

KATE GRENVILLE

Jacob's Ladder

Felicity sat in the Sewing Room upstairs, sewing. Actually, it was the *Ironing Room* and the *Suitcase Room* and the *Spare Bedroom* and the *Store Room*, too, but Felicity liked to think of it as the *Sewing Room*. If the Bank ever promoted Hugh to Head Office, she promised herself a house big enough to have a Sewing Room. Nothing would go on there but sewing. Only ironing would go on in the Ironing Room.

It was nice to know exactly where you were with things.

Meanwhile, it was Karakarook, population 1,374, out in the middle of nowhere. Even the freeway avoided it, skirting around in a big arc. You had to really want to go Karakarook to end up there and, frankly, Felicity could not imagine anyone really wanting to go to Karakarook.

Outside, blank white light poured down out of the sky. The light bleached everything of color, except the little shapes of dense black shadow. They lay along the ground as if someone had snipped them out of black fabric. From the window of the Sewing Room, beyond the backyards of Karakarook, she could see a line of sheep toiling across Palmer's paddock. She often wondered why sheep bothered. They kept moving, but there was never anything better farther along. She could hear the scabble of a bird's claws on the iron roof above her and heard its long-mournful cry, like someone giving up.

It was like being a prisoner, really, with the heat that hit you like a blow as soon as you stepped off the verandah, and the sun that shriveled up the skin of your face. No wonder all these country women had faces like worn-out shoes. She was sick to death of blue sky. The worst thing about it was the way it meant you could not pass a few polite words about the weather to the sort of people you had to pass a few polite words with, such as the bank manager's wife, that was everyone, really. The thing was, there was no point in passing a remark about how hot it was, or wondering whether it was hotter than last week, or whether there might be a cool change tomorrow. Nothing as exciting as a cool change was ever going to happen in Karakarook. It was just going to go on being the same: blue sky day after tiresome day, birds landing and birds taking off, sheep going left and sheep going right.

Hugh said he hated it too, but Felicity had a feeling he was just trying to make her feel better. It was like being God, being the bank manager in a

little place like this. You knew everyone's little secrets. Everyone was terribly nice to Hugh. They were nice to her, too, just in case.

Pillow talk. That was what it was called when husbands told their wives things. After intercourse. The assumption was, you had intercourse, and then the man spilled the beans in the afterglow. She could have told them not to worry. There was no pillow talk. Not much afterglow, come to that.

He had a special kind of smile: fixed, like a photograph of a smile stuck to his face, for anything to do with anyone's secrets. It was a good quality in a bank manager. But it made for a dull old time for the wife.

After the *little awkwardness*, Head Office had decided to bury them alive in Karakarook. But the Bank never buried you alive in any place for very long, in case you got to like it. One day the *little awkwardness* would have been put behind them, and Head Office would send them back to Sydney.

She cleared her throat and quickly got out her thread box. It was best not to dwell on the *little awkwardness*. You put it behind you, that was all. If it was behind you, well, it was as if it had never been. You put it behind you, and you looked forward. This morning, for example. Looking forward, there would be the butcher's boy coming at two. While not exactly exciting, it was something to work towards. And if she did it carefully, packing the meat away would take long enough that it would be time to pick up William from school when she had finished.

Two o'clock, the butcher had said. On the knocker.

Then he had winked. She did not really know why he had winked, but he had, so she had smiled. It was only polite.

It was tricky, with him being Chinese. She was not a racist. Most certainly not a racist. She did not call Chinese people *chinks* or *chows*, the way some people did. She absolutely loved sweet-and-sour pork, and always used the chopsticks. So she smiled when the butcher winked, just to show how very much she was not a racist. *Two, on the knocker.* It did not seem especially amusing, but he had winked, and you could not be too careful, with such a lot of racism about, so she had smiled, and when he did not stop watching her, she had added the little laugh.

Thinking about it now, she wished she had not added the little laugh.

The little laugh was not exactly a *difficulty*, but all the same it was one more thing she would put behind her.

He was a rather seedy little man, actually, although it might be racist to let yourself think that. His hair was clumped stiffly over the back of his collar, and it had a dusty look to it. She knew just the sort of conditioner he should be using. His shirt was too tight, too, so that the buttons pulled open all the way down his chest. You could actually see quite a lot of his chest. The actual skin.

He was not a tall man but he was solid. Thick. And hard. Quite hard and thick, and you could tell he was virile. She did not know how she could tell,

but she could. They were famous for their virility, of course, the Chinese. Something about their funny food, ducks' tongues-and what-have-you, it gave them a lot of, well, virility.

Vigor. That was a better word. They had a lot of *vigor*.



The quilting had turned out to be a nice little *interest*, and *interests* had been recommended after the *little difficulty*. Quilting was the best because it was so fiddly. Interests had to be fiddly or they were not interesting, and quilting was much more fiddly than macramé or petit-point or china-painting. You had all the fiddly equipment, the plastic templates, the rotary cutter, the self-healing cutting boards, the needles from small to big, several different kinds of thread, the little gold safety-pins for the basting, the little boxes with special little compartments for everything.

And the scissors. They had started as a joke, really, when Hugh had seen her four different pairs of scissors for the quilting and said, *New hobby, darling, collecting scissors?* And they had both laughed, and replayed the joke a couple of times, with different words, because what with all the secrets Hugh had to keep, jokes were thin on the ground. You had to get your money's worth out of any that happened along.

Most wives collected things, snow domes or teaspoons or china figurines or glass cats. Their husbands went away on business trips and could come back with another snow dome, another glass cat. She could see Hugh thought it was a good sign that she had a collection. It was nice and normal, and it made presents easy.

She was up to sixty-three now. Hugh had bought her something called Multi-Purpose Scissors once, but she was not interested in anything multi-purpose. The scissors she liked best were the ones that could only do the one thing. You could not cut hair with her zigzag Pinking Shears. You could not cut a bit of string with her Hair-Thinning Scissors, with their blades like the teeth of a comb. You would be there all day trying to cut a piece out of the paper with her Cuticle Scissors. But if you had a seam to trim or hair to thin or a cuticle to trim, well, they were exactly what you needed. There was no messy overlap. One scissor, one purpose. End of story.

She had got two pairs of Fly-Tying Scissors out of the catalogue. It was true that there was no immediate need for them, but they were a lovely scissor. And there was a good chance that Hugh might get interested in fishing one of these days, being out in the country and so on.

It was the action of the blades themselves she liked, the silvery grinding. It sort of set your teeth on edge, but at the same time it was sort of exciting. You wanted it to stop, but you wanted it to start again as soon as it stopped.

The other nice thing about scissors was the way they were just cause and effect. You closed your hand and the blades closed too. When the blades closed, they cut whatever was between them. They did not have to think about it or wonder if they were doing the right thing. They just cut.



The top of the quilt, the patchwork part, was nearly finished. She flipped it out on the sewing table to admire it. One thousand and fifty-four pieces. It had taken her nearly a year because she had picked a very complicated pattern, a variation on Jacob's Ladder that she had found in a book. It was all squares, really, just different sizes. She loved squares. They were so snug and tight. There was no slipperiness. They enclosed all that was inside them. There was no danger of anything getting out. Now she would attach the last block, sixteen little tiny squares that had been stitched together—by hand, naturally—until they made another, larger square, which in turn formed part of an even larger square.

She could hear Palmer's sheep, their indignant cries carrying down the hill, over the backyards of Karakarook South. But when she looked out the window there was nothing to make them indignant: they were just moving, the way they always did, pointlessly, back the other way across the side of the hill. Above them the sky was hard and white.

City people got all romantic about the countryside, but countryside was something sweet and green out of a book. This hard dry fly-blown place was not what anyone had in mind as *countryside*.

It was still only eleven o'clock. There were times when she felt herself swelling like a balloon into the vacuum of her days.

On the knocker, Freddy Chang had said, and she had laughed, just out of politeness, really, and said it too, *On the knocker*. That was when he had winked, as if saying *on the knocker* had somehow given something away. Not that she had anything to hide.

The carcasses were really rather rude. It did not seem right to have them hanging up there on their hooks. The lambs especially. Without their wool and their skin they were rather suggestive. The way their legs hung open. They way they were so thoroughly naked. Human beings were quite different, of course, but all the same the flushed red look of the carcasses made you, well, think of a flushed red, well, *thing*. They had that same look: flayed.

He had a way of leaning over the counter towards you, between the cash register and the big silver scales. *Mrs. Porcelline*, he would say in that silky way, so her name was a hiss. He leaned right over. Close enough to touch, although he never had.

Felicity did not like it, having another person so close to her. The feeling of the heat coming off another body, the little electricity of its nearness, the molecules drawing towards each other, made her feel grubby and muddled. The thing was, if you got too close to another body you could not be sure whether it was their heat or your own that you were feeling.

It might look racist to move back, though, so Felicity did not move back. What can I do for you, Mrs. Porcelline?

She could feel each little word as a separate little puff of air against her face. There was a dark mole just under one of his eyes. It made him look as if he had eye make-up on. Plus, he had those peculiar Chinese eyes with the little flap of skin on the inner corner. But if she stared it might look racist, as if she thought he was funny-looking. On the other hand, if she did not make eye contact, that might look racist too.

Sometimes things got complicated.

One way and another, it meant you were very close, looking into his eyes in quite a concentrated sort of way. The mole under his eye gave him a smudged, bedroom sort of look. Intimate. And if you glanced away from so much eye contact, you could see his chest, very close up, all the way from his neck down to where the counter came and hid—well—what was further down, waiting in the darkness of his pants. She cleared her throat, took a needleful of even stitches, pulled them through the fabric. She thought the Muller thread was superior to the Detterham. The Detterham was inclined to tangle on you. She took another needleful and pulled it smoothly through. See? No tangles.



The thing was, when he said *On the knocker*, Felicity had straight away thought, *knockers*, and had suddenly been overly aware of her own *knockers*, under the nice little pink top, pointing themselves boldly in the direction of Freddy Chang's gaping shirt. They were not big, as *knockers* went, but when he said that, they suddenly seemed to swell until they took up all the space between them.

She felt a little private pulse when she thought of it. It was almost like needing to go to the toilet. She knew that little private pulse. It was the one that went with all her *little awkwardnesses*.

But this was not going to become an *awkwardness*. It was simply a matter of being in control. You thought about something else, that was all. There was a lot you could think about. Thread, for example. You could think for a long time about the way you poked the needle through the fabric and it disappeared, and then it came up again, further along, carrying its little load of thread. And then you pulled it though. See? Easy.

Freddy Chang lived above the shop. He had told her that one day, out of the blue.

I've got my quarters upstairs, he had said, leaning towards her over the counter, and she had nodded and smiled, confused, thinking he meant *quarters* in the sense of *hindquarters* or *forequarters*.

Your quarters, she repeated.

He went on staring from his funny eyes, and to fill up some of the space between them she went on wildly.

Beef or lamb?

He laughed as if he thought she had made a joke, so naturally she had laughed too.

Upstairs in his *quarters*, his sheets would have that musty, pelty, animal smell that bachelor's sheets always had. Gritty, too. You would feel the grit under your body, being ground into the skin of your back as you lay there. If you, you know, happened to be, well, lying there.

Stiff patches, too probably, where he had you-know-what-ed. She imagined him as a big you-know-what-er. They were well known for their . . . appetites. They were famous for appetites. Doing it upside down and back to front. Or was that the Indians? The white slave trade. *A taste for white meat*, she heard herself think, and suppressed the thought.

She pushed her hair back behind her ear and blinked once or twice. It was the only problem with the hand sewing, the way it could make you frown. The patchwork was nearly finished and she was not going to think any more about Freddy Chang and how many times a day he might you-know-what.



The rest of the day, the rest of the week, the rest of her life lined itself up before her. Each minute, each day, each year, was lined up tidily into the distance. There were times when she felt the rooms of her house surrounding her like bodyguards. The *Sewing Room*. The *Living Room*. The *Dining Room*. They watched her, silent and smug.

A huge yawn welled up from deep in her chest, as if to engulf it all.

It had been like this in the Assistant Manager's office in David Jones and Sons, the day of the little awkwardness. She could remember the carpet, grey with a little red fleck so as not to show the dirt, and a square indentation where the desk leg must have been moved. There had been an African violet on the desk that had been watered from the top so its leaves were rotting. She had mentioned it to the Assistant Manager at the time, that African violets had to be watered from the bottom, but he had not seemed to hear, although she had told him twice.

He had had a hairy mole on his ear that should have been plucked, really. Dealing with the public. The public should not have to put up with a hairy mole like that.

The silence had gone on and on, and she had got sick of it.

She was sick of this one, too.

She was not aware of having picked up the big Solingens. They were the biggest scissors in the collection, shears powerful enough to cut through anything. They were in her hand now, her thumb through the thumb hole, her fingers through the finger-hole.

They felt dangerous in her hand. You could not be too careful when you had scissors near fabric. A little slip could be the end of everything. She put them down on the table. That felt safer. But the blades were a little ajar. She picked them up again and snipped them closed.

The boy would be bringing the chicken today, as well as the other things. That had been awful, asking for the chicken. Her fingers gripped the shears, trying not to remember.

I'll have some chicken, Mr. Chang, please, she had said, and straight away he had come back at her.

Breasts, Mrs. Porcelline?

The normal thing would have been to smile politely.

Oh, a few legs, please Mr Chang, she could have said, or, I think we might try the Maryland today.

But somehow, on the word breasts she had felt the laugh coming again, the laugh she did with Freddy Chang, and she squashed it, and what came out instead was a ghastly sort of hoot. *Hooo! Hoohoo!* It was the laugh getting its own back. It would have been better to let it out. *Laugh and the world laughs with you.* That would have been alright. They could have had a laugh together, and then she could have said about the Maryland. *Laugh and the world laughs with you, cry and you cry alone.*

There did not seem to be a category for hooting.

So Freddy had leaned over the counter then, leaned more than he had ever leaned before. He was wearing his big striped apron so she could not see the skin of his chest, but she knew it was there. He leaned over, and actually took her arm. She felt his big fleshy hand, warm and powerful, wrap itself around her forearm.

I've got a couple of lovely little breasts you could have, Mrs. Porcelline, he said.

He gave her arm a squeeze, as if she was one of those old-fashioned car horns.

Melts in the mouth, Mrs. Porcelline, he said, and kept on watching her.

She smiled desperately. Doing that hoot had paralyzed her. All she could think of now were her *knockers*, melting in Freddy Chang's mouth.

There seemed to be someone in the Sewing Room with her, moaning, but it was not herself, Felicity Porcelline, wife of the manager of the Karakarook branch of the Land & Pastoral Bank, wife and mother, conscientious quilter. That particular Felicity Porcelline seemed to have removed herself from the scene, leaving someone who was not Felicity Porcelline, exactly, but who was nevertheless operating the mechanism of Felicity Porcelline's arm, Felicity Porcelline's leg, Felicity Porcelline's face.

She sucked in air so sharply between her teeth so that it hurt, and in the moment of the pain she squeezed her hand shut. She could feel the Solingens close smoothly, biting through the patchwork so cleanly it was as if there was nothing between the blades.

She opened her eyes. Three small squares were sliced clean across. They had turned into funny shapes, spilling out of themselves.

She opened the scissors again, closed them around the next few squares. The scissors were so sharp she hardly had to try. It was almost not her doing it. It was almost as if the scissors were simply doing it, themselves. Her hand and the scissors were not two things, *me* and *not-me*, but just one thing, taking charge.

It was fascinating, watching the squares turn into something else. Every rectangle turned into a different pair of shapes, each one splitting open in a different geometry. She could not wait to see what would happen to each square as the jaws of the blades approached it, opened on it, bit it in two.

The fabric fell away from either side of the blade and as she moved along faster a fissure of table-top opened up behind her hand. It was wonderful, the way the scissors left the cut in their wake. The table was there all the time, just waiting underneath for the thing covering it to be sliced open. There it was, the wood grain, coming out from under the fabric. And *there*, and *there*.

When she had cut all the way to the top she took the two big pieces she had made and twirled one around. She hardly waited for it to stop moving before she cut across it. Again the tidy squares split open, again the grain of the table was exposed like a magician's trick.

The rhythm of hand in scissors, scissors in hand, pulsing across the fabric, was the most natural thing in the world. It was like breathing. She loved the rumble of the blades over the wood of the table-top. They sliced and sliced and never tired, and every shape that was there before was transformed by the passage of the blade into something different, something open, reckless, greedy.

She only stopped when there were no more shapes to open. In heaps on the table and all around her feet were shards of Jacob's Ladder. The scissors were still in her hand, still hungry. She turned to the window with some vague idea of curtains. It was important not to stop, to let the silence flow

back in again. But the curtains were flimsy things, gauzy and unsatisfying. She snipped in a half-hearted way, and stopped.

Out beyond the curtains, Palmer's sheep were standing in the paddock, each one making its own little tight black shadow under itself. They were all looking the same way, but there was nothing worth looking at.

Beside the house, out in the street, a truck was sliding silently down the road and coming to a stop outside her house. And there he was, Freddy Chang, coming up the path with her meat in a box on his shoulder. Her *forequarters*, her *hindquarters*. Her *rump* and her *loins*. Her *thighs*, her *shoulders*, and her *breasts*. And Freddy Chang, his black hair sucking up the sunlight, his powerful hand gripping the side of the box, his free hand reaching out to ring her bell.