

# For Sale: A Past Life

By Mary Howley

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'The carpet could be pulled up,' Barry says as he bounces on the carpet. The floorboards underneath make a painful squeak. They must be as arthritic as my knees.

'Caro, I reckon the boards might be alright.' His eyes are seriously intense.

I jerk my neck. Caro? Did he call me Caro? Do all real estate agents have this instant familiarity with their clients?

Bazza, the name's Caroline, I correct him in my mind as I inhale the stale mustiness of the old house. Hmm, Mum used to walk around this house spraying magnolia air freshener. It could do with a spray now.

'Just a sand n' polish and the floorboards will look pretty spiffy.' Barry's shaved scalp is as shiny as Mum's stainless-steel kitchen sink used to be.

'So, Barry, is the price negotiable?' I'm doing my best to fake it.

His face tightens. 'You could put in a lower offer, but ... I can't guarantee anything.' Beads of sweat form on his forehead; his suit is about two sizes too small. I know he needs this sale. Things are tight in the housing market. I really shouldn't be here, giving him the impression that he's got a possible buyer.

I walk into the room that used to be my bedroom, recalling where all of the furniture used to be. Bed here, doll's cot there, white Queen Anne dressing table there by that wall. I could hear my five-year-old self, 'Hey Mum who's Queen Anne?'

'Three big-sized bedrooms,' Barry says shadowing me as I walk from room to room. I stop abruptly at Mum and Dad's bedroom door. Barry almost collides into the back of me. I'm remembering how their whispers used

to drift through my fairy-floss-pink bedroom wall. Most nights as I lay cocooned in my bed, I could hear their muffled laughter and then shortly after, I'd hear Dad's gurgling snores.

Mum used to say that we were lucky. 'Can't get better than this,' she'd say referring to her life – our life, together, here. Dad used to kiss her and then he'd pretend he was going to eat her cheek. My brother and I would put our hands over our eyes, feigning disgust at their affection for one another. We'd scream, 'Yuck! You two are gross!'

I walk out of Mum and Dad's room and into what used to be my brother's room. Shane used to have a train set circling the floor until Mum stepped on it in the dark when she'd come in to wish him good night. Shane cried for hours. The train tracks were forever wonky after that.

Barry nods his head, navigating the floor plan. But I know it better than him.

'Lounge room is huge,' he says. 'You could have a few parties here.'

And my parents did ... oh shit! I'm wearing shoes on the carpet.

'Shoes at the door!' Mum used to command, her arm waving towards the front door. 'No shoes on my carpet.'

My eyes sweep around the empty room. It looks unloved and ... so much smaller than I remember. Right there in front of the window was where we'd position the spindly-silver Christmas tree. I place my hands in my pockets, because my fingers threaten to point the spot to Barry. All through December, Mum used to have the beige lace curtains gaping open, ensuring the neighbours noticed the heavily decorated tree.

'Kitchen's got that retro look everyone's mad for it,' Barry says pointing to the burnt-orange tiles. Hell! Are they still there? Dad was swearing like crazy the day he stuck those above the kitchen sink. The cheap adhesive he'd bought was – according to him, 'bloody useless.'

'Now kids don't jump around 'cos they'll fall like dominos,' he'd warned. My brother and I giggled behind our starfish hands at the white adhesive streaks all over his raven-black hair. I was wearing my pink Barbie pyjamas, goose-bumps all over my straw-thin arms, as the rain tapped on the terracotta roof tiles. Shane wore his Mickey Mouse pyjamas, the ones that hung limp around his skinny thighs.

I walk back to the lounge room and stand in the middle of the room. This was where the wooden coffee-table with the cigarette burns, used to be. Mum said it was a wild New Year's Eve party the night that Uncle Charlie, who was described by Mum as being 'drunk as a skunk', had scorched the table by butting his cigarette onto it. He hadn't realised that Mum had picked up the ash-tray and taken it to Uncle Terry, who was smoking on the back veranda. I'm guessing that the record player was probably spinning Dad's favourite tune which was, Roy Orbison's 'Only the Lonely' – hell, now it's playing in my head.

Barry walks to the wire back door, where Shane and I used to kneel, hoping to catch the first cool breeze after those stinking hot January days. He turns his rotund head to face me as he speaks.

'Just need to let you know that there has been a lot of interest in this house. The block's massive, half an acre in all, if you demolish this old house you could build four units here ... easy.'

I nod silently, observing that Barry has taken the marketing push a notch higher. The desperation in his voice plucks at my guilt, I really shouldn't be wasting his time. Walking out to the backyard, I'm aghast at the clumps of thistles that have conquered what used to be a pristine lawn and garden. Every Saturday morning Dad mowed the lawn, manoeuvring the lawn mower with such reverence that it reminded me of a doting parent pushing a pram. Shane and I would cling onto the Hills Hoist and swing round and round, till Dad

would turn off the mower and yell at us to get off the clothes line.

My eyes search for any traces of the fruit trees that used to be growing along the back wooden fence. Walking closer to the fence I almost trip over the tree stumps that are concealed by the weeds. And then I realise that these stumps are the ghosts of what was once a flourishing orchard. It was right here that I spent my tenth birthday, sitting in the fork of the nectarine tree, biting into the ripe fruit and licking the sticky juice that trickled down my wrist.

'Hey, Caro, check out the lemon tree,' Barry says, pointing to the only tree that's still standing.

I smile as Mum's voice rings in my head. 'Shane, go pick me a few lemons, will ya, love. Uncle Charlie's brought flathead. We'll have it for dinner.' Her voice from the grave.

The passionfruit has spread profusely over the back wooden fence. It was only a sapling, all those years ago, thin-tentacle like tendrils just beginning to creep into the cracks between the palings. That's where Dad was standing, coiling the garden hose around his arm, when the police came.

Mum was standing at the kitchen window. 'He's gone,' she'd muttered over and over. 'My Shaney's gone.'

Barry's watching me and I feel an urgent need to explain to him about what happened to Shane but I can't verbalise it because it's still so bloody raw. I want to tell him that Shane had gone rabbit hunting a week after he got his car licence, driving Dad's Holden. He was bursting with excitement early that morning, while Mum made him sandwiches and I stirred his Milo in the saucepan over the stove. He'd turned eighteen the week before. Couldn't wait to go shooting; he was picking up the cousins – they were bringing the beers.

I'm remembering Dad's voice: 'When did he grow into a man?' He'd said that as we all watched Shane drive off with Uncle Terry's ferrets in the boot of the car and Dad's shot gun in the back seat. Huh, no seat belts in those days. He might have survived the crash if he was wearing one.

I'm trying not to cry as I walk back into the house. The thumping of doors greets me as Barry stands in the laundry, muttering something about laundry cupboards being cheap at Bunnings.

'This'd be a good renter, you'd make good money out of it.' He says, 'It's in a good location.'

I take the floor-plan brochure from Barry, leaving him to turn off the lights and lock up. Meanwhile I'm back in my car. I had to see the house one last time, but now my festering heart-wound is starting to bleed. The black hole of depression is always at the surface; I don't want to fall in.

Barry's walking on the cracked, concreted driveway. He's got a skip in his step; I'm guessing he thinks that he's got a sale. I start my car and take one long look at the house. Countless other owners and hundreds of footprints after my family had moved away and the house remained, guarding our secrets. I take one last look and wave goodbye to Barry and to the old house – the place that's anchored my past. ⑩

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**Mary Howley worked as a teacher and interior designer before she began studying in the Professional Writing and Editing course at RMIT. She has had fiction and non-fiction stories published in magazines such as 'The Foothills', 'MiNDFOOD' and 'Country Style'.**

**Recently she worked in a restaurant and events venue, which gave her the idea for a crime fiction novel she is writing.**