



Kate
Grenville



Restless
Dolly
Maunder

1927

Eighteen Thousand Pounds

THEY'D been retired a couple of years when Dolly woke up one morning with a different slant on her life, as if in the night her mind had turned a corner. She lay listening to the water down in the bay, the butcherbird that Bert fed, the white cockatoos screeching in their roosting tree up the street. Thought of the rest of her life here, stretching ahead, every day the same till she died. She was nearly forty-seven, and that was nearly fifty, and fifty was old.

Yes, the house was lovely, but too perfect in a way, there was nothing to take in hand and make better. She was getting sick of Bert being around all day, pottering in the garden. They were too much in each other's pockets. Theirs was one of those

marriages that worked best when the two people didn't spend too much time together.

She had her friends, but to tell the truth she was sick of them. She knew them so well now, there wasn't a single thing they could say that would surprise her. She was sick of the trots, sick of the races. Wanted something. She couldn't put a name to it, but recognised the hunger that had been filled for a time and then come back: the old restlessness. It seemed to be dyed deep in the fabric of who she was, her need to keep moving. *Wanderlust*. When she'd heard that word for the first time she'd thought, Yes, that's what I've got. Lusting after moving on, finding the new in this wide old world. And enough other people had felt the same way for the thing to have been given a name. Once it had a name you could see that being made that way, with wanderlust in your nature, wasn't something wrong with you. It was just one more way of being a person.

So she found herself, as if idly, glancing again at those pages at the back of the *Herald*. The words leapt up at her: *Caledonian Hotel, Tamworth. Offered for the first time in sixty years.*

The Caledonian! Their wedding night, the feel of those lovely linen sheets, and the silk eiderdown with the embroidered stork. That carpet in the Bridal Suite! She could still feel the velvet of it under her feet. The week at the Cally had seemed like the seal on the contract: she and Bert making do with each other for the sake of a good life. Well, the making-do hadn't worked out all that well, but the good life had.

There was no better pub than the Caledonian. Dolly remembered how her father spoke about it, a mix of awe and

scorn: it was four shillings to have a meal there when you could have a good feed at the Greeks' for ninepence.

Seeing the place in her mind's eye, she was back in that other air, dry and fragrant with gumtrees and clean country dust. Could feel the frost crunching under your feet on the grass in winter, the blast of heat in summer that scoured your lungs. The glorious emptiness of the air, the way every sound, every crow-call, was a clear single thing like a note of music. She hadn't realised she was missing it, but looking at the grainy picture on the newsprint, she knew it had been with her, a deep unheard call, during all those years of being in other places.

She and Bert had only been back to Curra a few times after they'd left Gunnedah. After the wedding or the christening it would be cups of tea and fruitcake and everyone agog to know Dolly's business. And how are you getting along, Dolly dear, they'd ask, and she knew they were thinking, *I wonder did she ever find out what Bert was up to?* They'd look at her shoes and her gloves, could tell that she and Bert were doing well, but there was always that put-down tone: Oh, a little grocery! Oh, Camden, now where's that, Dolly? Heavens, Newtown? Goodness me! And the last time it was, Retired! and she could see they were thinking, *They've gone bust and she's trying to put a good face on it. Poor old Dolly.*

She slid the paper across the table to Bert. Didn't say anything. He looked at the page for a long time. Smoothed his moustache, the way he did when he was mulling something over. Under the moustache he was smiling.

You reckon that'll show them, eh, Dolly, he said at last.

Let them see how well we've done?

A bit scornful, but she could see he was drawn to the idea. She thought he might have been as sick of being retired as she was. They had that in common, she thought, they didn't want to sit down twiddling their thumbs.

It would cost them eighteen thousand pounds to buy the Cally. Not just the lease and the licence: the freehold was for sale as well. If you bought it, every brick of that grand building would belong to you. But eighteen thousand was a huge amount. They didn't have anything like that in the bank.

They sat over the table totting up the numbers. If they sold the lease on the Botany View, sold the Cronulla house, dipped into their savings and borrowed against the Caledonian, they could raise the eighteen thousand. The only thing they'd hang onto would be the flats. That was important to Dolly. Those flats stood for her stature as herself, an independent woman.

It was a big thing, to go into debt. They'd never done that before, always paid cash. It was a risk, it was a lot of money to borrow. But there was no argument between them. They'd done well: the grocery, the boarding-house, the five hotels bought and sold. They'd taken a risk every time, and every time it had paid off. This was the moment to take one last risk. It was 1927, everything was booming, and they had the touch.

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Standing in the cool entrance hall of the Cally—the light from the coloured panes beside the front door making soft patches of

red, of blue, of green on the walls, and a nice smell of beeswax everywhere—was a pleasure, but a pleasure touched with pain. She remembered herself there as a girl with Bert in their courting days, staring around in awe among a din of well-bred men shouting at each other in the bar and tinkling women leaving behind a waft of something expensive as they tripped past in their little shoes.

Old Mrs Trim had let the place go a bit, she was going on for a hundred when she died, so everywhere there were things Dolly could see you could improve. Not just re-furbishing, but making the place more go-ahead: for a start, the polo people needed garages for their flashy cars and you'd need to modernise the bathrooms. Then there was the bread-and-butter of the commercial travellers. You'd build some really good sample rooms out the back for them. Between the polo players and the tennis stars at one end, and the reps at the other, the place would never be empty.

They had to dip further into their savings to fit the place out properly, but once it was done it was magnificent. Together they nussed out the ad for the paper, got a man to take a photo. The angle he took it from, the place looked as long as an ocean liner.

One of the oldest hotels in the north and a landmark in Tamworth is the Caledonian or the 'Cally' as it been affectionately called by generations of citizens.

Business has been carried on at the present site for about seventy years, although the present 'Cally' has been

remodelled and equipped in the modern style. It has long been a favourite house for district visitors and travellers. The bedrooms are roomy, hot and cold baths are installed, the cuisine is excellent, and the balcony offers a more extensive promenade than any other hotel in the north. There are 17 lock-up garages attached to the hotel, the present proprietor being Mr A. J. Russell, formerly of Temora, who has maintained its old-time high standards.

They'd agreed there was no need to mention the Botany View.

From the farms in the good country around Tamworth, wool and wheat poured through the town and made it rich, and the Cally was at the centre of it all. The old-money squatters came in from the big spreads, had the four-shilling lunch and spent the rest of the afternoon with gin-and-it and champagne before they settled down to a grand dinner with a baron of beef. The soft pink lampshades gleamed on the beautiful old furniture she remembered from being there as a wide-eyed girl from Curra: elegant glass-fronted bookcases, chaise-longues upholstered in silk, huge fireplaces in the public rooms with magnificent fire-dogs. People said that old Mrs Trim had had them specially imported from France. Oh, I wish I could take them home, you wouldn't think of parting with them, would you, Mrs Russell? the rich visitors would say, and what a pleasure to smile and shake her head.

The Kings were still riding high on the hog out at Goonoo Goonoo. It was the next generation on from the one that had

humiliated Dolly's father, but the same family. *Stand back my man, you harbour the flies so!* In the season they had the polo out at their place, the clay-pigeon shooting, the croquet, the tennis. The King girls often came into town, shocking the locals with their hems up around their garters and smoking in the street. As they came in to spend the afternoon in the Ladies' Parlour they hardly glanced at Mrs Russell holding the door for them. There was a grim pleasure, knowing, even if they never would, that the daughter of the man their father had humiliated was now the owner of that grand place and every lovely chaise-longue and French fire-dog in it.

One Sunday she and Bert went for a drive in the Fiat and came back through Curra. What a dusty, silent, shabby little place it was. Being there was like squeezing yourself back into a bottle you'd managed to slither out of. They didn't stop. They'd done so well to get out, and now wasn't it good to be back, just to see what they'd left behind, and then head home to the Cally!



Frank had done the Intermediate at Newington and got a middling-level pass. Bert and Dolly gave him a gold watch for getting the certificate, and Dolly hoped he'd go on and do the Leaving. Now that would be something! But all Frank wanted was to go on the land. When they'd bought the Cally he'd been as close to angry as she'd ever seen him.

Why don't we get a farm, Mum, he said. Not another

smelly pub full of drunks. Somewhere to put roots down. We've been on the move our whole lives.

That was true, and for a moment she could see it the way he did: never in one place long enough to be part of it, always the new kid at school, no sooner making friends than having to say goodbye to them. *Put roots down.* It was a way of looking at things that she'd never thought about. She'd had more than enough of roots, all those years at Forest Farm, and only now did she think how it might have been for her children. But Frank had his whole life ahead of him to do what he wanted. Hers was more than half over, and how could you knock back the once-in-a-lifetime chance to own the Cally?

So he didn't come to the pub with them, went to work on his Uncle Eddie's place outside Tamworth. A waste of that good education, Dolly thought, but she could see it was all he wanted, grubbing around on the farm, a shovel in his hand or on the back of a horse. And there was an obstinate streak in him. Like her own, she supposed. Well, a stint at Eddie's place might make him change his mind. And if not, it would make a farmer of him.

Max was twelve, high-school age. She wanted him to go to The Armidale School. It had been started way back for the squattocracy and it was where the old pastoral money had gone ever since. If you were in the know you called it TAS. Max wasn't a great one for the books so he'd probably only stay till the Intermediate, but she'd have given him the best possible start. Frank didn't seem to have got much out of a top school, but Dolly hoped Max would do better. He was more outgoing

and sportier than Frank, more of a joiner, the kind of cheerful bloke everyone liked to have around.

Bert didn't argue this time, just said, Whatever you think, Dolly. Whatever you think.

He knows I'll nag till he says yes, she thought. He's just cutting out the middleman. She didn't like being a nag, but if you knew you were right, and nagging was the only way you could get it, what were you supposed to do?

Max went off in a fancy blazer and a straw boater at the start of 1928. Armidale was sixty miles away, too far to come home at the weekends, so he was a term boarder the way Nance had been at Rosebank. But he went off eagerly. He'd heard about the rugby they had there. And boxing, Mum! And a thing with swords, you've got to wear a mask over your face!

As for Nance, Eddie reminded Dolly again about the Gunnedah Convent where his girls had done so well. But Dolly thought that was yesterday's story. When Eddie's girls were growing up there'd been no alternative, but now there was: Tamworth High School, just a few years old, along there on Napier Street with something in Latin over the door. The government schools were just as good as the church ones these days, St George Girls' showed you that. And no need to deal with those damn nuns.

Nance started at Tamworth High in third year, the year of the Intermediate Certificate. She came third in the final exam, got prizes on Speech Day, a leather-bound copy of *Keats' Poetical Works* and *Poetical Works of Alfred, Lord Tennyson*. Dolly saw her up there in her white dress, shaking hands with

the mayor, and thought, Well, she might be the girl, but she's the one with the brains. And Bert wasn't one of those men who thought a girl shouldn't be clever. He was as proud of Nance as Dolly was, clapping away, making a huge noise with his big hands, and there might even have been the glint of a tear at the corner of his eye.

Dolly felt something rise up in her throat, something like a sob, a pain that she didn't know was still there after so long: the star that she'd got, week after week, at Currabubula Public, and the little poetry book—she hadn't thought of it for thirty years—that in her lonely grief she'd pushed out of sight behind the beam in the cowshed. If the rats hadn't eaten it, it would still be there. Now here she was, watching her daughter up on the stage, a young woman with a different future ahead of her.

The day after Speech Day, one of the teachers, Bill Crisp, came to see her at the Cally. He was awkward with her and she thought at first it was because he was so nicely spoken and gentlemanly and she was Dolly Russell who'd never gone past grade six. Turned out it was something else altogether. He thought Nance should go on to the Leaving, and he thought he'd have to talk Dolly into it.

I know there's a lot think education is wasted on a girl, he said. But it would be a tragedy if she didn't go on. Such a clever girl, a credit to you. You and your husband both.

She nearly laughed in his face, she didn't need flattery from some smooth-tongued teacher! She knew the Leaving opened all sorts of doors. You even needed it these days if you wanted to be a teacher. You had to get the Leaving and then go to the

Teachers' College, the old pupil-teacher thing was long gone.

But these days a girl didn't have to be a nurse or a teacher. A girl who had the Leaving could aim higher. Dolly didn't know exactly what aiming higher might mean, but whatever it was, she was going to get it for Nance.

If there'd been any doubt in her mind about Nance going on, Bill Crisp's visit clinched it. Not every day a teacher came and begged for a child to go on at school! She played hard to get, let him think it was his doing. That way he'd be more likely to keep an eye out for Nance.

But in Nance's next year Dolly started to see that Tamworth High wasn't the same as St George Girls'. It was the local farmers' kids who went there, and they didn't want the frills. There were no plays, no school magazine with poetry and high-flown essays. Only ten pupils were going on to the Leaving. No one at Tamworth High would have called themselves a *scholar* except as a joke.

There was another difference too, one that mattered more than knowing how to have a conversation in Latin: Tamworth High had boys and girls, but it was really just about the boys. Of the ten going on to the Leaving, there were only two girls, Nance and Una Dow. Dolly had to field many conversations about her daughter still being at school. What's the point, Dolly, when she'll just get married? It was a different argument from *Over my dead body*, but it came to the same thing: making sure a girl would always be dependent on a man for her bread and butter.

Bill Crisp aside, most of the teachers thought the same,

though they didn't say so outright. Nance came home in tears more than once because she knew she should have been top in some test, but the teacher had finagled things so she finished third or fourth.

Nothing's changed, Dolly thought. There were Nance and poor little Una Dow—it looked as though they had a better chance than she'd had herself, but men were going to keep on gripping their fists hard around the advantages the world had always given them. After a while a girl lost heart, fighting something so taken-for-granted. Dolly knew how that felt. She'd lost heart, and how could she have done anything else? For Nance there was no father saying *Over my dead body*. It was more hidden than that. But the upshot was the same: a girl funnelled into a smaller life than she deserved.

Nance had a bright laughing way with her, a sparkle that attracted the slow country boys at the school. And she liked being queen bee among them, who wouldn't? So she was happily drifting along, not thinking beyond the next tennis party, the next picnic out at the river. Drifting into marriage to one of those boys, Roy Axtens or Tom Fletcher. They were good-hearted young fellows, would make fine men. But their horizons were narrow. They'd each follow in their father's footsteps on the farm or in the little family business.

Dolly felt something like panic, seeing Nance drift smiling and laughing into a cramped small life. She'd wake up, of course, when she was locked into place by children, no other life open to her. She'd wonder how she'd let all her other possibilities slip through her fingers. But it would be too late.

The pharmacist Mr Morris was a regular at the Cally, often sat up in the lounge having a gasbag with Dolly, they both liked to follow the horses. Not quite a doctor, though everyone called him Dr Morris and the sign on his shop awning—*Medical Hall*—suggested it. He was a boy from the backblocks, he'd told her one day, his father a clerk in the mine at Greta. He'd had an uncle in the city he could stay with, so when he turned out to be bright he was sent off to Sydney Boys' High School.

Pharmacy, Mrs Russell, he said, it's the first rung on the professional ladder for a boy from nowhere.

Laughed, he was a cheerful man enjoying the success he'd made of his life. He was sending his son to Sydney Boys' too, wanted him to be a doctor, a real one. That was how it should happen, he said, each generation doing a bit better than the last.

He was a clever man, being a chemist. He'd opened the pharmacy the year before and it was already doing so well that he was going to open one in Manilla as well. He planned to have a whole chain of them, adding another whenever an opening came up.

So if you hear of anything, Mrs Russell, he said. I know a good publican has her ear to the ground.

Ah, that was why he came in and chatted about racehorses!

So Dolly picked his brains—what did he think they should do about their clever daughter who was doing the Leaving?

Well, Mrs Russell, he said, there's always teaching.

She could tell he was feeling his way, not wanting to be too

definite in case he said the wrong thing.

Yes, Dolly said, but if she's a teacher, when she gets married she'll have to give it up.

Mr Morris heard the edge in her voice. She saw him decide to say what he thought.

Well, Mrs Russell, since you're asking, I might just mention that pharmacy has no marriage bar. And something else—it pays a woman the same as a man. Not many jobs you can say that of.

Oh yes, Dolly said, that's because the men who run things never thought there'd be any women doing it!

Mr Morris smiled, she could almost hear him thinking, Oh, Mrs Russell's a sour old thing.

You could be right, Mrs Russell, he said. The fact remains, a woman could make a fair living at it, if she had the brains, and she could have a family too, if she was so inclined.

The thing that tipped it for Dolly was that pharmacy was a business. It wasn't just a job, working for a salary. You'd never get on, working for someone else. The only way to get ahead was to have your own business. She and Bert were living proof of that. Pharmacy was a good money-spinner as a business, there was Morris doing very nicely. But it had standing as well, a step on the professional ladder.

It wasn't a degree, Mr Morris said, but you went to the university for the chemistry and the *Materia Medica*. The rest of the time you learned on the job as an apprentice. Dolly didn't have a clue what *Materia Medica* was, but what Mr Morris was laying out sounded right, a mix of the foreign and the familiar.

Bert was on her side. He liked the idea of his daughter becoming a pharmacist. The boys haven't got too much go in them, he said. Maybe the girl can make something of herself.



At the Leaving, Nance got four Bs and something called a Lower Pass. That was enough to do Pharmacy. But Nance, that difficult child, said no. She'd already put her name down for the Teachers' College. Dolly wanted to hit her. The words rushed out unplanned. Over my dead body! she shouted. Over my dead body you'll be a teacher!

She heard the echo of her father's words all those years ago and felt a hollow shock to find herself using them against her daughter. But this was different. Teaching had been her only option, but Nance could have a different kind of future. She'd have a big bustling shop, people would call her Doctor Russell. Married or not, she'd be set for life. And here she was, acting as if it didn't matter. Couldn't she see how important it was?

It's that boy, she said. It's that Roy Axtens you're so keen on. What are you going to do, Nance, marry him and spend your life watching the sky for rain? When you could do so much better?

Nance stared at her with that stiff wooden gaze she put on when she wasn't going to budge. Stared and said nothing, as if her mother was a madwoman.

Dolly felt the familiar hot spurt of rage. You little fool,

she shouted, you can't see beyond the nose on your face, when there's a whole long life ahead of you, and by God I'm not going to see you waste it on Roy Axtens and a houseful of screaming kids!

Nance shouted back, All right Mum, I'll bloody do it, at least I'll get away from you!

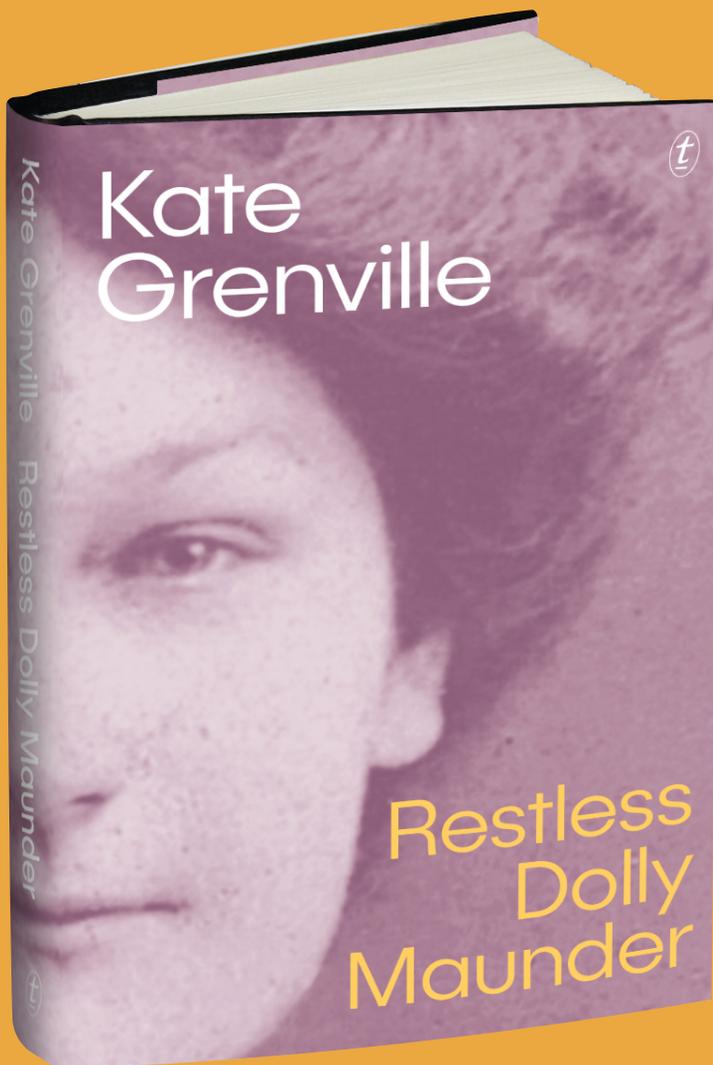


She was going to do the apprenticeship in Sydney, at a pharmacy in Enmore. Ten minutes' walk from the Botany View, wasn't life odd the way things came around. They all went to the station to see her off. Look after yourself, Nance, Dolly said, trying to catch her eye.

The words were silly, feeble, a thin pale little phrase trying to stand in for other words that she couldn't find. Words that would build a bridge to this young woman standing there on the platform with her smart little suitcase, the way she herself had stood on the platform at Currabubula all those years before, about to go off into her life. *Look after yourself*: what that really meant was *You are precious to me*, but the depth of her feeling was made shallow by the glib phrase.

She leaned towards her daughter, wanting to embrace her. Nance gave her a quick kiss but in the same movement turned away to say something to Frank. The kiss didn't quite reach Dolly's cheek. Then there was a great fluster, the train was starting, Nance turned and climbed into the carriage, everyone was shouting goodbye, good luck, bye bye, Nance!

The moment was gone. The past she'd shared with her daughter, the pushing and pulling against each other, was all there'd ever be now.



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