

Kali Napier

Traces

2010

Ali

A cloud of cockatoos screeched into the bluest sky. Ali watched them wheel across the Harbour Bridge, holding the Cockatoo Island brochure above her eyes as a shield from the glare of the sun. She brought it down to study the map. Where she stood had been the prison. Sandstone buildings surrounded her on all sides, their windows barred and narrow. Prison gratings, prison walls, prison dormitories, prison yard. She skimmed the text beside the map—back-breaking labour, cruel abuse—and exhaled, the breath coming out tight, jagged. She read on, noting that at one time, the buildings had also been used for a reformatory and industrial school—named Biloela, for cockatoo.

She ducked her head through the nearest open door, shuddered, as though chill water ran through her. Inside, the cell was large and airy and the walls were studded by iron spikes at intervals of a foot apart. In the far corner, a boy was writing on the wall with a black felt-tip.

“Stop that.” The words escaped her lips before she knew why. “It’s vandalism.”

He flinched, turning his face up to hers. He looked about six or seven, freckles across his nose. He rubbed at the wall where he’d been writing, then ran past her out of the cell.

Ali worried her forehead with the heel of her palm. Where’d that voice come from—stern, parent-like? He wasn’t her child to tell off. She bent down to see what the boy had written.

I wos her— he’d begun. He hadn’t done a good job of erasing his presence. She spat on her palm and rubbed at the offending marks, crumbling the stone to dust. Its smell held her fast, like the clump of earth she’d refused to let go. They’d said, “*Let him go. Let go.*”

Beep. Beep.

Jolted back to the cell. She pulled her hand from the wall to rummage in her daypack, and switched off her phone. Could Simon not let her have any peace? Her throat constricted. She pulled out her water bottle, swigging from it as she dropped down to the floor with her

back against the wall. Three weeks since she'd last seen him and it wasn't long enough. Halfway across the world and it wasn't far enough. She'd told him she needed to get away, to be on her own to think things through—like if she wanted to stay married to him. She couldn't even say that she still loved him. Her heart had turned inside out, feeling too keenly the pain of strangers, bringing tears to her eyes in an instant, when inside her was an empty nothingness.

She'd never been on her own for this long before. She'd met Simon at university while studying French literature. He had a motorbike. Three years later they had a farmhouse near Exeter, a cow, ducks and pigs, and Nicholas.

They hadn't planned to have children. Not yet, anyway. "My life is ruined," she'd howled into Simon's chest after missing her period for the second month. He'd held her to him, rubbing her arms, soothing her, telling her gently that the baby wouldn't change how they lived their life. They'd been dossing down in the courtyard of a riad in Dakhla, four weeks into their West Africa motorbike trip. "I'll zip the baby up inside my jacket if I have to," he'd said, taking the cigarette out of her hand as an inch of ash plumed across the tiled floor.

They'd cut that trip short. Bought the old Macallister farm in his parents' village and settled in.

She needed this holiday. As far from the tinny skies and drizzle as she could go. Somewhere the sky was an unbroken blue. Where she didn't have to be that other Ali. Where Simon wouldn't pester her every moment of every day to come back.

As her eyes adjusted to the dimness of the cell, she noticed an iridescence that didn't belong in the mortar between the stone bricks in the wall. She inched closer towards it on her knees. A shell. With a nail file from her daypack, she carefully prised the shell out from between the stone blocks, turning it over in her hand. It reminded her of an ear: the smooth, pewter, flat spiral on the inside, and the outside, rough. She'd keep it for him, she thought, slipping it into her pocket.

1880**Evie**

Evie dug deep into the sandy soil, turning it with the spade into neat hillocks. Dig. Turn. Heap. Dig. The smell of the turned earth filled her nostrils, reminding her of cemeteries. There was solace in the kitchen gardens two hours a day, dispelling the ghosts that tugged at her forelocks during the long padlocked nights.

“Evie!”

She thought it had been one of the voices, but now it came louder. She lifted her face towards the rocks on the ridge above—squinting against the white heat—to see Daisy.

“What are you hollering for?” Evie called.

Daisy swung her legs over the ridge and slid down the rocks to the reformatory’s vegetable plot.

“Watch it. Walker’ll tan your hide if you rip your dress.” Evie patted down Daisy’s backside. “There. You’ll survive this time. Now, what’s so urgent?”

Daisy looked as solemn as an eight-year-old could be and pulled at Evie’s sleeve to come close.

“Is it a secret?”

Daisy shook her head. “No,” she whispered. “I think they’re gunna be tellin’ you all on Sunday after the service. So I heard Matron say to Mrs Pryce in the laundry.”

Evie leaned the spade against the rocks and wiped her hands down the front of her pinafore. “Telling us what, Daisy?” She darted a glance at the plots further along the ridge—Mae and Polly had turned away. The strains of their bawdy tunes carried back to her by the breeze. The other girls were out of sight.

“It’s so dreadful, I can’t stand it,” Daisy said, clutching at Evie’s forearms.

“Out with it, then, child.” Evie shook her by the shoulders. Not roughly, but with urgency. Only another hour before returning to the cells, and she had other things on her mind.

“They’re sendin’ the reformatory girls away. You won’t be at Biloela no more.”
Daisy choked back her tears.

A surge in her blood. Calm, Evie warned herself, lest she gave sign of what she was to do. She laid her hand gently on the girl's head, pulling it to her chest. "Daisy, Daisy..." she sang. Her steeled heart fluttered. It had been her mother's song.

Daisy lifted her face towards her. "You can't go, Evie. Who's gunna look after me?"

Evie gazed into Daisy's face. She'd had a lonely life already, this one. A streak of snot sat above her lip, and Evie wiped at it, before slipping her hand into her dress pocket. She ran her fingers over the smooth side of the shell, and pulled it out, hidden in her fist.

"Now, I have something special for you, so you can remember me when we're apart." Daisy swiped for it but Evie waved her hand away. "Uh-uh. I'll give it to you, but you have to make a promise first."

"Yes, Evie." Daisy nodded, reminding Evie of her girlhood marionette.

"All right." Evie uncurled her fingers in front of the child's eyes, which brightened as the magical shell was revealed. She waved away Daisy's eager hand once more. "Before I give it to you, I want you to promise you'll not be afraid without me. I'm nearly seventeen. I would've been going away next year anyway, when my sentence is up. It's just a bit sooner, that's all," she said, cupping Daisy's chin. "There're plenty of other girls in the school who'll look out for you. You shouldn't be messing around with us lot, anyway."

"But yer different to the other reformatory girls."

Evie sighed, looking over at Mae and Polly. Warden Armstrong slouched against the rocks a bit further along the ridge, smoking her stinking pipe. She wasn't as strict as the school's matron, and didn't bother with a little fraternising. But that afternoon, Evie needed to slip away unnoticed, and she wouldn't if Matron Walker found Daisy with the reformatory girls.

"Here, take the shell, and go." Evie pressed it into Daisy's outstretched palm.

Daisy remained on the rock, stroking the shell. "I ain't never seen a shell like this before. Where'd you get it?"

Evie looked back towards the warden who'd stretched out on the rock like a cat in the sun, then back to Daisy. When Daisy smiled, her face dimpled.

"If I tell you, it's our secret, okay?"

"Okay." Daisy peered at the shell between her two hands cupped like a mollusc.

“Come with me,” Evie said, lowering her voice. She crept along the ridge, her back against the rocks to keep from sight. Daisy followed, giggling with one fist clamped tightly around her prize.

When they came to the fence, Evie placed a finger to her lips and gestured for Daisy to step onto Evie’s hands so she could push her up. Once she saw Daisy over the fence, she pulled herself over the palings after her, slicing her hand on a split post.

“Evie, yer bleedin’.”

Blood from Evie’s palm trickled around her wrist. She wiped her hand on her bodice, leaving a bloody print. “Just keep going to those rocks overlooking the graving dock,” she urged.

She slid herself into a cleavage from where she could look down over the ship in the Fitzroy Dock crawling with dockworkers making ready for it to sail to Melbourne tomorrow. “See that one, down there, with the ropes over his shoulder?”

Daisy leaned through the gap in the rocks, straining to see where Evie was pointing. Evie grasped the scruff of her neck to stop her from falling over the edge.

“His name’s Michael. He’s the one who gave me the shell.”

Daisy turned back to Evie, her eyes wide. “You know one of them, down there? How?”

Evie told her half the truth.

Daisy scrunched her forehead. “But that’s a mortal sin.”

Evie almost laughed. In Daisy’s eyes, she wasn’t already fallen. Every Sunday after Catholic services when Daisy found Evie in the gardens, she would tell her all about Moses and Joseph and Cain and stories of fishes and plagues. The reformatory girls had their own services, but they learned of eternal damnation. If there were any doubts as to which side of the corrugated iron fence Evie belonged, hers or Daisy’s, the services erased them.

The police had taken Daisy to the courts, just four years old and found asleep in the arms of one of the ladybirds in her mother’s bawdy house. But she was a good girl. Evie couldn’t begrudge her the stories of shepherds and lost lambs.

“Do you remember your mother?” Evie asked, rubbing at a spot of dirt on Daisy’s cheek.

Daisy curled her lips, squinting. “I dunno, I think so sometimes. But I can’t remember her face. When I think of her all I see is you.”

“Oh, Daisy,” she murmured. Oh, no. Please don’t say that. She took her by the shoulders and held her squarely. “Listen to me now. You’re a lucky girl, you hear. You’ve got the chance to be boarded out soon to a real nice family, and they’ll take care of you. You just have to keep believing it’ll happen for you.”

Daisy shrugged. “I know.”

Evie peered over the rock edge at the graving dock below, just making out Michael, with his blue cap, hanging halfway down the ship’s hull on a rope ladder. She reckoned she still had ten minutes to reach their spot.

“What’s it like havin’ a family?”

She turned back to see Daisy tracing pictures in the dirt with a stick. “You don’t want one like mine.”

“Why not?” Daisy put down her stick, waiting on an answer.

Evie sat beside Daisy and tucked her skirt around her legs. “If it wasn’t for them, I suppose I wouldn’t be here.” She sighed. It was a hard story to tell, let alone to a child. “I come from Swansea, up the coast. We used to be better off, until my father ran up a debt with an important man called Mr Durrell. I suppose, my father figured he might be able to get out of repaying it.”

“How?”

Evie rolled back her shoulders. “Mr Durrell has a son, Wilbur, four years older than me. I’d just turned fifteen and my father, he—he invited Wilbur to our house several times, always making sure I was left alone for hours with him.”

“What for?”

“Well, Daisy. My understanding is that he wished Wilbur to compromise my position so he would have to marry me.”

“Did he, Evie? Did Wilbur compromise you?”

She looked at her hands. Once they’d been finer than they were now with their dirty torn fingernails and rough red patches. “He did,” she whispered.

“I don’t understand. Didn’t he marry you?”

Evie shook her head, tracing the veins across the back of her hand with her finger. “No. Wilbur and his sister took me to Newcastle where there was a doctor.” The memory gouged at her, just as the doctor had taken to her womb with the cold curette. “Then there was no more baby.”

Her father had reported Wilbur and his sister, Maria, to the police. For the crime of “Using an Implement,” Wilbur’s sentence was two years, and Maria’s six months. Evie’s father disowned her, but for Wilbur’s father, this was not punishment enough for Evie. Not when his children were gaoled for Evie’s sins.

Daisy laid her head in Evie’s lap. “You would’ve been a good mother. I wish you was my mother, you know.”

“Oh Daisy, don’t say such things.” If she didn’t go now, she never would. Nudging Daisy from her lap, she said, “I’ve got to go now, Daisy. I have to see Michael before the warden takes us lot back to the cells.”

Daisy sat in the dust, pouting. “Yer gunna go and do those disgustin’ things with him, ain’t you? What if you get compamised again, huh, Evie?”

Evie gazed down at Daisy with her small fists balled in fury. “I might.” She turned away, finding the path cut between the rocks that zig-zagged down to the graving dock. Daisy flung her arms around Evie’s waist. “Don’t go. I’m sorry I got angry. I am. I wanna keep you all to meself.”

Evie lifted Daisy’s hands from her waist and turned to face her. “I know.” Pushing Daisy with one hand and yearning to pull her back with the other, she said, “Go. They’ll be searching for you before long.”

“Okay. Evie—will you miss me when they send you away?”

She looked down into Daisy’s craving face.

“Always, Daisy.”

After lights out and the warden had made her checks, Evie lay in the darkness, pressed between Mae and Polly. The seven reformatory girls shared the four beds pushed together. She listened to the light snores of those who’d already fallen asleep, and the giggles and furtive whisperings of those who hadn’t. Despair and loneliness pressed her on both sides, night after night, while the icons of saints that had forsaken her loomed from the walls. Someone—Mae? —complained at being given a rough elbow in the ribs.

“Shut yer trap,” came the response.

Had she done the right thing not telling Daisy of her plan? In return for Michael’s promise, all he’d asked for was a bit of comfort. She could never trust a man again, but what she had to offer no longer had the value it once did.

Sighing, she knew she couldn't explain to Daisy that each day she spent locked up reminded her of what she'd done to her own child, not yet born, her sleepless mind circling the regrets. Regret, that her father had gone to Mr Durrell for hush money after the marriage refusal. Regret, that the Durrells had countered with their own offer, which Evie wasn't in a position to turn down. Regret, that the Durrells had forged letters incriminating her for her father's blackmail.

Living without the life that had begun to grow inside her would be a punishment that never ended. Not in one year, not in ten. But staying in this prison another day longer was not a fate she could contemplate. She needed to get off the island before they were transferred to someplace else where she wouldn't have the means for escape.

Daisy had grown too attached, and that would make the leaving hard. Perhaps, it was just as well Evie would be going the following night, stowed on the *HMS Dove* when it left the island for Melbourne. Her last chance.

A clanging alarm bell shattered the night's sounds, followed by frenzied voices, and the pounding of running feet, coming from the school yard on the other side of the wall.

Evie sprang upright. Beside her, the girls stirred. "Bloody hell—go back to sleep you cretins," someone murmured. Two of the girls scrambled from the bed; the others taking advantage and spreading themselves out.

Evie slipped out of bed and pressed herself against the wall beneath the grilled window. "Quiet, you lot. I can't hear what's happening."

Polly whispered, "D'yer think it's a fire?"

Evie turned to Polly, putting a finger to her lips then pointing it upwards. "Climb on my shoulders and listen through the window."

Other girls leaned forward, eager to know the cause of the commotion.

"Gosh," said Polly, as Evie raised her up. "Them's all up over there."

"Tell us what's goin' on," Mae said.

"I think someone's been murdered."

Jane sat up. "I bet one of those girlies is gunna be headin' over our side of the wall now." She cackled.

Mae punched her in the arm. "Yer gonna have to move over then, eh, Janie."

"I'll cave yer head in, poxy slut."

2010

Ali

Ali entered a smaller room and checked the map. *The laundry*. She cast her gaze about the room—it could have been anything; bare-faced walls, weathered over the years.

She turned a circle inside, just to say she'd seen it, been there, when the mark on the floor stopped her cold.

A greying stain the shape of a Valentine's heart.

He had a birthmark just like it, on the back of his head where his downy hair had fallen out. Nicholas. His name a jagged pain in her chest. He'd lived only twenty-six days, and had been gone from her arms fifty times that, but she could still smell the milkiness of his neck where she'd nuzzled him.

The walls closed in on her, pressing the mustiness of the room down her throat. She fumbled her way through the doorway to the sunshine that assailed her. The glare from the stone walls flashed, slashed by the sounds of children's laughter.

Laughter. Another time. Another Ali.

When Simon first milked their cow, easing his hands around Bess's teats and whispering her sweet nothings, she'd laughed until orange juice spurted from her nose. When he'd built the cot around himself, wedged inside, and she couldn't see through her tears to wield the screwdriver.

Shouting.

The young graffiti artist raced across the yard, chased by a woman—mid-thirties, her face lined with impatience—shouting at her child. He stopped running when his mother grabbed his arm, pulling him away with her.

Ali's gaze followed the woman. She wanted to grasp her by the shoulders and ask: *Why did your child live and not mine?* But the woman didn't look at her, didn't see that Ali was a mother, too. How would anyone know? If they did, would they tell her it's been three years already, time to get over it? —or worse, as her friends had done, pretend that she'd never had a baby?

Nicholas.

Stab.

This sadness would never end. \

Beep. Beep.

Come home, the message would say. She didn't need to look.

She shivered in the full sun, and hoisted her daypack onto her shoulder. It was this place with its stone walls, tiny grilled windows of slim hope, and stale air. Her life was already a prison; she didn't need to visit one.

Her fingers curled around the shell in her pocket, following the spiral to the centre. She'd get away, take the ferry to Manly.

1880

Evie

Raised voices came from the Chief Warden's rooms. Evie shot a glance at Armstrong who broke her unwavering glare over the girls, to listen.

"Keep walking in a circle. There'll be trouble, by God, if any of you slacken while I'm gone."

Evie watched the warden hurry towards the cottage, then flicked her gaze to the wall that separated them from the school yard. Beyond, the industrial school was quiet, as though abandoned. The reformatory girls weren't going to the kitchen gardens today, nor, she supposed, for a while to come.

A hand pushed her in the back. "Keep goin' you lousy cow," hissed Jane.

Evie focused on the back in front of her—Polly's—as they trudged in a circle around the yard for their daily exercise.

She leaned forward, whispering, "How'd she do it?" treading on the heel of Polly's boot.

"Ouch, Evie," Polly squealed, kicking back at her shin.

Evie gritted her teeth. "Quiet. The warden will be onto us."

"'Twas the iron cross from the end of her bedstead," Polly whispered. "She stove the laundress' head in with it. Lots of blood all over the floor, but the old woman still lived."

"What are they going to do with her?"

"Daisy? They're takin' Daisy in the boat to the Police Courts. She's gunna be tried for attempted murder, they reckon."

Holy Mother of God. Why had Daisy done such a thing of madness? Why now? She could have been boarded out or gone into service within the year. But now she'd be stuck in the reformatory when they moved out to Shaftesbury.

Oh God! Evie could have been starting a new life in Victoria this very night. A new life.

She stumbled.

Pain tore at her scalp as Jane yanked her hair. Evie turned, lashing out to scratch Jane's smirk from her face. With a roar, Jane pulled her down to the ground, landing punches that Evie barely felt. She twisted her fingers into Jane's sweaty locks, holding her off as the girl's fists and spittle rained down on her face.

A whistle blew. Rough hands clenched Evie's arms, and she was dragged across the ground, grazing her knees.

In the darkness that night, Evie held her battered face between her hands, staring up at the shadowy icons on the wall. There would be no salvation—she'd have to stay on in the reformatory to watch Daisy's back.

* * *

The wind whipped her hair over her eyes as she watched the green water of the Parramatta River churn behind the boat. They rounded the bend, and she looked back at the island. Tiny figures rambled in and out of the stone buildings on the ridge and the large metal sheds of the dockyards below.

She searched the bluest sky; unbroken, for the cockatoos had long flown away.

About the author: Kali Napier is a Brisbane-based writer studying creative writing at The University of Queensland. Her debut historical fiction novel will be published by Hachette Australia in early 2018. In 2015, she was selected to participate in the QWC/Hachette Australia Manuscript Development Program. Kali is active on Twitter: [@KaliNapier](https://twitter.com/KaliNapier) and on Facebook: [@KaliNapierAuthor](https://www.facebook.com/KaliNapierAuthor). She blogs at kalinapier.wordpress.com.