

love *like* water

This page intentionally left blank

love *like* water

MEME McDONALD

  
ALLEN&UNWIN

First published in 2007

Copyright © Meme McDonald 2007

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](mailto:info@allenandunwin.com)  
Web: [www.allenandunwin.com](http://www.allenandunwin.com)

National Library of Australia  
Cataloguing-in-Publication entry:

McDonald, Meme, 1954- .  
Love like water.

ISBN 978 1 74114 885 5 (pbk).

I. Title.

A823.3



**Australian Government**



This project has been assisted by the Australian Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body.

Cover and text design by Kate Mitchell Design  
Set in 10/14.5 pt Sabon by Midland Typesetters, Australia  
Printed in Australia by McPherson's Printing Group

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

for my father  
and  
for my sister  
for family  
and homeland  
and for love

'love is a river  
deep and wide  
love is a river  
it's got two sides  
might be raging  
might run dry  
but love is a river  
sweet river of life'

*Shane Howard*

This page intentionally left blank

Part

---

One

This page intentionally left blank

## chapter *one*

Cathy knew heat. Where she came from, heat stood back and laughed at you, then shoved a hand down your throat and dried you inside out. It wasn't the weather in this desert town that would get to her. It was sleeping with neighbours just a snore away. She wasn't used to that, but she was ready to give it a go. She wasn't a snob. Didn't think she was a snob. Maybe she was. She'd been schooled in correct grammar and pronunciation, rounding out the *ou* in you, rather than *ya*, as in how ya goin mate, but she could adapt. She had Margie to show her how.

'Eyes closed.' Margie was dragging her by the arm, up the front steps and into the house.

Cathy wasn't in a hurry to look, didn't dare. Didn't know if she could handle the rented room, sleeping on a mattress used by people she'd never met. Be like getting into bed with strangers.

It'd been a long flight to get here. Left home at dawn, caught the twin engine to the coast, wasted time flicking through

magazines at the Brisbane airport, then boarded the jet heading west to the Centre. She'd forgotten why she'd said yes to packing her bags. Must have run out of reasons for saying no.

'Okay, open them. Open, open.'

Cathy opened her eyes. Purple satin sheets. A double bed with slinky sheets. The bed took up the whole space. It glowed. She blushed. She hated blushing. Why blush at a double bed with satin sheets? She'd ended up sleeping in a single bed back home, but that was by accident, not by choice. Maybe it was the purple. Purple was so out there.

'Lilac,' Margie corrected.

'Lilac.'

'You don't like them, I can tell.'

She swallowed. 'No, I do . . . I do.'

'You don't.'

'Do.'

She stumbled into the room, dropping everything. All her belongings carefully packed in her shoulderbag scattered. The carpet was threadbare, probably full of dust mites. It had the smell of other lives. She scrambled to gather her hairbrush and purse and mints and pocketknife, and the handkerchief her mother had pressed. It was her grandmother's, linen with embroidery, sprigs of lavender. She wouldn't be blowing her nose on it, just keeping the hanky close for the touch of family.

Margie dumped the suitcases on the bed.

Cathy lifted them onto the floor.

'Shit, it's hot.'

Long-haired Margie wasn't bred for short-haired dingo country. Sweat gathered in rivers down her neck, flowing into a gully of cleavage. She was voluptuous. Cathy envied that, the way the shearer's singlet had more to hold than it could handle. Cut-off jeans rode easily up Margie's thighs.

Curvy was confident, shameless, almost pin-up. Cathy looked away, made shy by her own straight up and down. The denim skirt and cotton blouse were conservative, something her mother would wear, too ironed. She pulled at the band that tamed her tangle of red hair into a ponytail, tried to shake out the neat and tidy.

Margie nicked the mustering hat out of her hand, started fooling round, straddling the suitcase and slapping her rump, letting out a howl like a coyote or a cowgirl. Cathy wasn't a cowgirl or a coyote or anything American Wild West. She wasn't amused, but forced a laugh, trying not to be narky about Margie and her city ways. Trouble was, no one messed with her hat. Margie was messing with her hat, not respecting the sweat and dust worked into the felt. That hat was home. That hat was as much a part of who she was as her name or the tone of her voice.

The re-entry into their friendship was always a rodeo. Margie busted through boundaries, leaving the gates wide open. It was her laugh. It undid things. Cathy tried to emulate Margie's laugh, full of smoke and drink and casual sex, but she didn't have the basic ingredients. Anyway, *emulate* was one of those words she wouldn't be needing in Alice Springs now she was a townie.

Margie gave the hat back. 'Hey, I'm sorry.'

'Don't have to be.'

'I do. I'm out of control.'

'So? Me too,' Cathy lied.

'No you're not.'

'Am.'

'I forced you to come.'

'Didn't.'

'Did.'

‘Not.’

‘Did so.’

‘So not.’

The silly talk had been a habit since boarding school. If they were in the mood, they could keep it going for the whole of a lazy nothing-to-do day. Cathy relaxed, let it slide about the hat.

Then Margie was hugging, roughing her up, squeezing too hard.

‘I wouldn’t be here without you, Cees.’

‘Me neither. Without you, I mean . . . didn’t mean without me . . .’

It was the words. Words were slippery gravel. What she wanted to say was thanks to Margie for dragging her away. She’d needed to get away.

‘We’re *here*.’ Margie was shouting again. ‘Can you believe this?’

Cathy smiled. ‘Doesn’t have to be national news.’

It was getting used to the loud of Margie. She could strip you naked with talk. Cathy picked up the larger suitcase. A grin snuck out. She nudged Margie out of the way. Margie shoved her back. Then it was on. Tripping up, being stupid, mucking about as if they were arriving back at boarding school, tickling and pinching and poking rude places.

‘Any spunks on the plane?’

‘No.’

Cathy wanted to take in the room, to get organised, orientate. Margie seemed to have forgotten she wasn’t looking for anyone new.

‘Not a one?’

‘None.’

‘Course you were looking.’

Cathy clenched her jaw. Margie got the message. She backed off.

‘Hey, look at you.’

The compliment in her tone made Cathy look down at her feet, awkward. It was the new shoes, the high heels. Maybe they looked all right. Margie was wearing rubber thongs. Cathy’s father called rubber thongs Japanese riding boots. On principle he wouldn’t give a job to a bloke who turned up asking for work in Japanese riding boots. Cathy looked up, their eyes met. It had taken courage to get on that plane. The softness in Margie’s eyes acknowledged that. Cathy breathed more easily.

Then she was tumbling and falling and crashing. Margie had tackled her onto the bed.

‘Feel that bounce, baby.’ Margie slithered across the sheets, thrust her pelvis into the air, banging down hard on the mattress, moaning and rubbing herself.

Cathy wanted to copy, but she was rigid, a wedge stuck in her throat. The pressure of it ached. If it burst, the flow would scorch the skin off anyone in its way, drown them both. Margie kept going. Cathy gritted her teeth, closed her eyes, lay there being bounced about, waiting for Margie to stop. The bed could break, the legs might fall off, neighbours would hear. Margie’s singing drummed in her ears.

‘Bounce, baby, bounce . . .’

It wasn’t the singing. It was the remembering. The rhythm of bed, the smell of him naked, holding her. It was too hard without Dave. There wasn’t going to be anyone else. She’d always be on her own. Satin sheets were crap.

She held her breath. She’d read about a woman who’d stuck a plastic bag over her head for so long she asphyxiated. She was asphyxiating. Her lungs were burning. The ache wasn’t

hot anymore. It was cold, jabbing at her heart, slabs of ice groaning in the melt.

She started fighting back, struggling free, clambering off the bed. This wasn't anything to do with neighbours hearing, or the bed falling apart, or even Margie. It was to do with being broken. Broken was private, not for sharing, or joking about. Cathy didn't need Margie to bring her out of herself. She needed quiet.

'Stop,' she yelled.

She hadn't meant to yell. But she did. Loud. At her friend.

Where she came from, friends were like rain, scarce. A neighbour to talk with had been half an hour's drive away, and then only for conversations about the forecast or the stock market. Margie was a luxury. It was more than her laugh. She made the smell of other people lift, the dirt fade from the walls.

Margie stopped bouncing, lay there with her arms behind her head. Cathy felt mean-spirited. This was Margie's big moment, getting them both here. She'd bought the sheets to make Cathy feel welcome.

'Thanks for the sheets.'

It was an apology. Cathy meant it. Didn't matter what they looked like or the colour, they were a present. Margie was good at presents. Cathy was better at remembering birthdays.

'They're a bit over the top.'

'They're perfect.'

They looked at each other again.

'Hey, you made it.' Margie's voice was soft.

'Yep. I did.' Cathy looked up at the ceiling, 'I'm here,' then leant back against the wall. They both smiled with the simple joy of being together.

'Nine o'clock in the morning,' Margie chirped.

‘What?’

‘I’ve got you an interview.’

‘What for?’

‘A barmaid job.’

‘Barmaid?’

‘Why not?’

‘I’ve never been a barmaid.’

‘So? Sarah has.’

‘Who’s Sarah?’

‘Our housemate. She’ll give you a lesson. She thinks you might be a bit of a redneck, coming from western Queensland, but I told her you weren’t like that.’

That took digesting, that they’d been talking about her. She wasn’t used to being talked about, or being labelled a redneck.

‘Matron did me a favour and phoned the publican,’ Margie explained. ‘Says he’s got tickets on himself, but he’s all right. The Australian’s the best pub in town. We hang out there.’

*We* sounded as if they were best friends. Margie’d only been in Alice Springs four days.

Cathy went across to the window, looking through stained lace for neighbours. They must be lined up at the front fence by now, gawking at the noise.

The street was empty. A string of cloth squares hung faded and breathless between the verandah posts. There was some kind of foreign language scrawled on them.

‘Prayer flags.’ Margie rolled onto her side. ‘Tibetan prayer flags, not churchie stuff. They flap in the breeze and say prayers or something, I don’t know. Don’t worry, I haven’t gone religious.’

It’d been a year since they’d seen each other.

‘Didn’t think you had.’

‘Didn’t think you *thought* I had.’

Margie had a habit of leaning down hard on words, giving them more weight than they were built to carry. Cathy kept looking through the window. The front garden had been left to sort itself out either side of the cracked path. A lightshade was lolling about. The house faced nowhere in particular, neither the river of sand across the road nor the row of houses opposite, squat to the ground, weary from holding up roofs under the weight of blue.

Margie rolled off the bed. 'I'll run you a bath.'

Cathy didn't want a bath. Not in a shoddy house. Not in the middle of the day. She put the suitcases beneath the window. Then decided they'd be better at the foot of the bed. She shifted them back. They were in the way. She moved them across to the wall and hung her hat on the corner of the door, then on top of the curtain rail. She listened to the sound of water running. Work hats should be by the back door, hanging on hooks.

Margie was calling out how great their housemate was, how she was a riot, how Cathy would love her to bits.

Cathy walked across the hall. The walls of Margie's room were plastered with photos. Full-frame smiles, group hugs about to collapse on the floor as soon as the shutter clicked. Margie had managed to stick her head in just about every one, taking the shots at arm's length.

She was still yabbering on. Cathy wasn't listening. She stared in the mirror over the dresser, checking to see how she was holding together, if any cracks were showing. Freckles still splattered across her face. She'd hoped they might have joined up by now, made her look more mature. As a kid, punishing sunburn had kept her awake at night. The skin between the brown dots turned scarlet, and by morning would bubblewrap into blisters that split and peeled strips off her nose and shoulders. But when the burn faded she was back to what she'd

always been, lily white . . . with freckles. Sun kisses, her mother had called them.

She went back to her room and lay on the purple and closed her eyes. Emotions were like water. Hard to keep a hold of. Cup them in your hand and they'd slip through, making mud puddles at your feet. Water was precious, not for wasting.

The satin was making her sweat. She got up before she drowned in the bed, lifted the fruitcake off the floor. Her mother had wrapped it in greaseproof paper and foil tied with string, then packed it in two plastic bags. In the unfamiliar room, the cake sat like a memory. She held it, smelled the richness of her mother's cooking, thirsty for a cup of tea at a kitchen table.

'Deester, can you do us a favour and get some iceblocks?' Margie called from the bathroom. 'The cold water's boiling.'

Cathy wandered past the door of their housemate's room. It was plastered with stickers. Stop The Drop. Ban Uranium Mining, in black lettering on powdercake yellow. Save The Whales. The black, yellow and red of the Aboriginal flag had Land Rights sloganed across the middle. She was nervous about meeting someone who was doing so much to save the world.

The lounge was strewn with junk sloughed off like old skin. She checked the bike with two flat tyres. The couches had sarongs draped over grungy covers. Ashtrays overflowed and mugs of coffee were growing mould. There was no hook for a hat at the front or back door. No kitchen table. She lifted a dead apple out of the fruit bowl and sat the cake in its place and thought about wiping the benches. Maybe not all surfaces needed to shine.

She poked her head out the back door. A slab of cement ran the length of the house, cluttered with beanbags and milk

crates and boxes. The cyclone-wire fence made the place feel like an exercise yard. Probably built that high to keep out some mongrel dog from next door. A shopping trolley with a load of boulders was bogged in sand near the gate, car doors chucked against a corner. There were bottles in boxes sagging at the seams, glass conductors from telegraph poles, a bullock skull, torn bits of cloth on totem poles marking out what could have been a vegetable garden before it withered to dust. The backyard was a project for another day.

The iceblocks were buried in the freezer. She chipped enough free, and carried them through to where Margie was luxuriating in a bath full to the brim, patches of her face crocodiling the surface, hair spreading like riverweed. One arm flopped over the side. People were careless with water when it didn't affect their livelihood. Cathy tossed the ice in, making sure it landed on bare skin. Splashes retaliated across the room.

'Hop in,' Margie gurgled.

'I'll be right.'

'Tell you what, Cee Cee Dee, we were so lucky to get a room each. Half of Alice is living in the caravan park, no kidding. Doctors, lawyers, social workers, geologists . . . The place is chockers with ring-ins like us patching up the mess.'

'What mess?'

'Blacks making a mess of themselves, or something or other, I don't know. You ever been in the minority?' She didn't wait for an answer. 'You will be here. Aboriginals everywhere. You should see the hospital. It's a madhouse.'

Margie's hands were waving, splashing water.

'Never know who you're going to meet. It's a hoot. I haven't stopped partying since I got here, so get ready, girl.'

Cathy wasn't thinking about parties.

She slumped on the wet floor, leant back against the tiles. Leaving home was one thing. Arriving somewhere else was a whole other paddock to muster.

## chapter *two*

He'd arrived in Alice Springs on a Boeing 737 from Melbourne via Adelaide, a stranger in a strange place. He'd needed to get out of Melbourne. It was no more home than Brisbane or Sydney or a dozen other places he'd pulled up in since he left home up north. Alice was the next stop. He was nervous about going bush. Alice Springs was the bush as far as he was concerned. He was from the saltwater, from the coast, not from this no-water outback country.

He had no family out here. Didn't know the people who did. He wasn't sure he could do the job they'd brought him out to do. He knew he could pull off a great set in a club. He could get people up bumping and grinding and crazy in love, or just crazy off their faces, that was easy.

He was a legend in the nightclubs down south, even in his own eyes. Jason Johnstone, JJ the DJ, everyone knew him, karltick, too deadly for his own bad self. He'd started playing European electronica while others were still cutting their baby teeth on funk. He'd done the afro thing with his hair, bought