

THE BOOK SHOP OF THE BROKEN HEARTED

ROBERT HILLMAN



TEXT PUBLISHING MELBOURNE AUSTRALIA

Chapter 1

SHE DIDN'T stay long as far as marriages go; a year and ten months. Her note was brief, too: *I'm leaving. Don't know what to say. Love Trudy*, and Tom Hope was left injured in a way that seemed certain to kill him.

He stood at the wooden table in the kitchen reading again and again what she'd written. He thought: *It was the rain*. He pictured her standing on the verandah in her blue dress and her cardigan while the rain came down day after day from a grey sky. It was raining now, in the middle of the afternoon; not heavily, a subdued drumming on the iron roof.

He read the note one more time, wishing more words would appear. It was written on the pink notepaper she'd used on special occasions. She'd also left behind a piece of toast from which she'd taken a single bite. The indent preserved the arc of her teeth.

He kept to the farm for weeks after she'd gone. He knew what would happen if he drove into town—*How's the missus, Tom?* from

every direction—and he had no answer. He worked in a daze, holding himself together as best he could. Cleared the channels in the orchard, a good five days, then repaired the wire fences of the hill pastures ready for the woollies in spring. Trudy had come with him in her jodhpurs when he walked the fences in the first few months of the marriage. She'd say, 'Tom-Tom, what do you call that bird, what's its name?' He always gave her one or two tools to carry so that she felt useful.

Sometimes now, in the effort of his work, he thought she was with him still but when he looked around there was nothing; the hills and the apple gums and the currawongs. He had never wept in his life but these days his cheeks were tear-streaked all the time. When he noticed, he would shrug: what did it matter?

He couldn't stay on the farm forever. He needed tobacco, sugar, tea. He needed Aspros. He woke with a headache every morning. In town, first one friend then another expressed surprise at his long absence. When he was asked how his wife was faring, he said, 'Oh, she went on her way.' He didn't elaborate. Those who spoke to him were left with the impression of strife, but that was all. If Trudy had left it wouldn't be a shock. She and Tom had never seemed a very likely couple.

If he was honest with himself, he still held out hope of Trudy's return even months after she'd gone. Each morning at the time of the mail delivery he stopped whatever he was doing and looked down the driveway. If Johnny Shields in his red van pulled up at the mailbox on the town road, Tom would blush and close his eyes for a minute then walk down to see if Trudy had written something for him.

Never a letter, though, not for all his longing, and when he walked back to the house he shook his head at his folly. He thought, *I'm meant to be alone.*

He had more reason than Trudy running away to make him

believe this. He'd always been awkward with people. He had to remind himself to smile. But in his heart he yearned for people all around him. Only let them not ask him to talk and smile too much. Let them just say, 'Tom, good to see you,' and 'Tom, look in one time and say hello to the kids.' Animals forgave his unease. The mare he'd bought for Trudy to enjoy obeyed him, never her. His dog, Beau, an old heeler, loved him in the way of dogs. But then, Beau loved everyone.

It had been his habit to listen to the radio in the evening, a program of songs that had been popular when he was a boy in the 1940s. When Trudy left, Tom lost his appetite for music and gave up listening. But with an empty Christmas facing him he saw the need to heave himself out of the dumps. He turned on the radio and sat listening in his armchair. Trudy had scorned his forties music. She liked pop music on 3UZ. She danced by herself and made dramatic faces and sang along and giggled. She didn't expect Tom to join in.

But it was Trudy's strange game played with three decks of cards that Tom found himself recalling, seeing so vividly the form of his wife leaning forward on the sofa with her chin resting in her hand and the cards in small heaps all over the low table. He understood suddenly a comment she'd made not so long before she left. She talked a lot when she was playing the game with the cards, such things as 'Clever girl!' and 'Whoops-a-daisy!' But the comment Tom had just recalled was different. At the time, he'd thought it part of her strange, three-deck game. It wasn't. It was something intended for him. 'Another night in paradise,' she'd said, moving one small pile of cards to the edge of the low table.

Tom stood up from his armchair and stared straight ahead. Why had it taken him so long to understand? *Another night in paradise.* He stamped through the house, arms folded tightly over his chest. All the things he might have done to make his wife happy crowded

his mind. A record player. Songs that she could choose for herself. A television set on hire purchase. A proper bathtub, not that half-rusted tin thing.

He ran to the kitchen and found a piece of paper and a black pencil. He wrote in a frenzy a list of the things he would do to make a difference if Trudy should one day come back. When he'd exhausted his initial inspiration he strode up and down the passage trying to think of more items. Whenever a new idea came to mind, he rushed back to the kitchen and added it to the list: 4—*Picnics!!* 7—*Pets cat budgie!!* 9—*Light fire kitchen first thing!!* Outside, Beau ran yelping along the verandah from the back door to the side door, excited by the movement inside the house.

More items occurred to him over the following days. *Tell her about good things she does.* Such as what? *Like when she doesn't burn the sausages.* And when he'd had that pain in the guts, she'd asked him three times if he was feeling better. *Like when she says how are you feeling.*

But one afternoon, in the kitchen for a cuppa, he glanced down at his list on the table and noticed how hard he'd pressed the pencil into the paper. This was mad, wasn't it, making notes? *Tell Beau not to jump up on her.* An image formed of Beau listening to him, head cocked.

Tom smiled and made a mental note on a different list: *Don't be an idiot.* Trudy had told him once, smiling, that he was 'unbalanced': the way that he'd stick with some problem about the farm for hours, for days, studying the habits of the codling moth until he'd all but indexed the physical and mental processes of the insect. She'd mimicked him perfectly, the way he wandered up and down, arms crossed, head on his chest, mumbling his thoughts. He'd enjoyed the micky-taking. Also Trudy's low gurgle of laughter at the end of her performance. He would blush, loving what she did with him.

In time, Tom came to believe that it was the farm itself that had driven Trudy away, not the lack of a budgie in a cage or a proper bathtub. He thought: *If she gives me a second chance we'll move to the city.* The farm had come to him from his bachelor uncle, and, although he liked the work the place gave him, the land was not in his blood. He could easily go back to the city and his old employment in the Tramways workshops. Trudy was a city girl, after all. He'd met her at Luna Park on one of his annual trips to see his sisters in Melbourne. It was no wonder the rain and the mud had worn her out.

'No, to the devil with the blessed farm!' he said aloud above the roar of the tractor carrying mulch up to the orchard. If only Trudy came back, to the devil with it. In the city they'd have the pictures every week. The first time he took Trudy out was to the pictures, *The Guns of Navarone* at the Odeon. She'd taken his hand in the dark and held it in both of hers and only three days later was calling him darling. How he wished he could tell her about his new idea of returning to the Tramways and going to the pictures each week!

But she barely had any family, her father missing up in New South, her mother and sister living with some bible bashers who'd taken them down to Phillip Island. He'd sent two letters to the place she was working when he'd first met her, Foy and Gibson in Bourke Street. No reply. He'd sent the first letter care of the glove and scarf counter, where she was almost in charge, and the second to her friend Val in the cafeteria. Nothing came back.

Or maybe Trudy would think again and decide to stay at the farm. He'd do that. He'd keep the farm if she wanted. She hadn't been sick of the farm every minute of the day. Now and then she'd said nice things about living out here under the hills: the sound of the wind in the trees, the song of the maggies, the spring growth in the paddocks. And she hadn't been sick of *him* every minute, either.

One summer morning in her dressing-gown, points of bright light in her eyes, she'd reached across the breakfast table for his

hand. 'Come back to bed.' Afterwards, she'd kissed his face, his neck, his chest. 'You're good at this, Tom. Do you know that? Do you know you're good at fucking me?' The word *fucking* thwarted any possible answer from Tom, even when spoken with gratitude. But at times she had liked him. Loved him? No. Liking was worth something, though.

Tom's sisters drove up from Melbourne to see to him in Patty's big Ford. He'd been their big brother in their growing-up years but at some point one sister then the other had adopted a protective way of handling him. It was as if their developing experience with men had made them aware that their brother lacked a type of male insistence; often very stupid insistence but maybe necessary. He was solid with men, respected by them, but a woman of a certain sort, they clearly believed, could get away with murder. And Trudy was evidently that sort.

Listen to Tom in his letters taking all the blame on himself! The sisters had come to the farm with a message: get over her, Tommy love, and move on.

Tom had only the one strategy for dealing with his sisters when they fussed: he became carefree. Making tea in the kitchen, Patty called over her shoulder, 'More fool her if she doesn't want our handsome Tom!'

Tom said, 'Probably for the best!' and smiled as if he were well on top of the situation.

Claudie said, 'Her and her crosswords!' She meant the crosswords in the *Sun* newspaper that Trudy had pored over, chewing her pencil.

Patty called cleverly, 'I'd give her a cross word or two if she turned up now, I can tell you!' and the three of them laughed.

When the sisters left for home in the middle of the afternoon, Tom heaved a sigh of relief. But the relief was succeeded by a plunge

of sadness. He had said one or two things critical of Trudy for his sisters' sake and now he felt like a traitor. 'Damn you for that!' he said to himself. He added to his second-chance list of ideas this new item, number 34: *Don't blame her for things!!*

A big south-easterly took a sheet of iron off the dairy roof the day Trudy returned. Tom was up a ladder in the late afternoon hammering the sheet back in place when he saw her. The Melbourne bus must have dropped her off on the town road.

Everything in the world came to a stop except for Trudy struggling up the drive with her suitcase. It had been raining for a month, just as it had been when she ran off, and it was raining now. The first words that came to Tom when blood returned to his brain were: 'Thank God!' He hurtled down the ladder two rungs at a time and strode to meet his wife with all the unused joy of twelve months swelling his heart.

When they met halfway up the drive he wrapped his arms around her, he couldn't help it. 'I'll take this,' he said and picked up her suitcase. Trudy was sobbing. Even in the rain, face all wet, her tears still showed in their passage down her cheeks.

'Don't cry, love,' said Tom, but Trudy's shoulders continued to heave with the rigour of her weeping.

Once in the kitchen Tom helped his wife off with her red overcoat and sat her by the warm stove. He brought her a towel for her hair and although she accepted it with a whispered 'Thank you', she didn't use it. She sat with the towel on her lap, sobbing and shaking. Tom stood behind her with his hands on her shoulders. He said, 'There, love. Don't cry now.' Every now and again in her weeping, Trudy struggled out the word 'Sorry!' and once managed a little more: 'Tommy, I'm sorry!' Tom was looking down on the tangled wet mess of her fair hair. As Trudy sobbed, Tom drew the strands of her hair back from her face with his fingertips.

He didn't presume that Trudy would wish to share their marriage bed that night and was prepared to sleep on the sofa. But no, she insisted that he climb in beside her. She had recovered from her sobbing and something like her old, soft smile had returned. There was nothing wrong with her appetite, either: she ate a huge plate of bubble-and-squeak and, on top of that, a whole tin of peaches with fresh cream. And she'd spent almost an hour in the bathtub before bed once Tom fired up the water heater.

Trudy wore to bed a pink satin nightdress that Tom had never seen before. It had been her custom, before she ran off, to wear pyjamas at night. Tom was careful not to touch her and only lay still beside her in the dark, smiling at his good fortune. Nor did he ask for explanations. It was Trudy who spoke first, and it was Trudy who drew herself close to him. The soapy smell of his wife could almost have burst Tom's heart.

'Tom,' she said, 'I went a little bit mad.'

'Yes,' said Tom.

'Do you know what I want? I want to forget all that. I want to forget it forever.'

'Yes,' said Tom. 'Forget it forever.'

'I missed you so much, oh so much, darling! Did you miss me like that?'

'Very much,' said Tom.

She kissed him. Nothing on earth as soft as her lips, nothing. She stroked his face. If he'd had the words, he would have blessed her for coming back to him.

She kissed him harder and said, 'Will you make love to me?'

'Do you want that?' said Tom. It was something he'd refused to hope for.

Trudy sat up in bed and lifted her nightdress over her head, lay down again and pressed herself to him.

'Darling man.'

Tom agonised over the list of ideas. He wanted to show it to Trudy but feared it would seem foolish to her. She was the one with the education, two more years of high school than Tom's father had thought enough for him. A sophisticated person might consider his list a bit childish—he could see that.

In the end, though, he decided that he must show her. Her mood on the first two days of her return had been the best he could remember but on days three and four she'd seemed glum. Tom hoped with all his heart that the list would cheer her up again. Even if she laughed at it, wouldn't that be better than staring up at the hills from the back verandah? She'd laugh, if she did, because the list would make him seem naive, a hillbilly. He wasn't all that naive, but it was okay if that was how she saw him. He was loyal in his love. And if the list didn't interest her, he'd ask her if she wanted to go back to the city.

'What's this?' she said. She was still in bed but roused herself to accept a breakfast cup of tea and Tom's six sheets of notepaper. Her bedside light was on. She'd been reading her book and had dozed off. The book lay open and face-up on Tom's vacant side of the bed. The cover picture showed a young woman with long golden hair shielding her breasts with loose crimson fabric. Two men leaned over her, one at each shoulder. A crusader knight and, as Tom surmised, a sultan.

'Some ideas I had,' said Tom. He sat on the side of the bed.

Trudy read slowly, sipping her tea at intervals. She didn't say anything. Tom managed not to ask her what she thought of the list while she was still reading. When she was away he'd forgotten how pretty she was, how the brown of her eyes caught the light and gleamed. He wanted now to stroke her hair and breathe in the sleepy smell of her skin. He thought, *I should've shaved*.

Trudy put the list down on the little table beside the bed. 'Oh,

Tom,' she said. She lay back on her pillow and covered her face with her arm.

Tom in his dread didn't move. Then found the courage to stroke his wife's hair. 'What is it, Trudes?' he said. 'What's wrong?'

Eyes covered, she said something that Tom didn't quite catch.

'What was that?'

Trudy uncovered her face. Her eyes were wet and glowing. She reached up and took hold of Tom's shirt just below the neck and kneaded the fabric between two fingers.

'I'm pregnant.'

'Pregnant?' said Tom.

'Tom, I wouldn't blame you if you threw me out. I truly wouldn't. I wouldn't blame you if you throttled me.'

As Tom leaned back the air came out of his lungs with a sound like a sigh. It was as if his body couldn't be sure that it was supposed to keep going. Finally he said, 'There was someone else?'

Trudy didn't say anything. She was watching her husband's face.

Tom said, 'Excuse me.' He walked out to the verandah and let the screen door slam behind him.

'Dear God!' he said under his breath. So much was ruined. When his father died it was like this. So much ruined. A healthy man who strode about like a king killed in a week by a sickness that didn't even have a proper name. Tom looked up at the hills and said again, 'Dear God!'

But even in his shock and disappointment he knew there would be no throwing out, much less any throttling.

He heard her voice behind him.

She was standing inside the screen door, barely visible in the shadows.

Tom didn't speak. Her form became more distinct as his eyes adjusted. He could see the sheen of tears on her face.

‘We’ll work it out,’ she said. ‘Please let’s work it out, Tom? We can, can’t we?’

She came with him everywhere, whatever he was doing. This was ‘working it out’. The farm was small enough, a one-man spread, income from the small dairy herd, from the woollies, the fruit, firewood sold in foot-lengths to a merchant in town, and Tom’s own innovation, cherry tomatoes for the cannery. Small enough, but it kept Tom busy. Never a break from the milking, never a break from moving the sheep about. Trudy was there, growing bigger with the baby, whatever the work. She didn’t do much but she kept up a cheerful refrain, sang songs from the radio, Gerry and the Pacemakers, Kathy Kirby, Cliff Richard. Before she started a song, she told Tom the title and the artist.

Tom was tender with her, more tender in fact than when he’d loved her.

Late one afternoon Trudy said, out of the blue, ‘Do you want to know about Barrett?’ She was making scones in the kitchen—she’d taught herself to bake a few things recently: the scones, apple turnover, a type of shortbread that didn’t taste like shortbread. Tom was preparing a brown trout he’d taken from the fast stream that ran through the northern end of his property. He was the better cook.

Trudy had never spoken of the man she’d known in her time away and Tom had never asked. But since she’d raised the matter he thought he should let her speak.

‘He’s not a nice man,’ she said. She looked up from the scone dough and gazed away towards the window above the sink. ‘He’s... well, he’s selfish. He only wants what’s good for him.’

Tom said not a thing and Trudy went back to rolling the scone dough.

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It was noticed in Hometown, Trudy's baby—well, naturally. She must be, what—four or five months now? And she'd been back with Tom no more than three months—about that? Or maybe Tom had been seeing her before she came back, wherever she was. Do you think? Anyone with hide enough to ask Tom Hope if his wife's baby was his, good luck to him, or her. And if it wasn't, did Tom even know? Bev Cartwright from up on the flood plain, who had been close to Tom's Uncle Frank, told anyone who raised the matter: 'Do you think he's an idiot? Tommy's an intelligent man.'

Eight months into her pregnancy Trudy's mood changed. She stayed in bed until after eleven each morning and wept often. She said that food tasted like poison to her. Up until seven months or so she had coaxed Tom to make love to her, lying on her side. Now she couldn't bear him to be close to her and she asked him to sleep on the camp stretcher in the spare room—the room that would become the baby's in time. She said that the world was full of crooks and liars.

When Patty visited—and it had taken Tom four months to tell his sisters that his wife had returned—Trudy said, 'She's the biggest liar of all.' Claudie came twice in a fortnight, once at Christmas, and made an effort to be kind and understanding. Trudy said, 'She hates me. I've always had nice teeth and hers are all over the place. You wouldn't say she was elegant, would you? That awful old cardigan.'

At times like this, when Trudy was full of bitterness, Tom put it down to fear. She was frightened of her baby. And yet not every frightened mother-to-be was as bad-tempered and ill-mannered as Trudy. He tried to jolly her along, the only strategy at his disposal other than concern. 'Cheer up, Trudy. The milk's curdling.' Gestures of affection—no. He shared the house with her, that was all. He would show the same kindness to a stranger.

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Whenever Tom drove his wife to see the prenatal nurse in the regional centre a long way beyond Hometown she fidgeted and whimpered the whole journey. Tom had to stop the car any number of times so that she could wee. It was his task to hold his coat up as a screen while Trudy squatted by the car. She always thanked him, and strangely, these were the only times when he still felt close to her; as if he might still love her deep down.

All this fear of Trudy's was there in the hospital with her when she gave birth. She screamed blue murder and so annoyed the midwife that she was eventually told to show a bit of gumption. The delivery was straightforward enough despite Trudy's carry-on (the midwife's word). Afterwards she had to be ordered to suckle the child, a little boy given the name Peter.

The midwife said to Tom, 'I don't envy you over these next few months, my dear!'

Trudy didn't want to leave the hospital even after six days. She complained of intolerable pains in her legs and neck and abdomen. Doctor Kidman gave her painkillers but told Tom privately that his wife was making a mountain out of a molehill. Tom said, 'But the baby's okay, is he?'

Doctor Kidman said, 'Oh, I suppose so.' He was probably too old to still be practising, Doctor Kidman. Tom sometimes met him down on the river, fishing with mudeyes and drinking from a silver flask.

The hospital couldn't keep Trudy forever; she was obliged to go home with the baby. The sullen face she wore on the drive back to the farm was the face she kept for the next three years. Her constant complaint, usually muttered, was that she hated the child. It was against Tom's nature to insist too much on anything but he couldn't have the child hearing that. He told his wife she must never say such a thing when Peter was awake and listening.

The boy didn't understand the words his mother was using but he must have felt her lack of affection because even at four and five months he looked to Tom for comfort. And Tom took pains throughout his working day to get back to the house regularly. He'd put down the wire-strainer or his shovel or the slasher and stride down to the house to give the boy a few fond words and a hug and make sure he'd been fed and changed. Trudy watched without interest, scratching at the rash that came and went on her arms and shins.

My life's gone to the dogs, Tom thought, but the little chap's coming along.

At other times, by himself, he thought of what a hit-or-miss business it was being married. Just good luck if it worked out, bad luck if it didn't. He shared hardly a thing with Trudy—no interests that bound him to her—and yet he had once been head over heels in love with her. Now she only perplexed and worried him. If the little boy couldn't make her happy, what could?

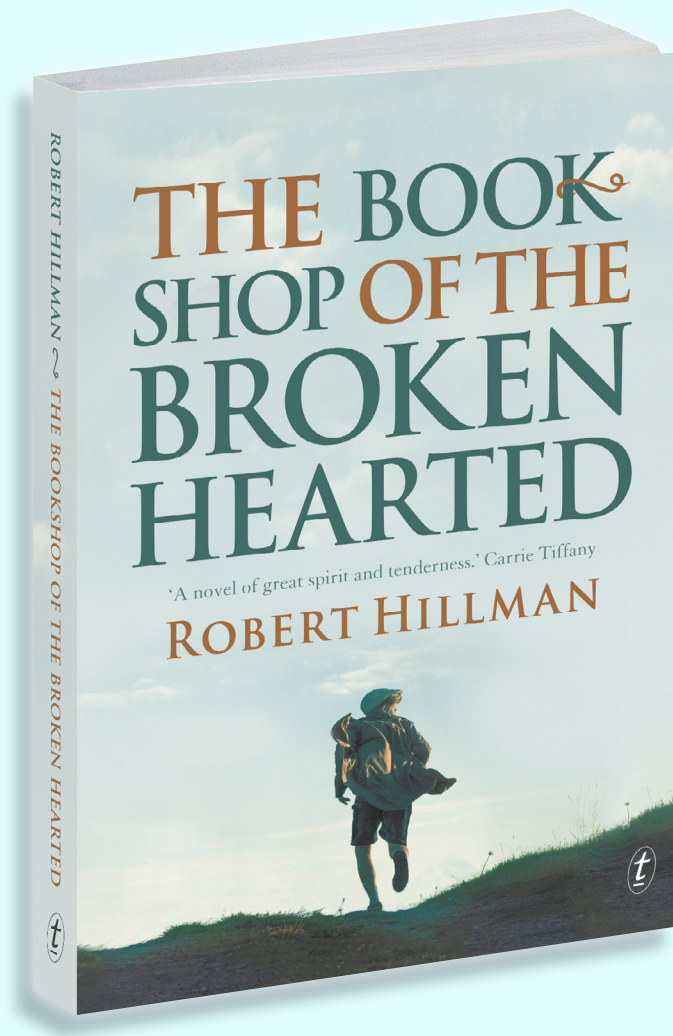
He wished Trudy could be a happier person. He wished she would go and find her friend Barrett, if that would do the trick. Only if she took the little boy with her it would upset him badly.

He tried to calm her by sitting on her bed in the mornings and reading to her from the newspaper. He chose happy stories, or at least stories that had nothing to do with death. Trudy's greatest interest was in the upcoming execution of Ronald Ryan, who had killed a policeman. He was supposed to hang in February. She said, 'Hanging's too good for him. They should chop him to bits with an axe.' Then she began to cry and something in her relented. 'I don't want anyone to hang,' she said through her tears. 'I'm sorry I said that. Can you forget what I said, Tom? Can you?'

Tom said: 'Of course.'

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How many meals were shared before Trudy went away again? Hundreds upon hundreds at the cedar kitchen table, very little said, middle loin lamb chops with cauli and peas and mashed potato, grilled trout, rabbit stew with carrots and parsnip, mutton roast on Sundays. Tom fed Peter in the high chair, the little chap with his coal-black hair and plump red cheeks reaching for Tom and not for his mother. Tom called the boy Petey; his mother rarely had a name for the child at all. Although every so often she would suffer a fit of remorse and make more of a fuss over the boy, combing his hair flat to his head and dressing him in a strange little tweed suit her mother and sister had sent from Phillip Island. These fits could last up to half a day but always ended with the child distressed and calling in a high, imploring voice for Tom. And that was the child's name for the man who was not his father: Tom.



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