

JUDITH CLARKE was born in Sydney and educated at the University of New South Wales and the Australian National University in Canberra. She has worked as a teacher and librarian, and in adult education in Victoria and New South Wales.

Judith's novels include the popular *Al Capsella* series; *Friend of My Heart*, which was shortlisted in the 1995 Children's Book Council of Australia Book of the Year Awards; *Night Train*, Honour Book in the 1999 CBCA Book of the Year Awards; and *Wolf on the Fold*, Winner of the 2001 CBCA Book of the Year Award for older readers. *Kalpana's Dream* was an Honor book in the 2005 Boston Globe–Horn Book Awards for Excellence in Children's Literature in the Fiction and Poetry category.

Judith's books have been published in the United States and Europe to high acclaim.

JUDITH CLARKE

ONE
WHOLE
AND PERFECT
DAY


ALLEN & UNWIN

This project has been assisted by the Australian Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body. Judith Clarke would like to thank the Literature Board of the Australia Council for the New Work Grant that covered the period during which *One Whole and Perfect Day* and *Kalpana's Dream* were written.



First published in 2006

Copyright © Judith Clarke

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or by any information storage and retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publisher. The *Australian Copyright Act 1968* (the Act) allows a maximum of one chapter or ten per cent of this book, whichever is the greater, to be photocopied by any educational institution for its educational purposes provided that the educational institution (or body that administers it) has given a remuneration notice to Copyright Agency Limited (CAL) under the Act.

Allen & Unwin
83 Alexander St
Crows Nest NSW 2065
Australia
Phone: (61 2) 8425 0100
Fax: (61 2) 9906 2218
Email: info@allenandunwin.com
Web: www.allenandunwin.com

National Library of Australia
Cataloguing-in-Publication entry:
Clarke, Judith, 1943- .
One whole and perfect day
ISBN 978 1 74114 856 5.
ISBN 1 74114 856 1.
I. Title.
A823.3

Cover and text design by Ellie Exarchos
Cover image from The Image Bank/Getty Images (tbc)
Typeset in 10.5 pt Apollo by Midland Typesetters
Printed in Australia by McPherson's Printing Group

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

References:

Mr Lee's recollected lines from Shakespeare are from *King John*: Act III, Scene IV, and *King Lear*: Act I, Scene IV, from *The Tudor Edition of Shakespeare, The Complete Works*, Collins, London and Glasgow, 1951
Mrs Nightingale's readings from Robert Burns are from *The Complete Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, Geddes and Grosset, David Hale House, New Lanark, Scotland, 2000
Jessaline's recipes are taken from *The Alice B. Toklas Cook Book*, Brilliance Books, London 1983

Teachers' notes available from www.allenandunwin.com

*To dear Ted,
for knowing how to laugh J.C.*

Also by Judith Clarke

Angels Passing By

Night Train

The Lost Day

The Heroic Life of Al Capsella

Al Capsella and the Watchdogs

Al Capsella on Holidays

Friend of My Heart

The Boy on the Lake

Panic Stations

The Ruin of Kevin O'Reilly

Luna Park at Night

Big Night Out

Wolf on the Fold

Starry Nights

Kalpana's Dream

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My heartfelt thanks to: my dear editors, Erica and Sue, and my long-suffering agent, Margaret Connolly.

To my sister and her family.

To Frances; and Nanny Floyd; Neema and Reis; Geraldine and Salim; Kishore and Rosevita; Arthur and Michèle; Jayant and Sunanda; Sandra James; the librarians of the Mt Waverley Library; the ladies of the Fleet Street Walking Group (especially the ones at the back); to the remarkable Powerhouse Neighbourhood Centre and Fay, Monica, Carol and the redoubtable Sandra.

To Wendy in Jerusalem.

PROPER FAMILIES

Every day on her way home from school, Lily dawdled in the quiet streets and avenues of her neighbourhood, gazing through the windows of the houses at the families inside. She saw kids watching TV and doing their homework and playing computer games; she saw mums and dads talking and laughing together, chopping vegetables in their kitchens, stirring pots on the stove. Proper families, Lily would think to herself, they're proper families.

Not like hers. She had no dad for a start; he'd bolted back home to America when Lily had been no larger than a plum pip deep inside her mother. She'd never actually seen her father, and when his phone messages came at Christmas and birthdays, she found she didn't know what to call him: 'Dad' sounded awkward in her mouth, unnatural, like a cold hard pebble rolling behind her teeth. Her brother Lonnie, who'd been almost six when their father had left, experienced no such trouble. 'Oh, hi, Dad,' he'd go, so

confidently, so naturally. 'Oh?', he'd say, and 'Yeah, Dad!', and the very ease with which he spoke the word 'Dad' always gave his sister a small, sharp pang. Even though, on the ordinary days that made up most of her life, Lily rarely gave a conscious thought to her absent father.

Though parties reminded her. Those perfect parties other families seemed to have.

Lily paused on the footpath to let a homecoming car ease into its driveway through gateposts where a clutch of bright balloons fluttered. Their round bright perfection made the breath catch in her throat. She watched the car door open and a man get out and two little kids come racing across the lawn towards him, yelling, 'Daddy! Daddy's home!'

He swept them up, each in turn, and whirled them round in his arms.

For a second, Lily's stomach clenched in longing, and then grew easy again.

Ah well. She hitched her backpack more comfortably across her shoulders and walked on down the street. You can't miss what you've never had, can you? She certainly didn't miss Oliver DeZoto, this guy her mum had married twenty-three years ago.

Plenty of kids had single parent families. Lily knew that, just as she knew it wasn't the absence of a father, or even the smallness of their family (only the three of them – five if you counted Nan and Pop), which marked them out. No, thought Lily irritably, it was the sheer peculiarity of the people in it that made her family not quite right.

First there was Lonnie.

Lonnie. Lily shook her head so hard, so briskly, that tiny little sparks flew from the ends of her dark frizzy curls. The very thought of her hopeless brother made her feel angry, electric, especially on a darkening winter afternoon when there was dinner to get on at home, and tons of homework after.

Forget about Lonnie. She'd think about Mum instead because Mum was okay; a slender woman in her forties with wispy blonde hair pulled back from a delicate face that always seemed to wear an apprehensive expression. The worst you could say about Mum was that she worried about Lonnie too much, and worked too hard. She was a psychologist, she had a doctorate (she was Dr Marigold Samson!) and yet she worked in a daycare centre for the elderly, slaving long long hours for very little pay. Mum could get a better job, Lily was sure of it, yet she persisted in her slavery, bringing home piles of paperwork and sometimes actual people, elderly lame ducks whose carer-children, so Mum said, were quite desperate for a little break.

'A little break!' snorted Lily. Mum was the one who needed a break. Mum was such a softie! She was just like Nan.

A tiny smile tweaked at Lily's lips. Nan! With her small plump figure and soft white hair shaped in a little girl's style (straight around the ears, thick shiny fringe down to her eyebrows), her lavender scent and floral dresses and long droopy cardigans, Lily's Nan looked like a granny from a picture book. Except for one thing: she had an imaginary

companion like little kids sometimes had, a made-up friend called Sef. Sef accompanied Nan most places, round the house and garden, up and down the hilly streets of Katoomba, and Nan held conversations with her, in public, speaking in a low sweet voice, offering confidences and asking Sef's opinion on anything to do with family.

When Lily was little this had seemed quite natural. 'Who's Sef?' she'd asked.

'An old friend, dear.'

'A girl? Is she a girl, Nan?'

'Yes, she is.'

'You can't tell, from that name, can you? You can't tell if she's a boy or girl.'

'No, you can't.'

'And you can't see her. Is she invil, um, invilable?'

'Invisible, dear. Yes, Sef's invisible.'

These days, at sixteen, Lily found her grandmother's companion unsettling. Could Nan – in the nicest possible way, of course – actually be a little bit mad? Though who wouldn't be mad if they'd been married to Pop for over fifty years? Pop was short and loud and sturdy, red-faced even when he wasn't shouting. Pop bristled – he wore his grey hair in the kind of spiky crewcut that reminded you of cops and soldiers and the kind of people who glared at migrants in the street and told them to go back where they came from. Pop had actually been a cop once, though never a soldier because he had flat feet, and Lily thought he was a bit of a racist too, or at least the sort of person who thought a decent Aussie was the best kind of person in the world. Huh!

Lily quickened her step. She was very close to home now; just three more houses and she'd reach the corner of her own street, Roslyn Avenue.

And always, as she reached this corner, Lily suddenly stopped dead. She closed her eyes and counted to five, slowly, before she turned into her street. She knew it was ridiculous, the kind of thing a very little kid would do (like skipping cracks or crossing the road to avoid a black cat in your path), and yet she couldn't stop herself. She *had* to do it, because turning that corner she was always seized by a panic that their house would be gone; nothing left of it except a pile of smoking dust and ashes and a thin trickle of smoke rising up above the trees of Roslyn Avenue, escaping into the pale wide sky.

And this was all Pop's fault. Of course it was. Just as it was his fault that Lonnie had left home last January.

Pop hated their house. He said it was a dump. He said it was unsanitary and falling down, though not falling fast enough for him. 'I could burn it for you,' he kept on offering. 'When you're out, of course. You'd get a fortune for the land, and with the insurance, you could buy yourself a really decent place. Something —' and here he'd give them a long sly grin, 'fit for human habitation . . .'

'He'd never do it,' Mum said, but Lily wasn't quite so sure, because there was something deeply unpredictable about Pop. Hadn't he threatened Lonnie with an axe? Told him that if he dropped out of one more course or one more job, he'd feel the edge of it?

What kind of grandfather was that? Grandfathers were supposed to be kind and understanding, weren't they? Sympathetic to their grandchildren's problems? Lonnie hadn't even done anything. Nothing out of the ordinary, that was; he'd simply been his same old useless self, and all at once Pop had lost his block completely.

'One, two, three, four – five!' counted Lily, and stepped bravely round the corner into Roslyn Avenue, where she saw at once (as she always did, every single afternoon) that the house was still standing. There it was, porch sagging, paint peeling, the windows crowded so thickly with ivy that even at the height of summer there was hardly any light inside.

'Mummy, I want to go home!' the small daughter of a charity collector had bellowed a few days ago, when Mum had asked them into the house while she went in search of her purse. 'This is the Witch's Cottage!'

It *was* like the Witch's Cottage, Lily thought fondly, and yet she loved every crack and cranny of it, every leak and stain. Lonnie loved it too.

'Is that mark on the ceiling of my room still there?' he'd asked last time he'd rung up. 'The one shaped like a cauliflower?'

'Course it is.'

'You know, I really miss it. When I'm lying on my bed, thinking . . .'

And that would be most of the time, thought Lily. Though she didn't say it, because calls from Lonnie were rare.

'And I look up,' he continued, 'and the ceiling's bare. It seems really funny not to see the old cauliflower . . .'

Yes, their house was a dump, thought Lily, forcing the gate open, closing her ears to the unearthly shriek it made scraping across the concrete – but it was dear and familiar too, even if it wasn't proper, and a disgrace to their street. It was theirs and it was home.

THE SENSIBLE ONE OF THE FAMILY

Lily was the sensible one of the family. She always had been. She could write her name and count to fifty before she started school, and even tie her own shoelaces, something her Mum said Lonnie hadn't learned till he was in Grade 3. By age seven she was getting her big brother up for school in the mornings, since he never seemed to hear Mum's pleadings. These days she cooked dinner every second night, made out the shopping list for Saturday, remembered when the car had to be serviced and bills paid.

Yes, she was the sensible one, but there were times (like this evening, alone in the gloomy old kitchen, swinging the fridge door open to gather the ingredients for spaghetti sauce) when Lily wished she wasn't. She wished she was like the other girls in Year 10, like Lizzie Banks or Lara Reid or even awful Tracy Gilman. She wished she could, just once, *enjoy* filling in a quiz from *Bestie* without thinking

it was bullshit, or talk about clothes without suddenly remembering the funny noise the washing machine had started making and how much it might cost to get it fixed.

I'm like someone's *mother*, thought Lily with disgust, as she took carrots and onions and parsley from the vegetable crisper and began to chop; like someone's *nan*. The carrots were old and tough, the knife slid, Lily nicked her finger and felt like crying. Another tiny cut – even her hands didn't look like real girls' hands, covered as they were with tiny cuts and household scratches.

'What do you *do*?' Tracy Gilman had demanded yesterday when the 10B girls, gathered in their special lunchtime place beneath the pepper trees, were comparing the shapes of their fingernails. 'What on earth do you do to get your hands looking so gross?'

'Nothing,' Lily had replied defensively, snatching her hands away. And then, defiantly (because anything was better than saying she did housework), 'I've got a pet piranha.'

Though she did lots of housework, Lily wasn't all that skilled. The most tender meat grew stringy when she cooked it, her gravy had lumps, cheese sauce curdled . . . she wasn't a bit like Nan. Lily pictured her grandmother in the kitchen, busy at her clean scrubbed table, so calm and efficient – perhaps all that housework, years and years and years of it, was responsible for poor old Nan's delusion that she had an imaginary companion. Perhaps one day, not too far down the track, she herself would begin to see another person standing at the kitchen bench beside her, shadowy

at first, and then becoming clearer . . . Lily shivered, the knife slipped again, narrowly missing another finger. She chucked the tough old carrot in the bin and started on the onions. Started, and then, quite suddenly, stopped, flinging the knife down on the bench. Why did everything come down to her?

She knew the answer. Because Mum was overworked, and Lonnie had moved out of home. Though even when he'd lived here, her brother hadn't been much use around the house. He was – well, Lily couldn't think of words for Lonnie, only pictures, tiny incidents that somehow said it all: Lonnie helping her with the shopping one dark wet day last year, snatching the three litre jug of orange juice from the trolley and holding up another brand. '*This one!*'

'What?'

'*P and N!*' He'd pointed to the label.

'*P and N.* So?'

'Don't you get it? Pop and Nan, see?'

He was like a toddler. At the cheese counter he'd taken a fancy to a cheese called *La vache qui rit*.

'But that's cream cheese, Lon. We don't use it. We need ordinary stuff, the sort you use in macaroni cheese.'

He'd pulled a face, toddler-style.

She'd picked up a block of supermarket cheddar. 'This kind, see?'

He'd wagged his head. 'Yeah, but –'

Lily had dropped the block of cheese into the trolley.

'Okay, Lil, you know best, but –'

'But what?'

‘Oh, nothing.’ He’d flicked at the heavy lock of hair that fell across his forehead. It stayed there. He’d flicked again. And again.

‘Oh, leave it!’ hissed Lily.

Outside in the street it was raining. Mum had been home with the flu. Lon had just dropped out of his economics course. The fridge was packing up and the person Lonnie called Dad had forgotten to ring Lily on her birthday. Not that she cared about that – he always did it, forgot and then rang three months later, upsetting her all over again. Once he’d even got her name wrong. He’d called her Lolly. *Lolly!* It was strange how someone you didn’t know could make you feel as if you didn’t matter.

A wind from the Antarctic had scoured their faces as they emerged from the supermarket, and on the median strip in the middle of the highway, perched dangerously between two roaring streams of traffic, Lon had grabbed her arm.

‘We needed something laughing,’ he’d said.

‘What?’

‘That’s why I wanted it, the cream cheese. So there’d be something in the house that laughs. Even if it was only the cow on the cheese packet. “*La vache qui rit.*” ’

She couldn’t help noticing how perfect his accent was, how he’d sounded exactly like Mme Bispin at school. So how come he’d failed his oral French exam back in Year 12? Lonnie was a total mystery. Trucks and cars had roared round their tiny traffic island, the rain had pelted down, Lonnie’s face had gone vague and dreamy, as if his soul had

been beamed up to some distant corner of the universe and only his shell was left here for Lily and Mum to mind. When a break came in the traffic she had to tweak at his arm.

‘C’mon’ she’d said gently, as if he were some frail and helpless creature she’d taken for a walk. ‘C’mon, Lon, let’s go home.’

What would Lon be having for dinner tonight? wondered Lily, dragging herself back into the present, their gloomy kitchen and the spaghetti sauce. Now he no longer shared their life and was out there in the big wide world on his own. Cheeseburgers from the takeaway? Hot chips? Pot noodles warmed in hot water in the kitchen of the boarding house she and Mum had never seen? If it even had a kitchen . . .

She glanced up at the clock. Almost six: Mum would soon be home. What would it be like to have a dad come home from work and in the door each evening? Lily shook her head, dismissing such a fantasy, took up the knife and began to chop onions again. No matter how hard she scrubbed in the shower, she was sure the smell of them stayed in her skin and hair.