newcastle, New South Wales. This ‘The Steel City,’ an industrial port, also had a beach culture. Aged 14, Cate’s life was thrown off-course when her siblings, Cara and Dom, were in a car accident. Cara and friend Bernadette died, Dom survived. Now approaching 50, Cate is struggling with a failing marriage and an empty nest. The family crisis that forces her return brings a showdown with the past. Here, Cate recalls and addresses her lost sister Cara – a memory that takes her to a place ‘altogether elsewhere.’



*Fairweather Beach, a fictional place drawing three beaches featured in this 1960s image:
Bar Beach, Dixon Park & Merewether Beach*

We are at the beach behind the surf club. You’re letting me sit with you and your best friend, Bernadette. Normally at the beach you ignore me, especially if you’re with friends. This time, because you’re in trouble again, you’ve had to bring me with you as punishment.

We sit facing the car park, backs to the sun-baked brick wall, bums on towels laid out on the cement. You have a new jar of coconut oil and Bernie has a dribble of Hawaiian Tropic which we smear on our bodies to

burn better. You and Bernie are keeping a roll call of who's going in and out of the surf club bar. Our brother Dom's at work with Dad. Dom's best mate Thomo is upstairs getting shit-faced with some of the older guys. They've been drinking jugs of beer since lunchtime.

I've got *Flowers In the Attic* to read and I'm loving it. The girl in the book is locked up in the attic with her brothers and sister and left for dead by their mad mother. I've just read the bit where the girl and her brother kiss. Imagine kissing your actual brother. Foul. I've heard what happens later in the book and I can't imagine it. I can't imagine having sex with anyone, full stop.

Led Zeppelin's spilling out of the back of some bloke's panel van. He keeps giving you and Bernie the eye, but he's too much of a Westie for you both to even give him the time of day.

The sun is a monster. I'm wearing my baseball cap and you tease me about it. I don't know why it's not OK to wear a cap, but so what, I like it. I bought it from a surf shop at the top-of-town with my Christmas money from Nan. My nose is permanently peeling and scabby, my lips too. I'm supposed to stay out of the sun today but I want to get as brown as you and Bernie. Mum reckons Bernie's got a bit of foreigner in her somewhere. Me and you with our hazel eyes and mousy hair are freckled and golden, but we'll never tan like Bernie. Plus she's got that long wavy hair, honey coloured, threaded with reddish blonde sun streaks. She's got the best hair of anyone we know.

You and Bernie are restless, a pair of cats with twitching tails. I'm just pleased to be allowed to sit with you but wonder how you'll make me pay for the privilege. You both make up a rule that we have to each do a circuit around the surf club and report on activity out the front on the beach side. Except we don't take turns. I do it and you pay me in chocolate paddle pops and a carton of hot chips. I don't mind because I'm broke. You get your money from your casual job, Thursday nights and Saturday mornings at Best and Less. In August next year, when I turn fourteen and nine months, I can put my name down for a job. Bernie gets an allowance on top of her casual job at Eastham's Jeans, so she's always got money in her purse.

Each time I do a circuit the grassy area out the front is deserted. No wetsuits laid out on the benches to dry. No towels marking a camp. No bikes or skateboards to trip over. Lots of people are away with their

families. It's that time of year when the long summer holidays are slowly unravelling toward the new school year. We never go away. Bernie's parents have a caravan at Shoal Bay and head up there for a couple of weeks when school breaks up. She hates it because she's an only child. Sometimes she's allowed to invite you along for a week. Bernie's parents take you out for prawn cutlet dinners. They hire bikes for you both and you're allowed to ride wherever you want. At night you all play cards and board games together which you say is boring but I'd like it. In the morning the rosellas wake you up squawking and carrying on. Some of them are so tame you can feed them from your hand. Best of all you get to buy cherries and watermelon from a man who has a fruit and veg stall in his truck and drives through the caravan park right to your doorstep. Wish I could go, I'd love to sleep in a caravan, even just for a night.

I'm leaning into you, shoulder to shoulder, as you thumb through Dolly magazine and point out to Bernie all the stuff you'd buy if Mum and Dad won the lottery. I like what you like. Bernie's losing interest, so you toss the magazine aside and say, 'the only bloody thing we've ever won in our family is a meat tray at the pub raffle.'

You and Bernie are so bored. No-one to spy on and no one to flirt with. But I'm in heaven with you two, weighing up a rumour, circulating for days, about a keg party down the coast for someone's twenty-first. Maybe that's where everyone's at. Our next door neighbours had a keg of beer in the back yard at their New Year's eve do and I could hear everyone, including Mum and Dad, getting pretty silly. I worry for a minute when you and Bernie start talking about hitching to Redhead Beach to track down the party. Thank goodness you both decide it's too far and besides if you were busted you'd be in even more trouble with Mum. I stick to my strategy, keeping as quiet as a praying mantis. If I pretend to read my book, I can listen to you both. You talk about getting your periods in embarrassing places, like the time it happened to you at the beach in a white bikini. White bikinis, see-through when wet, are a general disaster, you both reckon.

Renata Rossi and Suzanne Heggarty walk past and say, 'G'day. How's it going?' And you both say, 'G'day, alright,' all friendly-like.

Then the minute they're gone you talk about the time back in Year Eight when Renata went off with some guy called Goat on a Mary Immaculate Youth Club trip to Luna Park. On the way home they messed

around in the back row of the coach and he spoofed all over her jeans. She was so worried that she might get pregnant that she brought the jeans to school to show her friends. ‘Renata’s not the full barrel of biccies,’ you say. She’d freaked out because this was the year Sister Margaret had advised all the girls to place sheets of newspaper across a boy’s lap before sitting on it to avoid accidental pregnancy. I can’t imagine sitting on anyone’s lap, but I keep that to myself.

Our bums grow numb on the cement. It’s too hot. We decide to go and pinch Nev’s ancient Malibu from the surf club. Nev’s a lifeguard in the summer and works on the roads in the winter. He’s busy in the emergency room looking after some kid with heat-stroke. He lets us get away with stuff because we’re locals and because he likes us. He’s OK, not too pervy, for an old guy.

I can hear The Eagles playing loud from the car park. We sing along as we struggle across the grass with that big beast of a board. A herd of little girls bursts from the change room. They cut across our path without looking where they’re going. Each wears a towel coiled at one end like a crown on their heads and the rest billows veil-like around their skinny arms. They wear swimmer bottoms, the kind with a frilly skirt like we wore when we were little.

‘Watch out, squirt,’ you say to the biggest one. ‘Nearly knocked you flying.’ She pokes her tongue out at you. So, you pull a face back. The kid doesn’t know whether to laugh or cry.

‘Nice cossie, but,’ you say, and she puffs out her little belly and says thanks, all shy. Her hands reach out for the towel to make it into a cape and she flies off like Supergirl after her friends.

A Westerly blows in hot gusts. Everything has that beach smell: sun lotion, vinegary chips, calamine in a bucket, ciggy smoke, and the sugary taste of chocolate paddle pop at the back of my throat. The wooden stairs cut between the dunes down to the sand. Pig grass grows wild across the embankment, with hot pink flowers the shape of exploding stars. The surf’s slicked flat and drowsy. The water’s clear and emerald green moving slow as oil.

‘Hey! Mini Devlins!’ someone yells from up high across the grass. ‘What are you’s lot up to?’ Dom’s mate, Fat Thomo, stands on the balcony of surf club bar. He salutes us with a jug of beer in one meaty

paw and a schooner glass in the other. I don't mind Thomo even if all he's good for is smoking bong and surfing.

'Hey Thomo,' I yell.

'Just ignore him,' you say.

'He's harmless,' Bernie says.

'Where's Devlin at?' yells Thomo. He means Dom.

'Working with Dad,' I say.

Scott Campbell suddenly fights his way through the fly-screen streamers. He blows in Thomo's ear then slaps him on the bum, saying something about what are you up to you fat bastard.

'C'mon,' you groan. 'Let's keep going.'

'Wait a sec,' says Bernie. She flicks back her long hair and with her free hand adjusts her bikini bottoms even though it all looks fine to me. Nothing falling down or up her bum.

'What are you doing?' you say. But then I catch a glimmer of recognition in your face as you follow Bernie's focus of attention. Scott Campbell standing on the balcony.

'What?' says Bernie.

'Scott Campbell's an arsehole,' you say.

'A good-looking arsehole,' says Bernie.

'Don't make me spew,' you say, glancing back at Scott who still has his eye on Bernie.

Bernie's flexing her power. You're both starting to get so much male attention that it's hard not to notice. But it's more than that - a hint of something competitive and unspoken that I can't quite understand.

'C'mon Berne,' you say. 'Get your arse into gear, it's bloody boiling.'

I hold my breath as I don't want you to start fighting with Bernie and wreck everything. I'm having a lovely time and I don't want to go home. So I'm really happy when Bernie sees Nev looking pretty cheesed off and heading our way.

We haul the board down the wooden stairs as fast as we can. Nev must have spotted us and followed us outside. We're halfway down the stairs when he blows his whistle at us like it's full time at the footy and says, 'where's your manners, did you ask for permission to take that board?' I'm ready to take the board back immediately. I hate getting in trouble.

'Can we borrow the Malibu, Nev?' you say. 'Please?'

You and Bernie start a staring competition with Nev. Neither side blinks.

‘Please,’ says Bernie, jutting out a hip.

Nev doesn’t have the the energy today and backs down like they knew he would.

‘Next time, ask first,’ he says.

‘We will,’ you both chorus.

‘And look after it. No dings,’ he says. ‘ I mean it.’ Then he wanders back to his bench on his bantam hen legs.

We heave the board onto the burning sand and scorch the soles off our feet. The shore feels miles away. The tide is out. We stop for a break and flip the board on the sand, fin-side up to rest our feet on top. Then we hop and squeal to the shoreline for instant relief, sinking into the wet sand. It’s as if the water makes everything better. You and Bernie are friends again.

We glide the board through the shallows till the water comes to our waists. You and Bernie dive through the gentle roll of waves and pop up, flinging back your hair. I hold my nose and sink down. It feels so good, warm as bathwater. We jostle and push each other into the water. We keep one eye on the board so it doesn’t drift away. I come up and my hair sticks in the air like a cocky’s crest. You laugh and say, ‘let’s play hairstyles.’ We used to play this game all the time when we were little. Ducking down into the water and coming up fast to flip our long hair into crazy shapes that make us scream with laughter. I love to make you laugh, it keeps you close.

You and Bernie lie front down across the Malibu. ‘Push us around, Kitty-cat,’ you say. You haven’t called me that in a long time. So, I wade you both through the shallows in the low swell and you soon get sick of giving me orders and start talking the good stuff again. Without me saying anything, you tell Bernie to shove over and make space. I flop down next to you and wiggle in. We go with the soothing roll of the waves. I love it here. I love the scatter of people rising under beach umbrellas cocked at angles to find shade from the late afternoon sun. I love the little kids swimming and playing at the water’s edge. I love the golden sand and the blue sky. I love this place and never want to leave or anything to change. We drift with happiness while the sun burns our

already sunburnt skin. It feels good to be with you and Bernie, to catch you off guard, and without boys around or our parents or anyone to judge.

We've been so long in the water the tips of our fingers turn white and wrinkled like when you stay in the bath for a long time. I close my eyes, saltwater-sore, when something from behind grabs my ankle hard. My heart explodes and I shriek in surprise.

'Dom, you shit,' you shout and kick at him. He has you by the ankle too. We both flip around to aim a kick at him but he's too quick and slippery for us. He's hooting with laughter, splashing water in our faces and calling us babies. He picks me up bodily like he's a caveman and throws me over his shoulder. I'm screaming and laughing and bashing at his back but he's too strong. You grab hold of his waist to tackle him, but he pushes you off into the water. When you try and surface he shoves your head back under. Bernie slides off the board and watches, eyes bright, chewing her thumb nail. She wants to join in and edges towards us, hair-flicking like a champion.

'Pants him,' she shouts, and goes for his board shorts.

'Don't you dare,' he says, keeping her off with one free arm. 'Don't you fucking dare.' He throws me in the water and I fly headfirst into the swell. I'm laughing and screaming as I go in and end up with a belly full of water.

By the time I get to my feet, spitting and spluttering and checking if I'm decent, Bernie's at it again. 'Bet you can't pick me up,' she says.

Dom stops messing about for a millisecond and says, 'Wanna bet?' She gives him one of her looks like she thinks she's Farrah Fawcett.

'Jesus, Bernie,' you say, skulking off to retrieve the Malibu drifting to the shore.

Bernie dives into the water and Dom catches up with her. They shove each other around in the surf while you and I catch our breath and flop back on the board.

'Dom's such a dick,' you say.

'Yeah,' I say, even though I don't really think he's a dick.

'Bernie's such a little pricktease,' you say.

'What? Yuk,' I say, not quite sure what the word means exactly except that it's not a good thing to be.

Dom and Bernie grin at each other, standing face to face. He has her pinned by both wrists, her arms bent and hands up by her shoulders.

She can't slip out of his grip. She's tall and sturdy but no match for him after his summer of labouring with Dad. She hasn't noticed her boob's half popped out of her bikini top. I'm so embarrassed for her, I nearly die. I wish Dom hadn't turned up to ruin everything. Dom suddenly notices too, because he drops his hands real quick.

'Oi, Flasher,' you say, and gesture at Bernie to put her boob away.

'Shit,' says Bernie, going all red and shoving herself back into her bikini. Dom turns away like he's been caught in the girls' toilets by accident.

They separate and come towards us, lifting their legs through the water.

'Flasher!' you chant. I join in, 'Flasher, Flasher, Flasher.'

'Shut up,' says Bernie, joining us on the board as if nothing's happened.

Dom stands over us with the sun behind him. I squint up at him, hoping he'll say something to make everything feel less weird.

'You still in the shit with mum?' he says to you.

'Always,' you say with a sigh.

You've woken me up more than once this summer to let you in the back door after you've snuck out. Mum's onto you. She waited until you were at your holiday job then went full-on detective mode and found that shoe box stashed under your bed. She read everything. I know what's in it because I've found it myself and gone through some of it too - your notebooks and poems, old letters from your Bay City Roller pen friend, the photo booth pictures of you and Bernie. And a picture of Scott Campbell taken two summers ago by the local newspaper when he won the Under 16 Schoolboys surfing competition. Mum read every word and then burned the lot in the back yard. You got home just after the flames took hold and chucked a total mental. There were bits of letter and ash flying everywhere. I was sent inside, like that made a difference - the whole neighbourhood could hear you both. You called her a bitch and she called you a common little slut. Now you're grounded except for work. And you're not allowed to the beach unless you take me too.

You're moving ahead and away from me so fast that sometimes I feel I will never catch up.

'What you doing here with us anyway,' you say to Dom.

'Shouldn't you be with all your little poofy mates in the surf club?'

He starts going on about giving Thomo and the boys a wide berth for a bit. Saving his money for Europe and all that. It's all he talks about.

'Shove over,' says Dom.

Without a word between us, you and I shuffle Bernie off the board with a splash. She's still browned off about the bikini business and swims off in a huff for a shower. We make room for Dom and for a moment we are the three Devlins: Dom, Cara and Cate. We all watch Bernie storm up the stairs and disappear into the change rooms and then for no reason we start to laugh our heads off until we don't even know what we're laughing at anymore.

And there we are and there, in my mind's eye, we stay, floating in the shallows on Nev's Malibu, believing that the future holds for each of us an infinite number of stories.

Kellie Jackson was born and grew up in Australia. She settled in London in 1990, and has also lived in Hong Kong and New York. Her short stories have aired on BBC Radio 4. She has a BA in English Literature and an MA in Creative Writing from Goldsmith's College. In 2016 she set up *Words Away*, a popular series of monthly salons and workshops bringing writers together to explore the writing process. She's currently working on a novel set in the UK and Australia.

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First publication 2021 by Blue Door Press in *Altogether Elsewhere*, an anthology of writing about place: <https://bluedoorpress.co.uk/>