

Chapter One

Edith

Baby Edith was born at home on an icy winter's morning in Melbourne, 1974. Gough Whitlam was prime minister of Australia and 'Kung Fu Fighting' was top of the pops when Edith's mother, Sue, went into labour. It was always going to be a long one.

Sue was a professor with a doctorate in the history of infectious disease. Sue was a woman of logic with a side order of spontaneity and fun. She couldn't understand why on earth the male of the species would oversee the reproductive health of women. Sue birthed at home because there was no chance in hell that she would submit to giving birth in a hospital under the medical management of an obstetrician, who in 1974 was almost definitely a man.

Sue's husband, Jeff, wasn't technically Sue's husband; it was just simpler to call him that. They were living in sin, de facto, way ahead of their time. Choose your battles was one of Sue's favourite sayings. She simply couldn't be arsed calling Jeff her partner and defending her life choices, so husband he was called.

'Keep their mitts off my muff. It's all forceps and fanny fiddling in hospitals,' Sue said to Jeff as they did the dishes together. Jeff washing because Sue's arms were no longer long enough to reach the sink beyond her pregnant belly.

Jeff was a researcher at the CSIRO and was clued enough to know that an expectant father should never interfere in the wishes of the birthing mother. He too was keen to avoid all third-party fanny fiddling, even in the professional sense.

Sue did what so many educated, white women do. She gave birth in her head rather than surrendering to the mystery of the pelvis. She'd read an impressive pile of research on childbirth during her uneventful pregnancy so that when push literally came to shove, Sue thought too hard about the technicalities of how she was designed to perform, rather than simply letting go.

Sue laboured all day and all night in their little timber house in East Brunswick. She had Jeff keep time on the contractions and, like the impeccable scientist he was, he did a perfect job with his clipboard and pencil. When contractions failed to come closer together as Sue's extensive obstetric readings had promised, she was frustrated, then frightened, then downright annoyed.

Every contraction was long, painful and tiring. Sue clenched her teeth through each surge of pain, which just told her cervix to stay shut. In the breaks in between, Sue asked Jeff a stream of impossible questions. 'Why are they so far apart?' 'When will the second stage begin?' 'Why is this all up to meeeeeeeee?'

All this brainwork and irritation with the process triggered a chemical shift that put the brakes on Sue's labour. Too much thinking, not enough surrender.

Then, just before dawn, at the coldest moment in the night, Sue suddenly lost control as she hurtled through the stage of labour that midwives call transition. Sue would have no memory of these seventeen, ferocious minutes, but Jeff would never forget until the day he died how Sue had leapt from the depths of the bathtub like a cat with its arse on fire. She stood up, creating a tsunami of displacement on the bathroom floor, then screamed a monologue of expletives entirely aimed at Jeff.

She picked up momentum on the last syllable of the word *motherfuckerrrrrr!* She took off in pitch, volume and ferocity until she was holding the towel rack like a sumo wrestler ready to snap the oar of a dragon boat. She screamed the kind of screams that midwives listen for.

Jeff looked at Sue in disbelief and then to the midwife, wondering why their professional birthing lady wasn't responding to Sue's explosion. Transition is a medical euphemism for 'hurts like hell, nearly there', so the midwife simply smiled because that meant she would be home by lunchtime.

There were a few more *fuck yous* directed at Jeff before first light tinged the sky over Melbourne's east. As the sun tipped the horizon, the midwife calmly loaded up the fire with Jeff's neatly chopped wood. Then, at that very moment, Sue felt the overwhelming urge to dump a giant shit. Not just any old defecation, but a monstrous poop. The kind of turd that leans hard on the vagus nerve and makes your eyes water.

Not one book or research paper mentioned that giving birth feels like pushing out a super-sized poo. Nothing in her readings had explained why so many babies are born in the toot – the 'thunderbox'

as Jeff liked to call it. The toilet. No one could have warned Sue that she would be utterly desperate for her darling Jeff to *shut the fuck up* and let her concentrate as she pushed with every ounce of the energy she had to give, to expel this massive turd. She felt like she might *die* if she didn't.

And nothing could ever have prepared Dr Sue of East Brunswick for the surge of supersonic love that hammered through her body when she finally held baby Edith in her arms, all gooey and grey. She wasn't a poo after all.

Sue and Jeff named their one and only daughter after French legend, Édith Piaf.

Edith was a surprising kid from the start. As a baby she was a projectile vomiter. Sue and Jeff spent a whole year of their lives with a towel across one shoulder as their baby daughter shot regurgitated breastmilk across the house.

As a toddler there were no flies on Edith. At two, she swung her first punch at a boy twice her age when he told her that the monkey bars weren't for girls. Then she dusted her hands off like a job well done and climbed the monkey bars in victory while the boys scrambled off to the swings.

By four, Edith had developed a knack for making profound statements at unexpected moments.

'When I grow up, I'm going to have big feet and a fluffy vagina,' she announced to a man at a CSIRO staff family picnic. She was pulling on the finger of the chairman of the board while she made

this interesting physical prediction. He was the former premier of New South Wales, Neville Wran. Edith was four and a half.

'Dad, ya wife's home!' Edith hollered at the age of six when Sue walked through the front door with the groceries.

Edith knew her dad's favourite song was a Mungo Jerry track released before she was born, 'In the Summertime', and she'd tee it up on the record player when he walked in from work. It made his homecoming each day like a party. After he put his brief case down Jeff would dance like a dog clicking his fingers above his head, just off the beat, and Edith hugged his leg and grinned.

Sue and Jeff would lie in bed in the dark before sleep, recounting their daughter's comments and conversations. Jeff even had a little leather-bound notebook where he jotted down the most memorable outbursts and observations from his little girl.

'I spy with my little eye, something beginning with A,' said Sue on the tram.

'Arsehole!' hollered Edith, aged seven.

By ten, Edith adored writing elaborate stories in her journal. She had a little lock on the cover and when she turned the key, she felt like her stories were secured in a special vault, a secret between her and the yellowish lined pages.

In her tweens she watched *Perfect Match* which was on the tele before dinner. The trick was to stay as still as possible in the huge brown corduroy bean bag by the TV so that neither Sue nor Jeff would think to switch to the news and ruin everything.

A big fat line was drawn between Edith's happy innocent childhood and the next stage of her life, when Edith was thirteen. The family moved north for Sue to teach at Sydney University. Edith

began the treacherous first year of high school in a new city with a new bra under her light-brown check school uniform. She thought it made her look like a square potato. Edith was the only girl who wore knee-high white socks on the first day of high school. Sydney girls in the 1980s wore their socks so short they disappeared into their school shoes.

Sue, Jeff and Edith hadn't properly unpacked in their new Sydney house when Jeff was offered a one-year research fellowship in Washington DC. Things moved very fast and Jeff toddled off to the US. Edith was bereft. Six months later, Jeff died from a swift case of prostate cancer. He'd been diagnosed not long after arriving in DC. Doctors gave him a year or more to live but Jeff died within a few short weeks of that diagnosis while he was still trying to sort out a handover. He was cremated in DC and his ashes were couriered to Sydney.

The day Jeff's ashes arrived in a brown box, Sue and Edith climbed into the big soft master bed, and cried for a long, long time. Less than a year earlier, they had been living in East Brunswick, exploring the community park up the road, planting fruit trees and fiddling about with sourdough recipes. Sue was supervising PhD candidates and Edith was adoring every minute of her last year in primary school. Being the big fish in a little pond was ace and Edith won an award for creative writing. Jeff had been absorbed in a project on clean fuels.

Now, with a Federal Express parcel on the end of the bed instead of Jeff, mother and daughter were cuddled together, crying their hearts out in a house they didn't know yet, in a city they didn't love yet, a third of their family unit suddenly gone.

Melbourne would always feel like the life Edith had before her father died. BD: before Dad. An innocent, sweet life. Sydney was the new, harsher life after he was gone. The two cities represented radically different stages for a thirteen-year-old girl. She felt numb until she was about fifteen and, for those two numb years, Edith blamed her mother for letting her dad go to America. Edith seethed until one day when she was almost sixteen, her body stopped hating her mother. Mum was all she had. Edith softened and Sue was desperately relieved.

The brutality and totality of these changes and losses set Edith up for the choices she would make in adult life. She looked for security and permanency. She preferred things firm, paid up, secure, contractual. She liked to see the road ahead of her, planned out and under her control. She didn't do well in group assignments, where she had to collaborate or rely on others. Edith always performed better on solo missions. In her intimate relationships, Edith automatically kept the boys at a nice safe, arm's length. Light, fun and friendly, lest her heart be vacated and shattered.

By the time Edith walked out of high school, tossing her potato uniform on the floor for the very last time, she was no longer thinking of her dad every hour of the day. She thought of him far more often after his death than she had before. Every academic prize she collected had made her heart ache. Jeff would have loved to see his girl do such a terrific job at school. By eighteen – five and a half long years after her father had died so suddenly – Edith was beginning to breathe once more. She'd found her smile again, but it was a new version of her smile. A slightly weathered one. Not entirely free.

With school behind her, Edith spent the summer lying on the

beach. Then she dragged herself to university in the autumn to study. She lived with her mum while her friends were moving into share houses, smoking pot and taking pingers. Edith sometimes met up with her student friends at the Reasonably Good Café in Redfern for a late lunch. She'd watch them Hoover a giant shared plate of vegetarian nachos because they all had the insatiable munchies from smoking weed for brunch. None of this stoner lifestyle appealed to Edith. She liked to party, but not through a dopey fog that had a strange whiff. Pot just made her fall asleep and miss lectures. Her spelling went to shit and her handwriting got the wobbles.

From age twenty-one to twenty-five, Edith lived out of a backpack, working as a waitress and bartender on tropical islands in Queensland and then, once she got the hang of it, Europe and Africa. She preferred not to travel all alone so hopped from one small group of travellers to the next as they grew up overseas together, learned to live with a very small toiletries bag and gathered memories to see them through the slog of adult choices and boring responsibilities ahead. She'd pulled beers in nine countries by the time she was ready to come home and be a grown-up.

Edith arrived in Sydney, all out of cash, just in time for Sue's fifty-fifth birthday, surprising her mum with a knock on the door. Sue screamed, both women cried, and Edith dropped her big brown backpack on the floor for the last time.

Sue had labelled the toilet door 'The Thunderbox' as a nod to Jeff but, other than that, nothing much had changed in her little semi-detached house in Centennial Park. Sue was on a health kick and was walking to and from university after her doctor had said she had the early signs of type 2 diabetes gathering around her middle.

Wearing a hippy-print skirt, once-white tennis shoes and a floppy hat, pulling a tartan shopping buggy behind her, Sue looked like a flamboyant homeless lady. She was a single, career academic in her mid-fifties and could not care less what anyone thought of her or her choice of dress or shoe.

The one-hour walk each way from home to campus and back again had given Sue newfound time to think and this thinking time had meant that Sue missed her one and only daughter ferociously.

And then, at last, she was home again.

Sue and Edith picked up right where they'd left off, tinkering together in the garden, listening to the news on the ABC and missing Jeff. It had been eleven years since he'd left for DC and returned in a box. Edith couldn't remember what his voice sounded like anymore. He'd died long before there were video cameras in every mobile phone so there was no footage of her dad to remember him by, just some yellowing snaps in a few photo albums on the shelf.

One sunny Saturday in 1999, just a few days after Edith returned home, Sue sat at the outdoor table marking papers. She read until she came across something magnificent from one of her students to read aloud. Edith was soaking up the sunshine, lying on a towel with a hat over her face, listening.

'Syphilis is a sexually transmitted disease that is easily treated but can lead to serious complications if neglected. Some patients don't develop symptoms of the late stage of syphilis until ten to thirty years after they contract the disease. That's a long time to be spreading your filth.'

Sue and Edith cackled laughing at the student's profound judgement tacked on the end. Sue kept reading as she giggled.

'Late-stage symptoms include difficulty coordinating muscle movements, paralysis, numbness, blindness and dementia. That should stop them shagging.'

Again, they hooted laughing and Sue had to take her glasses off to wipe her eyes. These papers were much more entertaining to mark with company.

'Nothing says I love you like a long-term case of paralyzing syphilis,' said Edith.

'Al Capone died of syphilis,' said Sue. 'Serves him right. He was a horrible man.'

'I love how you make infectious disease so entertaining, Mum,' said Edith.

'It's a weapon of mass destruction, my love. If we don't find it entertaining in some way, how will we survive the horror?'

Edith's first job in the real world, one that didn't include pulling beer or clearing plates, was as a junior copywriter with an enormous advertising agency in North Sydney, just that side of the bridge. She was so damn good at her job that Edith was promoted to creative director by her thirtieth birthday. Her rise to the top involved a large chunk of luck for her and misfortune for others. The whole team working on the account for a cereal brand lost their jobs the day after their client fired the agency. Ad agency life was brutal in those days. The departure of that client left Edith as the most senior copywriter in a company with a serious lack of creative directors.

Just before Edith turned thirty-one, she met her future husband, Nate Scott, when they were both working on a federal government health campaign. She was lead creative and he was overseeing compliance or some such. Government campaigns always seemed to

attract a cast of thousands who didn't really need to be there. Box tickers, Edith called them.

Nate was safe, secure and a little older than Edith.

Cavewoman urges and some sort of human time bomb ticking between the back of her skull and her ovaries, like a tennis ball pinging back and forth, conspired to trap Edith into urgent procreation. Something ferocious and chemical happened, because after Edith met Nate she felt a roaring desire to make a baby and it had to be with him.

They had a wedding because Nate came from a long line of annoying Christians who expected him to marry before God in a church. Edith complied because, dammit, she had grown up with the hardcore social conditioning of the 1970s, '80s and '90s that brainwashed her to believe that she needed a man to have a baby and it was best they cohabited thereafter. This was a big mistake, but it would be a decade before Edith realised.

The in-laws looked down their noses at their daughter-in-law because she laughed a little too loud for a lady and had famously worked on a health campaign for the AIDS Council. Edith had written the headline 'Up ya bum' and it was plastered all over Sydney, to her delight. But not so much to theirs.

Edith gave birth to her one and only daughter, Jasmine Lilian Scott, on a hot December afternoon lying on a cold, steel operating table.

'Nothing wrong with a vaginal bypass,' said Edith's dearest friend, Rachel, who marched onto the ward of a huge private hospital with

all the confidence of a nursing unit manager. She walked like that everywhere she went. Like she worked there. She could walk behind the bar at the Hilton and pour herself a drink and no one would argue. Edith and Rachel met on their first day of high school when Rachel walked over to Edith and said, 'If you wanna survive high school, you'd better push those ridiculous fucking socks down.'

'I'm so, so, SO proud of you,' said Sue, kissing her daughter on the forehead.

'I'd better get back to work,' said Nate, who was already standing at the door. He looked exhausted, like a zombie scarecrow. He wore suit pants with a baggy grey T-shirt and loafers. During Edith's pregnancy he'd put on a little sympathy paunch, which completed the picture.

The night before, when it all hit the fan, Nate was out of his depth and utterly relieved when Edith was scooted into theatre for a caesarean section. She was grateful for his departure and the general anaesthetic that wiped her out soon after. Nate waited on the ward, spared the gore of a surgical delivery. No one wants to smell burning flesh as a laser scalpel makes its incision and seals it off at the same time. Clever innovation. He'd read about it in a childbirth book Edith had tossed in his direction during her pregnancy. The thought of his wife's guts burning made Nate gag.

Edith took a long pause from ad agency life after Jazzy was born. She was marching through her thirties now. She had a husband and a daughter. It still gave her goosebumps to think they'd made a human together.

The very first day after Jazzy slept a marathon ten hours, Edith woke feeling like a new person. A fresh, fully charged reboot of her

old self. She hadn't felt that level of calm and clarity since before she was pregnant. That day, she wrote the first words of her first novel. It would take almost a year to finish, partly because self-doubt kept sabotaging her progress and partly because she had a baby to love and nurture.

Nate thought his wife's writing was a cute hobby, until she was acquired by the second-largest publisher in the world. Her very first book was rather good.

'Complex and heart-warming,' was the review given to Edith's first novel by the most vicious reviewer in the nation. So, Edith didn't return to full-time advertising agency life. Instead, she wrote another book and then another. By the time Jazzy was trying on her first school uniform at the age of five, cute as a button, Edith was a full-time author. Her LinkedIn bio no longer said, 'I write killer ad campaigns.' Instead, it simply said 'Author'.

Edith Scott was pushing forty before she was ready to cut loose. Foundations had been set, safety nets in place. She was a contradiction in terms, our mate Edith. Security, stability and predictability become boring after a while and, if Edith hated anything, it was boredom.

By the time Jazzy was nine, Edith had an obligation to write one more book for her darling publisher and then she was planning to write something completely different, just for the challenge of it. A warzone story about men. Why? Because she was bored with writing family sagas, and they wouldn't go broke if a new genre flunked. Even Stephen King wrote flunkers from time to time.

Something inexplicable happens to women in their forties. They develop ruthless tunnel vision for things that matter. Time wasters be

damned. One of her favourite sayings was, 'Not my circus, not my monkeys.' Edith didn't go to painful afternoon teas with her churchy in-laws anymore. She let Nate take Jazzy so that she could stay home and write. Nothing kills your writing flow like a kid calling, 'Muuuuuum,' every two minutes.

Edith's risk appetite was on a steep growth trajectory by the time her husband stood in their chaotic garage on a stifflingly hot summer afternoon and asked for a divorce.

Chapter Two

Nate

For a lad born and bred in the church, Nate Scott was keen to feed at the trough of adultery. But he was lazy to the core so the trough would need to come to him. A year before he told Edith he wanted a divorce, Nate had stumbled into an affair with a woman named Anna. She was recovering from breast cancer and Nate felt like her rescuer. Anna was Italian, exotic and charming, but fragile at the same time.

Edith was so damn robust and efficient, it was emasculating, and her lips weren't soft or welcoming to him anymore. She'd always out-earned Nate and it shat him to tears. Edith just didn't need him the way he yearned to be needed. Nate felt he was unnecessary to her. More than unnecessary. He felt like he was in the way, a ball and chain that held her back from a life she might have had with someone more spontaneous and clever, with a wider vocabulary. Edith had been off somewhere talking about books the night her husband had met Anna.