

THE
WRITER

THE
HAIRDRESSER

AND THE
NURSE

ZARA ELLEN



SANGUINE PRESS

First published in Australia 2024 with Sanguine Press

Copyright © Zara Ellen 2024

The right of Zara Ellen to be identified as Author of this work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Moral Right Act.

The event, characters and conversations in this book are a work of fiction.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

Zara Ellen's books may be purchased for educational, business, or sales promotional use. For information, please email the sales team at joanne@hybridauthor.com.au

FIRST EDITION

Cover art designed by Peter Ryan at <https://peterryanart.com.au/>

ISBN: 978-0-6485950-4-5

*To Debbie (the nurse) and Steph (the hairdresser)
from (the writer) Jo*

Chapter One

Magdalena hungrily watches Caspian brandish his knob like a weapon about to mass destruct her... Agnes holds the delete button down on her laptop, watching the sentence disappear. What kind of man swings his penis about in front of his lover? A cocky one that's who. She scoffs, thinking of Doug's penis. How long has it been since she's seen it outside of her inventive mind? Running her fingers through her French bob, Agnes sips her strong coffee, printing another signature plum lip stain on the cup. Her cappuccino is cold, waiting for the others.

Agnes, Donna and Kristy have been congregating at Cafe 38 every Tuesday afternoon for years. A tranquil eatery attached to a four-star hotel overlooking a golf course, it gives off a holiday vibe in Perth's Northern suburbs, without you actually being on holiday.

Pondering her next line, Agnes arches her slender neck towards the heat radiating from the highest point in the sky, the Western Australian sun working her prominent features like a facial. She opens her eyes. No shadows cast on the green. Perhaps she should take up golf, with caddies and buggies proceeding her?

Writing. Back to writing. Focus on writing. She isn't getting a whole lot done, distracted like this, which only signifies her writing: stale. Not good.

Her phone rattles on the table – her agent, evoking a sixth sense on Agnes's unproductive day.

'Kimmy Lin, hi,' says Agnes, wondering why she keeps sipping her truly awful cold coffee.

'How are you, beauty?'

'Terrific, just working on *Stars, Lovers and Sex in-between.*'

'That's what we like to hear. I'm calling to confirm you are still attending Marcus Oliver's launch tonight as part of our authors-supporting-authors program?'

Agnes frowns, consulting her digital calendar. ‘I suppose I can make an appearance.’

‘Thank you, beauty, thank you. I know you don’t remember what it was like as a debut. Emily Shapter’s going.’

‘Terrific.’

‘I’ll let you get back to writing. One more thing, can you come into the office for a short meeting.’

Agnes flinches. Kimmy Lin only ever calls a meeting when disaster strikes. ‘I could come in before my writing session tomorrow morning?’

‘Beauty, 8.30am, we see you then.’

If Agnes couldn’t concentrate on her words before, there’s no way she can concentrate on them now. She’s been in the writing game a lengthy time; she knows when to quit for the day, or at least step back from ‘Caspian’s extending manhood’. Agnes checks her phone. Zero messages from Doug. Her head droops slightly. Once upon two decades ago they used to call each other and say “I love you” as many times as they could cram in a day, of course that was the beginning of their marriage, which felt oh so long ago. These days, Agnes is lucky if she gets a reply at all.

The gurgling steam from the milk frother, rattling of cups on saucers and thick waves of excessive silvery hair and frilly flowing white ruffles of skirts snap her back to reality.

‘Perfect timing,’ Agnes says, smiling at her friend. She stands, letting Donna envelope her tall frame. Agnes reciprocates, patting a palm against Donna’s back, noting Donna’s stiff shoulders visibly relax within her sparse embrace.

‘Hello, hi, Agnes, hello, another coffee?’

‘Terrific.’

‘Will I get the nurse one too?’

‘Ah, I’d hold off on that if I were you.’ They share a knowing look

as Donna scuttles to the counter to order.

‘How’s the writing going?’ Donna enquires, slipping into the seat beside Agnes looking out at the idyllic scenery.

Agnes stretches her hands. ‘It’s going nowhere. My agent called. I have a meeting with her tomorrow morning, which always signifies bad news.’

‘Oh, you always think the worst,’ says Donna. ‘I bet she just wants to check in on the progress of the new book.’

‘Like I said, not good. I feel like I’m writing the same story over and over again and just changing the character’s professions and names. If I can even write at all. Honestly, every sentence, scrap that, every word I write positively stinks. If I feel it. My agent feels it. My readers feel it.’

‘I’m an avid reader and I can promise you I’ve never felt anything you say ‘stinks’, in any of your books. I’m hooked start to finish.’ Donna reassures in her harp-like tone.

Agnes reaches over and squeezes Donna’s dye-stained fingers. ‘As my best friend, you must say that.’

‘No, Agnes Ryan is my best friend, not Agnes Roberts; she’s my favourite author. Honestly, your books keep going missing from the salon. I wouldn’t put it past Amanda.’

‘How is the she-devil?’

What little colour Donna has on her porcelain skin disintegrates. ‘Formidable,’ she says quietly into her teacup.

Agnes nods. ‘Are you feeling alright, you’ve gone a little peaky?’

‘Just the usual sick-to-my-stomach-every-Tuesday-in-the-salon-Amanda feeling.’ Donna says wryly.

‘Don, I say this from the infinity pool of love and respect I have for you, please, get the hell out of there. That environment is toxic. That woman is toxic. It’s making you ill, all this bad blood.’

Donna’s phone tinkles, cutting Agnes off. She need not ask. Donna’s angelic structure is a dead giveaway. ‘I swear, Matt’s so in-sync. I haven’t

even spoken to him today and it's like he just knows something upsetting's happened.' She shows Agnes the phone.

'No, Don. It's always been like that,' Agnes eye rolls, viewing Donna's lovey-dovey Matt message, so much like the kind Doug would use to sweet-talk her, back in their senior high school days.

'Two ticks,' Donna promises, her bangles clattering down to her elbows as she calls her husband. He answers first ring; Donna lights up more.

Agnes wishes Doug still cared enough to randomly call her during the day for nothing other than to simply tell her that he loved her, that he missed her or that he couldn't stop thinking about her. Even the occasional comment that he needed her or that he simply couldn't live without her wouldn't go amiss now and again.

Agnes dabs her watery eyes with her napkin, mortified to be acting so vulnerable in public. It's bloody lunchtime, and she's on the verge of crying. She hasn't even had a glass of her favourite vintage. At the ripe age of 41, Agnes deems herself too young for menopause; so what the hell is wrong with her?

Agnes's phone goes off again. Something inside her lifts. Maybe Doug does have a sixth sense like Matt after all. Could he have picked up on her pining? Agnes's heart skips a notch faster at the prospect of her holding her phone up to Donna, mouthing "it's Doug" while brandishing one finger and gleefully answering it. Instead, Agnes snorts seeing the number. She turns and shows Donna, who's now ending the call with her gallant husband to rejoin her. Donna offers a nurturing smile as the nurse's face appears on screen.

'What's the emergency this time?' Agnes teases, instantly wishing she hadn't.

The nurse's intelligent characteristics crumple. 'I'm sorry, girls. I really mean it. I know how long it's been. I'm so, so sorry to flake out on our Tuesdays lately, but I'm not going to make this one either.'

Kristy looks defeated. ‘I’ve got no seconds to grab something to eat or else I’m not going to get through my shift. Two nurses have cried sick, again!’ She sighs.

Agnes bites her tongue, letting Donna’s soothing octaves digitally massage Kristy through the phone.

‘We miss you,’ Donna adds, ‘but you know we know you are needed, and we get it.’

You do important work. We’re here for you always. We’re not going anywhere. We understand. No stress. There’s a Tuesday with us every week, always.’

‘And here I thought I was the writer.’ Agnes grins, nudging Donna. ‘What she said.’

Agnes takes in the truly haggard appearance of Kristy. Maybe because it appears to be darker where she is, which looks to be some sort of cupboard. Her usually lively hair, sugary brown, looks flat and faded. Her healthy olive skin, sallow. Her nurturing features seem on the brink of a flash flood. She looks worse than Agnes felt a moment ago.

‘We love you, love.’ Agnes says in solidarity. No other words, necessary. Kristy musters a crooked smile before signing off. Agnes makes a mental note to organise one of their infamous pinot and platter nights at Kristy’s. Even if they have to join her in the hospital toilets for half a second to scoff a piece of bread for lunch, they’d make the effort.

‘So,’ she turns her attention to Donna, ‘go on then, don’t hold back, how’s Mr wonderful, Matt?’

‘Oh, Agnes. What can I say. He’s simply wonderful,’ Donna gushes, uncontrollably grinning from one over-pierced ear to the other. Although this is nothing new, the sudden hollow feeling clawing its way through Agnes is. She grips the edge of her seat to steady herself, caught off guard by it. What the hell is happening to her?



Approaching the salon, the queasiness in the pit of Donna's stomach returns with a vengeance, attacking her happy mood. A lifted mood generally only Agnes or Kristy can raise after her morning at *Hair by Amanda*. Still, knowing Nan is her next client curbs the sickness. She swallows it back down, entering the shop to set up.

'May these tiny hairs from which I am about to cut be happy and peaceful. May no harm come to them, may no harm come to us.' Donna breathes in, blowing a deep breath out, opening her eyes at the exact same time as Nan. A warm, comforting look passes between them. Donna squeezes Nan's brittle shoulders before arching her scissors and taking her first snip.

Without even turning, Donna senses Amanda's sharp gaze stabbing into the back of her. She ignores it, concentrating on Nan's crown. Maddison, the junior stylist, places a large saucer of lukewarm tea just-the-way-Nan-likes-it in front of her, alongside a slab of thick banana bread with butter.

'Oh, look at that, thank you dear,' says Nan, gratefully.

'Thanks, Mads,' says Donna, combing Nan's short strands, gliding them between her fingers for measure before culling. They curl, falling to the dizzying black and white-chequered floor, where a small pile begins to gather. 'So, what's new, Nan?' says Donna, working her way around her head.

The wrinkles around Nan's lips widen along her cheeks. 'Oh, you know me, party, party, party. Never a dull moment in Nan's life; so many options to choose from: the Prime Minister's ball, the society of the ladies' luncheon.'

Donna smiles, amusingly. 'You've a better social life than me, Nan,' she says, pausing to let Nan lean forward and sip her tea.

'No, it's been a few trips to the library to get the new Natasha Lester and an appointment at Doctor Clark's to check my levels.'

‘How is your diabetes?’

‘Oh, you know, can’t keep me down.’

Donna’s chest swells. Nan struggles, she knows. Like many who sit in her chair, Donna isn’t just a hairdresser; she’s counsellor. Sometimes she wishes the secrets her clients tell her could be untold. Some clients feel the need to unload on her to relax. Others ignore her completely. It’s only Nan and a select few who actually have a decent conversation with her. Don’t air their dirty laundry. Have a bit of banter, as Nan likes to call it. That kind of light heartedness makes the day less painful. Makes time go quicker. These are the clients Donna cuts hair for. These are the clients she stays for.

Amanda materialises by her side. Heat creeps up Donna’s neck. Nan goes rigid beneath her fingertips.

‘And how are you, Nan?’ shouts Amanda, transparently.

‘Very well thank you,’ Nan shouts back, playing the deaf, dithery old woman Amanda’s pegged her for.

Amanda waits to hear more. But Nan ignores her. Donna loves her for it.

‘Good to hear. Good to hear. Well, mind how you go. And Donna, watch how much you’re taking off the ends there, we don’t want Nan leaving looking like she’s been scalped. It’s bad for business, *comprendé*.’

Comprendé. Amanda isn’t even Spanish, but excessively uses the word *comprendé* as part of her reigning authority.

The peaceful energy Donna and Nan emanate wavers. Donna focuses on her little broken wooden Buddha, propped up against the plant climbing the full-length mirror in front of Nan.

‘All under control, Amanda,’ she says in a sing-song voice.

Nan and Donna remain mute until she goes.

‘So, I think Doctor Clark fancies me,’ says Nan, slicing through the tension Amanda leaves in her wake.

A grin curls back onto Donna's face, knowing Doctor Clark to be a very young, very handsome newly wedded doctor.

'I told him he's not my type you see, doesn't earn enough money.'

Donna puts the scissors down for a moment, clutching her chest, chuckling. 'Oh Nan, you crack me up.'

'Happy to be of service, you can leave my tip there,' she says, tapping the counter. Once Donna dries off Nan's hair. They finish up. 'How's that for you, Nan?'

'Oh Donna, you really do make me look a thousand years younger; the bachelor's at senior swimming better watch out.'

'Oh, Nan,' says Donna, helping her with her gown and stepping off the chair. Donna notices Nan wince, trying to hide it. She collects Nan's bag and passes her things to her.

Walking to the counter, Donna takes her arm to support her as the junior girls swoop in to clean up the hair with their utensils.

'I'm sure Nan can manage on her own, Donna. No need to fondle the clients, *comprendé*. \$45 Nan.' Amanda rudely rings up the till.

'You're forgetting the senior's discount, Amanda,' says Donna.

Amanda snorts. 'Oh, we mustn't forget that now shall we, however will we eat.' Nan fumbles in her purse for the right amount. Donna knows what's coming next.

'Amanda, can I borrow you for a second,' calls Sage, a young stylist, from the other end of the salon.

Donna throws her a grateful look. Amanda shuffles off to help Sage. After Nan pays Donna, she helps her outside. 'Thanks, Nan. I'm so sorry about Amanda, she...'

'You don't need to apologise every time dear. I know Amanda's type. She's not happy because I'm taller than her.'

Donna bursts out laughing.

'And, well, you tower her. So, anyways I best be off. Take care lovey

and I'll see you next week.'

Donna watches Nan go to the bus stop as the number 998 rolls along and she slowly climbs on. The nausea is overwhelming now. Donna wants to leg it, but she can't. She has a job to do. A duty to her clients. They need her. They depend on her. Donna clears her throat, steadying herself against the door frame re-entering the salon.

'Do you think we're running a bloody charity here, Donna? Senior's discount. Since when?' snarls Amanda.

'Since always, Amanda, you installed it, remember, to keep up with the Bala Way hair mart.'

'Bloody perms, we're a high-end hair salon. We should be taking perms off the menu if that's the kind of people we attract.' Amanda gestures outside. 'All Nan comes here for is to freeload on tea and banana bread.'

A few clients look up from their magazines.

'She brings the bread in for all of us,' says Donna, eyeing the tiny crumb on Amanda's shirt, knowing too well she's already hoofed half the loaf.

'Still, if Nan calls again, we're too busy to have her in, *comprendé*.'

It was definitely not *comprendé*, but Donna feels herself nodding anyway.



Kristy hangs up the phone from her friends. Useless. She swats her tears roughly with the back of her hand. Loser. Lobbing her untouched sandwich into the bin, she slips her phone back inside her scrubs, then splashes cool water onto her puffy eyes. Failure. She takes a final moment. A deep breath before opening the bathroom door and being swallowed back into Emergency Department madness.

It's abuzz with the few nurses who actually turned up for their shift, not many. 'Buckle up, Kristy, we're in for a wild one. You take bays 2 down to 10. I'll do the west corridor. Yell out if you need a hand, the workload today is going to be a killer.'

Kristy lets out the breath she realises she's withholding. Her phone palpates inside her pocket with a message. Once she's sure of her duties, Kristy takes a sneak peek while in the drug room.

You are late paying your water bill. If you don't make payment in 10 days, you will be fined.

Hasn't she paid that? Another ping, this one from Eden:

Won't be home for dinner, staying at Brad's.

Her eldest. Kristy's heart warms thinking of 19-going-on-30-year-old-Eden. Phone halfway back into her pocket, another ping. Email. The triplet's Year 4 swimming school excursion slip needs to be filled in. Kristy makes a mental note. Ping. Trevor, middle child:

Need pkd up after sKol.

Kristy:

Message Dad. Get off phone at school!

Despite another couple of notifications coming in hard and fast, she fights the urge and casts her phone away before returning to the busy floor. Having five kids could keep her phone busy all day if she let it.

'How are we doing in here?' Kristy says sunnily, entering bay 7.

The middle-aged man forces a smile. 'Surviving.' The middle-aged woman bedside sits up in her seat.

'That's what we like to hear,' says Kristy. She reviews the patient's notes, observing the figures on the monitor, marking them up.

'How's your chest pain on a scale of 1-10?'

'It's about a seven.'

Kristy nods. 'We should be able to top up your pain relief with something the doctor has already charted. I'll need to do another ECG

since the pain is still up there. If there isn't anything charted for this pain, I'll have to get the doctor to do a review and chart something so we can get this pain under control for you, okay. We're still waiting for your X-ray results and your bloods are running late. But the doctor will be in to see you shortly with all the results.' They both smile at her gratefully as she reviews the med chart, then walks out of the bay, making a mental list of all the things she needs to do.

She goes to check another couple of patients. Halfway going through to survey Mr Knight in bay 6, Kristy's muscles tense. She spots Karl in the waiting room speaking to the ED clerk.

'Karl, what are you doing here?' she hisses, approaching her estranged husband, who's holding one of their three eight-year-old's hands in the waiting area.

'Mum!' Khai throws excited arms around her waist.

She embraces him mechanically, kissing the top of his sticky up-sandy-same-as-Dad hair. 'You can't be here, Karl.'

'We thought we'd surprise you. Can you come for a coffee?'

'You can't keep doing this. I'm working. And not only that, but I'm also working like three people's jobs; I just don't have time to stop and chat, let alone grab a coffee.' Inside her scrub pocket, she digs her thumbnail into her palm.

Karl looks at his phone. 'Don't you usually have lunch now? Oh, it's Tuesday, don't you normally have lunch with the girls?'

It takes all of Kristy's professionalism not to swing her last baby from her arms and launch herself at him. Instead, she speaks very slowly, like talking to an infant. 'Yes Karl, a lunch break would be very nice. But that's not really possible at the moment. And yes, it's also Tuesday, and that's exactly when I usually try and have lunch with the girls, try being the operative word. I think I've been trying to have lunch for like the last six weeks.'

Karl looks at her blankly, a little hurt. ‘I thought it was a nice surprise: us.’

‘Yeah Mum,’ laughs Khai. ‘What’s wrong with us?’

‘Nothing’s wrong with you, my baby. It is a nice surprise, of course it’s a nice surprise. I just can’t have nice surprises, or any kind of surprises at work for that matter, *because I’m working*. And why aren’t you at school. Dentist, right?’

‘Yep, about that, can I get them to send you the bill? My benefit payments don’t hit my account until this evening, really late tonight so...’

A beep from bay 8 zaps Kristy back into action. ‘Whatever Karl, that’s me – I’ve got to go.’ She squeezes Khai again. ‘Love you, baby. I’ll see you at home.’ She walks away with Karl calling behind her.

‘Wait Kristy, what do you want me to feed the kids for dinner?’

She grits her teeth. Once again fighting the urge to keep running towards the exit in front of her, or simply beating the hell out of the paper chart she’s holding in her hand. What’s for dinner? What should he make the kids for dinner? 15 years of marriage, five kids later, or was it six counting Karl, and he was still asking her what he should make the kids for dinner!

Reaching the right room, Kristy punches her feelings deep down into the dark depths of her, masking them with a winning smile made up of strength, calmness and confidence. She enters the patient’s bay like the professional she is.

‘How are you, Mr Hobs?’ says Kristy.