Sunny Afternoon

GWEN KELLY

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Always Afternoon

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In the afternoon they came unto a land
In which it seemed always afternoon.

The Lotus-Eaters
ALFRED, LORD TENNYSON

COLLINS
AUSTRALIA

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First published in hardback by William Collins Pty Ltd,
55 Clarence Street, Sydney, NSW 2000, in 1981

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Gwen Kelly was born in the Sydney suburb of Thornleigh. She attended Fort Street Girls' High and later Sydney University, from which she graduated with first-class honours in 1944.

Since then she has divided her time between her family, a busy teaching career and her writing. She has written three other successful novels and her short stories have won her wide acclaim. She is the only Australian writer to have won the Henry Lawson Award for Prose three times.

This novel is dedicated to my husband, Maurice Kelly, in gratitude for the hours he spent translating into English the journal of the German prisoners at Trial Bay, *Welt am Montag*.

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Chapter One

Mary Kennon was polishing the silver in the house at Arakoon. It was a large kitchen. A line of windows ran along one wall opening on to the pillared verandah. Through the cream lace curtains, dyed in weak tea by her mother Nancy, Mary could see the gum trees stretching beyond the garden to the headland, where the old gaol stood above the ocean. In the foreground the bauhinia dropped pastel petals over the lawn. It was spring, 1915.

'I wonder what the German prisoners will be like,' she said. Her mother, haloed by the steam of the ironing, replied dryly, 'Apart from your father's bread deliveries, they're not likely to bother us.'

'Mrs Fenton says they might escape and massacre the lot of us.'

'Don't be silly, Mary.' Her mother sighed. 'I'm too busy to be teased with gossip.'

But they might, even so, thought Mary. She sat at the wooden table scoured white with sandsoap, rubbing the teapots, the tea stands and the coffee service. She felt at peace, for she liked polishing silver, catching in the gleam of metal her own soft face, her waving fair hair. She felt no vanity, merely a calm satisfaction that she was pretty rather than ugly. She smiled. Freda, she feared, was vain. Only last week she had caught her posturing naked in front of the glass in her bedroom, a pale body, barely out of childhood, crowned by her pale hair. Freda stood on the tips of her toes with her arms stretched high towards the ceiling so that the small, firm

breasts rose sharply above the firm stomach and the neat triangle of golden hair. Mary felt love and amusement, but she knew their father would not be amused; he demanded modesty in women. Freda had grinned at her.

'Don't tell me you're shocked, Mary.'

'If I were you, I'd get my clothes on quickly before Mother or Father catches you.' She had spoken sharply, for she was not shocked and Freda's presumption irritated her. She had added, almost spitefully, 'Look at your feet for a change.' Freda burst into tears. She had become so sensitive about references to her long mouth, long feet and long hands. Mary thought as she gave a jug an extra hard rub, 'A fine nurse you'll make, Miss Kennon!' To think she had always prided herself on her tact and sympathy.

The huge fuel stove gleamed within the alcove. Ailsa and Mother had blacked it only yesterday. It was a messy job, one she hated although she had done it many times. She disliked dirty jobs, but she tried to hide her distaste, because a Christian should serve where needed, not pick and choose. She looked at her mother changing her iron for the one on top of the stove. She ran it along a cake of washing soap to clean the surface. Mother never seemed to be ruffled by dirty jobs, and Ailsa was the same, even if she finished with smudges all over her face. Mother remained spotless. She hardly needed the hessian apron she wore for hard work. Only the roughness of her hands bore the marks of housework, where the skin of her fingers was ridged like the rings in a tree, to separate the years of raising children, one from another. Mary felt warm when she looked at her. She loved Nancy.

Nancy unrolled a white linen cloth and ran the iron vigorously along the first crease. 'That fixes you,' she said firmly. Mary smiled.

Above the stove dangled the frilly edges of the shelf paper. It was Freda's job to cut the holes and zigzag the edges, a job Freda liked, praise the Lord. Freda was so cranky about jobs she hated. Pinned to the centre of the lintel behind Nancy's head was an illustrated poem. Mary read it automatically, for she knew the words by heart. It had hung there all her childhood.

'Laugh and the world laughs with you,
Weep, and you weep alone;

For the sad old earth must borrow its mirth,
But has trouble enough of its own.'

Mary looked at the almost girlish lines of her mother's face framed by the neatly braided brown hair. Mother looked pretty in spite of the dullest garments. Nancy held firm views about materials and styles suitable for a matron; but her brown hair fluffed in curls round her oval face, defeating her attempts to repress it.

'Why are they sending the prisoners of war to Trial Bay?'

'I suppose,' Nancy said, 'it is getting too crowded at Holdsworthy.'

'I heard,' said Mary, 'they were the troublemakers down there. As if we don't have troubles enough of our own with the Gallipoli campaign.'

'People will say anything,' said Nancy.

The poem on the lintel was Nancy's poem. She liked to scatter inspiring verses round the house. On the opposite wall hung an oblong, wooden-framed text. It was embroidered along the borders of its fawn linen face with mauve and yellow pansies. 'GOD IS LOVE' read the satin stitched capitals. Simple but right. The inner prop of all Nancy's beliefs. 'For He walks with me, and He talks with me,' sang Nancy and she knew it was true.

In the lavatory, the honeysuckle'd box a hundred feet down the back path, she had hung Mr Kipling's 'If' as an inspiration to the boys. Bill Kennon had, at first, protested. 'It's blasphemous to put it there.' But Nancy had laughed. 'It can't be blasphemous because Mr Kipling's words are not sacred. If we're going to spend so many hours sitting in that place, we may as well have something decent to read other than Saturday's paper.'

That had floored Father, for they all knew he spent half an hour in the dunny every Sunday morning with Saturday's magazine section. They did not buy Sunday papers on principle.

'You'll be a man, my son!' Brave words.

Nancy was now humming as she ironed. Did she weep alone? Mary wondered. She remembered the taut lines of her face when the news of Anzac came through, but she had kept smiling even then, just as she had smiled when Greg and John

marched away to fulfil the destiny she had placed before them in the lavatory. Greg, the eldest son, her own mate, her mother's favourite, even though she never said so. But she did not mind. She was her father's darling daughter, his first-born child. The certainty of her father's love filled her with a deep content, and in the final count, Mother loved them all. They were reared to respect both parents and one another. They had been so happy here at Arakoon, until that awful day in August last year. Mother and Dad had been upset when John enlisted with the others. He was only just eighteen, Ailsa's twin.

'Surely one is enough for any family to give,' Bill had said. 'Wait a year, son.' But John had gone out that afternoon and enlisted. Nancy understood and so did Mary. It would have been better if Father had said nothing, for John hated to think he was left out. His friend Bob Greenwood had volunteered and, in a way, he was John's real brother. Bob had boarded with the Kennons while at secondary school, for he came originally from the timber country and rarely saw his father. His mother had died when he was small, and he loved Nancy as if she were his own mother. After leaving school he stayed in Kempsey to learn carpentry, spending nearly all his spare time at Arakoon. He had sat with them in church, swum with them at Little Bay, and finally, to John's annoyance, had begun to court Freda, a mere kid; but the war had put an end to romance for the moment. The Schriebers, Tom and Erich had also joined up, even though their parents were German.

Nancy said, 'I heard Kurt Schrieber was rude to Sergeant Brown the other day. Pieter and Ted had more sense. I hope they don't intern him. He has been rather strange since Marta died.'

'Surely not,' said Mary. 'The boys are fighting with the AIF.'

'Governments don't always act rationally,' said Nancy.

Mary looked thoughtfully at the pink-petalled lawn. Her thoughts were not with Kurt Schrieber. It was not fair to expect John to stay, and it would not be fair to expect her to stay. She was determined to join the VADs. Father would, of course, resist. He believed girls should help at home till they married. 'Mother has her hands full with cooking and cleaning,' he would say, 'not to mention her war work. She needs you.'

But she had heard the call as clearly as a nun. She had been sitting beside Mother in church. The pastor had taken as his text: 'And Jesus answered and said unto her, Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things. But one thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen the good part which shall not be taken away from her.'

Nancy Kennon looked at her daughter's fair head bent over the silver. A soft, obedient girl, and yet, she had a will which did not falter, once she was sure of her desire. Nancy ran her iron over the tea towels and watched the deft fingers moving over the silver. Fine things. They went with Mary. If only she would fall in love and settle down near home, but she remained heart-free at twenty-two. She, Nancy, had married at twenty.

Mary's eyes were lost in the far distance. Freda could take her place. She was quite old enough. Monday's child is fair of face. That was Freda. And yet there was no reason why the fair should be excused from duties. She might even enjoy more responsibility. You never knew with Freda. She felt at times as if they lived in different worlds. On Freda's birthday last year, Mary had given her an autograph book. She had painted a spray of pink briar roses on a blue page and had written, 'Be good, sweet maid, and let who can be clever.' She murmured the rest of the verses to herself. 'Do lovely things, don't dream them, all day long.' She wanted Freda to strive for the best in life, because she loved her above all her brothers and sisters, but Freda had read the verse slowly, half-aloud, then said, 'Thanks Mary. It's lovely. I wish I could paint like you.'

'I hope you like the poem,' she had said, disentangling herself from Freda's arms.

'It's very elevating,' she had replied politely.

'But you don't like it?'

'Not exactly,' Freda had said.

'Why?'

'It sounds more like you than me,' said Freda. 'You *will* do good and noble things, I'm sure of that, but . . .' she clenched her long-fingered hands, 'well . . .I'm different, that's all.'

'What poem would you write?' Mary had asked aggressively. She was offended and showed it. Freda hesitated, shrugged, then, looking straight at Mary recited,

'For lust of knowing what should not be known,
We take the Golden Road to Samarkand.'

Mary had been shocked. That was the sin of Eve. Forbidden knowledge, and in a way, pride. It was Satan's sin too.

'Where did you learn that?' she asked.

'Miss Amos sent me a new book of Flecker's poetry last Christmas.'

Mary nodded. 'That fits.' Miss Amos, Freda's English teacher, had never recovered from the shock of Freda's leaving school at fourteen. She had since moved to Sydney, but still kept in touch. A book, a note at Christmas, nothing more; but it was enough to keep Freda lighthearted for days afterwards. Freda had loved school.

In spite of her desire to banish them, the lines had remained in her mind, a taunting counterpoint to life nobly led.

'I sent Freda down to the beach with the children,' said Nancy, folding the sheets. 'The mothers are resting. She's really good with children.'

'She likes it better than housework,' said Mary dryly.

'True,' said Nancy, 'but someone has to mind them.'

'Mother,' said Mary suddenly, 'I'm going to join the VAD's. I've already spoken to Mrs Gentle at the Red Cross meeting.'

Nancy put down her iron.

Ailsa Kennon shook her head fiercely to force back the length of black hair that had fallen across her face. Her hands grasped a wooden stick on which a steaming sheet hung precariously between the frothing copper and the blue water in the wash tub. Her straight thick brows, as dark as her hair, were knitted in concentration, so that she appeared to be frowning. The tip of her tongue protruded between the lips of a firm, straight mouth. Ailsa (a throwback, they said, to her paternal grandmother) was a stocky girl with strong arms like the baker, her father. The stick, with its load of wet linen, did not waver. The fire beneath the copper glowed scarlet. It was hot in the wash house, and the steam condensed on her face and on the unlined weatherboard walls. She was glad she had put on a gingham frock. It was cooler than a blouse and skirt. Its deep brown tonings caught the richness of her brown eyes, but Ailsa never chose a frock for that reason. Not like Freda. But then, she was

not like Mary or Freda. They were golden and white and feminine, a quality Ailsa despised, even though she loved her big sister and tolerated her younger one.

She enjoyed the challenge of the heavy job. 'Trust me to be Saturday's child,' she had said once; and her habit of retailing the burdens of her tasks as she worked, had led her father to exclaim on one occasion: 'Poor old Ailsa, the beast of burden. No one loves her.' But they were wrong. She did not mind working. The harder the task, the more she liked it.

These days, hard work was a blessing. It meant less time to worry. John, of course, was her special worry. He was the reverse image of herself, another Ailsa, fair and masculine, to offset the Ailsa who was dark and feminine. How she envied him 'the great adventure'. If only she had been a boy. She could have faced a battlefield with the best of them. She sighed and slid another sheet into the water. Her work was heavy this spring. There were several boarders, women with husbands in the forces who needed a holiday. 'Nancy's personal war effort,' her father called them. She, herself, always thought of The War Effort in capitals. She would do anything to defeat Germany. She hated the very name. How dare the Government dump their rotten prisoners at Trial Bay! Nearly all the families on the bay had sons at Anzac Cove. It was insulting.

'I shall dislike the lot of them,' she muttered. 'If I were a boy, I'd shoot them willingly.' She wrung the edge of a sheet in her hands as if it were the neck of a prisoner.

She was a strong girl. 'My other cobber', her father called her. She could run and climb and swim as well as the boys; and she could handle the horse and cart as well as Father. Tom, Greg and Mary made up one group; John, Erich, Bob and herself another. In the beginning, Freda had tagged along in the rear, an unwanted kid striving to keep up with them. 'Wait for monkey face,' her father had commanded, and they didn't dare to say no.

Later, Freda was part of the group in her own right, because Bob Greenwood got soppy about her; and all the boys liked her except John, who said she was still a snooty kid whatever the others thought.

Funny how Dad called Freddie 'monkey face'. She had never seen anyone less like a monkey than her baby sister. Ever since

she could remember she had been silver fair with dark brows, and eyes that were neither blue nor green. But Dad swore she looked just like a monkey when he first saw her, all mouth and hands and feet.

Ailsa forced the sheets through the wringer automatically. Through the window she could see the shed for the horse and cart, flanked on either side by a large white cart wheel. She and John had painted them for Father's birthday, when they were little more than ten. There was a donkey and a large black cat stretched beside the chicken coop, half asleep. Around the outer yard, a few hens scratched listlessly, while a Jersey cow poked her head over the fence in search of grass. There were also a couple of ducklings destined for the Christmas table. She sniffed the farm odours with satisfaction and they came to her mingled with the scent of bread from the bake-house on the far side of the house.

In the gum tree behind the courtyard, the tree-house still hung. The very sight of it recalled the smell of newsprint; local papers, and comics and romances sent by Uncle Tom who worked as a packer in a Sydney publishing house; and the doggy smell of boys.

Erich Schrieber had always been her beau at school, but nothing soppy. She was not like Freda, who began kissing boys like Robbie Fenton on the way home from school when she was six. In secondary classes she and Erich sometimes sat together for choir and assembly and some kids were surprised when he wanted to carry her case. She was such a tomboy and no good at school, whereas Erich was a swot who passed his leaving at sixteen and went to Sydney to become a teacher. Greg could have got his leaving too, but Dad insisted he help in the bakery. Mother was furious but Greg didn't mind. Greg was clever, but he was not a natural whizz at school like Freda, who collected an armful of prizes at the end of every year. 'Got to get books from somewhere,' she had said when they teased her.

Ailsa sighed aloud. 'I wish we could convert Erich to our faith.' No real Protestant ever married a Catholic, the pastor had said, because they wanted you to turn and, even if you didn't, the children had to be christened in the Roman Catholic Church or else the priests would pester you year in