The Song Not Sung

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In her hospital bed two days after her operation, Cheryl Smith’s own croaky singing woke her from her dream of flying:

... Ain’t it clear tha-at I... just... can’t... fit...

She’d been wearing that brightly striped, bell-trimmed dress from her adolescence as she soared in a blue sky, waving to her teaching colleagues in their grey school on the outskirts of the most isolated city in the world. She’d spent her whole life in those suburbs, where wattle birds rasped like gravel in tin cans and football and fireworks displays drew the biggest audiences. Time for someplace bigger, deeper, more sophisticated. Or maybe she just needed stronger painkillers.

Cheryl hadn’t had a flying dream since adolescence. She closed her eyes again. She couldn’t find her way back into the dream, but she remembered clearly the remaining lines of the Bob Dylan song she’d been garbling, despite not hearing it for decades. She’d loved his songs ever since she was thirteen, when she first heard The Times They Are A-Changin’ on the radio in her mother’s suburban blonde brick duplex, where nothing ever seemed to change. Cheryl’s father, a life insurance salesman, had abandoned them for another woman in Sydney two years before, waving to Cheryl from the back seat of a taxi headed for the airport, his shirt and suitcase both too full, his smile empty. Since then her mother had been blanketed by a dense depression that shifted slightly from day to day, but never really lifted.

Cheryl’s father never wrote or phoned in all the acne-scarred years of her adolescence, and she spoke of him to no one. Dylan’s music had seemed to her a lifeline, a connection to the real cities of the world, where she might one day find her clear skin and voice amongst more significant people and histories. In front of her wardrobe mirror at night, she practised being a backing singer for Dylan, crooning along to a cassette of Blonde on Blonde her best friend Ruby had copied from her parents’ LP. Summer weekends of her fourteenth year, Cheryl caught the bus to Port Beach to swim and stare at the horizon leading to New York, where Ruby said he lived.

The following autumn, Bob Dylan had toured Australia. She’d gone with Ruby to his Rolling Thunder Review concert in Perth’s new beige Colorbond-clad Entertainment Centre, circular and squat as a biscuit tin. She’d hurried past the surfers and old hippies smoking joints in the foyer, suddenly embarrassed by the tinkling of her silver bracelets and small Indian bells on the brightly striped dress she’d just sewn from a surfboard cover found on Port Beach. She’d decided at the last minute against wearing flowers in her hair:

She’d sung all the choruses as loudly as she could, hoping he’d hear her, but she was only one of many voices in the audience. Seeing the two nervous girls in the crowded wings clutching their autograph books after the show, Dylan had invited them backstage. She’d been so overwhelmed she’d only replied to his questions in monosyllables, echoed by Ruby.

‘How’dya enjoy the show?’
‘Good.’
‘Good.’
‘So what’s it like, living here?’
‘Good.’
‘Good.’
‘Know whatcha wanna do when you grow up?’
‘Good.’
'Doesn't make sense, Cheryl,' Ruby murmured. 'Cheryl, is it?' the singer grinned.

She was slightly shocked that he looked older than her father, hadn't been able to take her eyes off the deep lines bracketing his mouth and thin moustache. His smile looked almost like a grimace. After he'd signed their autograph books, she'd grabbed Ruby's arm and scuttled away, the silver bracelets and bells on her dress ringing like alarms as she ran, her palms clammy with nervousness. She'd sensed something like her destiny, and it seemed entwined with Dylan's. Maybe he'd picked her out because he'd known that she was even more amazing than his Sad Eyed Lady of the Lowlands.

What did he mean by basement clothes and hollow faith in that song, anyway? How childish she and Ruby must've appeared to him in their orthodontic braces and outlandish home-sewn garments, clutching their autograph books. Probably reminded him of his kids. Kindness or pity had made him invite them backstage. She pulled the white hospital blanket over her face. Too harsh, the new day's light.

'Bob Dylan's songs are irrelevant,' she'd declared to Ruby from the midst of a pile of dirty nappies about six years later. 'They make you crave for somewhere more exciting, but there's nowhere else people like us can go.'

That grinding journey through marriage, child-rearing, her teaching career and divorce. Everything she'd lost. Twilight and the smell of antiseptic dressing under the hospital blanket, tiny glimmers of light through the weave. Wouldn't it be great to meet Dylan again?

'Doctor's here to talk with you,' the morning shift nurse called cheerily. Lowering the blanket and sitting up to face the new day, Cheryl felt the stitches pulling where her left breast had been.

'My voice is still croaky.'

'It'll get better. Probably from the anaesthetic tubing. Good morning, doctor.'

'Morning. How are you today, Cheryl?' The oncologist, his suit black, his shirt white, his voice and hair smooth and grey. He looked nothing like Bob Dylan.

'Good.'

'Your hormone receptor and other results show you have about a fifty-fifty chance of the cancer recurring,' he said, scanning her file.

'Fifty-fifty,' she echoed numbly. It might mean a fair chance. It might mean not fair enough.

'I advise beginning chemotherapy in about eight weeks.'

'Does that mean more nausea? Will I lose my hair?'

'Yes and yes. Recover and relax before you begin. Take a holiday,' he appeared not to be joking. 'I'll call by again later,' he patted her knee briskly through the blanket, his smile sliding sideways along his face as he walked out the door with the nurse.

A holiday. What if the chemo didn't work and it was the last holiday she'd ever have? She wasn't sure where she'd been headed in her dream of flying, but she was certain it was somewhere she'd never been before.

When Cheryl returned from hospital and unpacked her bag, she tried to ignore her staid teaching clothes hanging in her wardrobe. How had her life become this regimented grey nightmare, so different to her young dreams of how it should be? Her mastectomy stitches hurt when she lifted her arm to change into a t-shirt. So much for taking a holiday; she thought, glimpsing her scar in the mirror, how can I ever really get away from this?

She went to her computer and clicked onto Explorer. She searched for Bob Dylan, found details of his tours for the coming year; publicity from Columbia Records; fans' gossip; and disconcertingly personal photos of him and his first wife Sarah with their infants maybe four decades earlier, each corner stamped with the name of the same photographer. Dylan looked bored; Sarah looked achingly beautiful, her pale face wistful above her blue dress. All the cosmetics in the world couldn't make a woman's eyes appear so immense and soulful, Cheryl thought enviously as she scrutinised her. No wonder he'd written those songs about her! Imagine that, being so beautiful and loved you inspired such poetry.

Cheryl was slightly gratified to read on another site that Sarah's Christian name was originally Shirley. Nearly as taggy as Cheryl. She scrolled through more photos and felt almost glad to see Sarah looking as suburban and tinsel-off in one of them as she had when her own child Zoe was young. The terrible semi-permed haircut, the bags under her eyes, the breakfast-table fatigue. Dylan looked depressed and slightly nerdy, not like a famous star at all. Still, the photo conveyed some sense of achievement. A man and woman with their child at the table. A plate of
toast. A pot of coffee. Cheryl had a photo like that of her ex-husband Max, Zoe, and herself. A good enough life, anyone looking at that photo would think. But the interior of that life had been fissured by discontent and longing so dense she wondered how it had cohered at all. Another website told her Dylan would be seventy years old soon. Clicking through the remaining web photos, she could find no photographs of Bob and Sarah together in old age.

She dreamed that night of meeting Bob Dylan in a crowded room somewhere in New York. He hadn’t aged since she’d met him in Perth, looked about fifty. In just a few sentences, she explained to him the most important things life had taught her since she first met him. He held her gaze, nodded. He said nothing, yet she could see he not only agreed with her, he approved of her wholeheartedly. Though nothing else occurred between them, it seemed clear their relationship would continue.

When she woke, her palms were clammy. She couldn’t remember what she’d told him, but the approval in his eyes remained. What she really wanted before she died.

Over the next few days, Cheryl was disconcerted by the persistence of her yearning to meet Bob Dylan again. A side-effect of the anaesthesia and painkillers? Or just middle-aged nostalgia, maybe? But it felt far more compelling than that, like a sense of her true destiny. Almost as if her adolescent meeting with the star had been an omen that she would share something more significant with him in future, and now, strangely, that future seemed imminent.

Cheryl trawled the web for more information about him. She was troubled to read on one website about Sarah’s apparent reasons for divorcing Bob, but told herself that if these were true, he would have changed with age. She searched for a way to contact him, but could find none. His recording company was based in Manhattan. She wrote him a short letter, mentioning the time she’d met him backstage at the Entertainment Centre. She concluded:

Your music has meant a lot to me. I’ve carried it inside all the way from my adolescence to my recent brush with death. I am thinking of visiting New York City soon, and would love to meet you again. Feel free to reply by email, post or phone.

She jotted down all her contact details, decided against signing herself with a more exotic name, and addressed the envelope to Mr Bob Dylan, care of Columbia Records in Manhattan. She looked the post office man in the eye as she handed it across the counter for express delivery, hoped he wouldn’t notice Dylan’s name on the envelope front.

Three weeks later, Cheryl found in her mailbox her unopened letter to Dylan, stamped with a stern pointing hand. NOT AT THIS ADDRESS – RETURN TO SENDER. USA POSTAL SERVICE. She hid it in the bottom of her handbag with the unused cotton prosthetic the hospital’s womens’ auxiliary had given her.

Her scar was healing, but the new shiny skin still looked dark pink, almost red. Her chemotherapy would begin in four weeks, her sick leave would be finished soon, and she was nearly fifty years old. So much to try and forget, and so little time left for forgetting. She clicked onto Internet Explorer again. Manhattan’s attractions shimmered on the screen: insouciant people in evening dress lounging in chandelivered hotel lobbies, the Statue of Liberty, Times Square, yellow taxis blurring past department store window displays. The sales immediately following Thanksgiving (November24) are the best time to bag a bargain in Manhattan.

Only a fortnight away! She might just be able to afford some stylish American clothes to conceal her deformed chest. Maybe she’d even find a blue dress like Sarah Dylan’s.

By that evening, Cheryl felt certain she wanted to go to New York City, Bob Dylan or no Bob Dylan. A real city, where she could forget the predictability of her daily routine and the unpredictability of her death; take paths she hadn’t taken; transform herself. Further encouraged by news reports of the strengthening of the Australian dollar against the American greenback, she snapped up a bargain Virgin airfare online.

She rang her pregnant daughter Zoe in Sydney and told her.

‘Are you sure you’re up to it so soon after your op? Your voice still sounds croaky. I was hoping you might come here instead.’ Cheryl’s two-year-old grand daughter Willow screamed in the background. ‘Bond a bit with Willow before the baby comes.’

‘Sorry. The fare’s non-refundable.’

‘What about terrorist attacks?’

‘Shouldn’t Willow be in bed?’

‘Sticking to routine’s not considered so important in childrearing these days, Mum. My girlfriend Wendy told me...’
New York hotels are expensive. God knows when I’m ever gonna get the chance to go.’ A door slammed, reducing Willows screaming to a sound like static. ‘But if you have to go, try the VRBO website. Much cheaper than hotels.’

‘VRBO?’

‘Vacation rental by owner. Wendy reckons Chelsea and Greenwich are the best areas to stay. Full of hipster history. Groovy for an old radical like you.’ Zoe sounded as if she was trying to be affectionate, but struggling to keep the sarcasm from her voice. ‘Well. I’d better go see to the monster, I guess.’

On the VRBO website, Cheryl found a homely looking apartment in Chelsea, half the price of the cheapest Manhattan hotel. Its owner, Maureen Dwyer, replied to her email enquiry within minutes, despite the twelve hour difference. About as far from here as I can get, thought Cheryl. At last! Maybe I’m about to find my true destiny. She could just afford it for four days.

She arrived in Manhattan in a yellow taxi on Thanksgiving Day. The trees had shed most of their leaves; the multistoreyed buildings allowed only thin slices of weak sunlight onto the streets. At 22nd Street in Chelsea, the taxi driver pulled up outside a severe red brick apartment building completely lacking the wrought-iron ornamentation of its older brownstone neighbours.

Cheryl dragged her suitcase up the front steps, pressed the buzzer labelled Maureen Dwyer. A pale, bleak-eyed woman about sixty years old opened the door onto a corridor that smelled of antiseptic and roasting poultry. Her pantyhose-beige hair hung limply around her face; the circles around her eyes were dark with age, pollutants or some illness, perhaps.

‘Maureen?’ Cheryl asked.

‘Cheryl no doubt.’ Maureen Dwyer yawned, pulled her grey cardigan closed over her grease-splattered apron. ‘Just cooking the Thanksgiving turkey. Gotta drag that up two floors,’ she said, eyeing Cheryl’s suitcase, ‘no elevator here.’ She handed Cheryl two keys. ‘This round one’s to let you in the front door here. Square one’s to let you in your apartment.’ She started up the stairs. ‘Well. Follow me.’

From the back, Maureen’s silver hair roots formed a circle like a skullcap above the dyed wisps. Cheryl dragged the suitcase behind her with her right hand, hoping to avoid stretching her mastectomy scar. Maureen stopped at the small second floor landing, opened the closest door onto a single room smaller than Cheryl’s bedroom at home, though it contained a kitchenette, a bed and one wall lined with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves. The other walls were painted a dull green, almost the colour of the surgical nurses’ overalls.

‘Careful not to let the quilt hang against the radiator. We don’t wanna see this nice little apartment go up in smoke, do we?’

‘Is breakfast included?’

‘Are you joking? At this price?’

‘It’s just – it’s listed online as a B&B.’

‘Penny cafes nearby. Anything from bagels to borscht.’ Maureen peered at the bookshelves. ‘Looks like someone stole the Zagat and Michelin guides from here. Too bad. A few cafes’ll probably open up after lunch today. Macy’s Thanksgiving float parade midtown in an hour or two, intersection of Broadway and 34th. Well. Turkey’s nearly ready. Just leave the balance money under my door, and I won’t disturb you anymore.’ Maureen smiled and sashayed half-heartedly to her rhyme before heading for the stairs.

In the closet-sized shower recess, the single chrome mixer tap looked impressively modern and large, but Cheryl couldn’t make it deliver warm water. After her cold shower, she pulled on her old grey coat over a teaching shirt and pants. She pushed the money under Maureen’s door on the way downstairs. Voices, clinking glasses and the smell of roast turkey and pumpkin pie wafted through the crack.

Ignoring her jetlag, Cheryl followed her Lonely Planet NYC Guide map into the dank grey concrete station under 21st Street and overcame her fear of terrorist subway attacks to buy herself a ticket to midtown for the float parade, but when she slid her ticket into the automated turnstile it wouldn’t turn. Invalid, the turnstile’s message screen flashed. The station was almost deserted.

Up on the street, she could see no taxis. She decided to walk instead. It wasn’t as cold as she thought it’d be. She unbuckled her coat so she didn’t get too sweaty walking, took her camera from her bag. Cafe signs advertised bagels, hamburgers, mile-high cakes, friendly service, but they were all closed. A wave of hunger welled and subsided beneath her fatigue. Maybe everyone was cooking Thanksgiving turkeys at home.
As Cheryl approached midtown, she realised that more than a few people in Manhattan didn't have enough money for a turkey, let alone a home. People begged on nearly every corner. She knew from television programs there were a lot of poor black people in New York City, but there seemed to be just as many whites begging. Those with handwritten signs announcing their plight were mostly silent. *Artist out of luck, work, and accommodation,* one young woman's cardboard sign read. Younger than Zoe, she sat behind it on the footpath, her lank brown hair hanging over her downturned face as if she was trying to hide herself. Other beggars were more forthright.

"You gotta few dollars help a homeless man getta hot dawg for Thanksgiving lunch?" A small wiry man with a wizened red face bowed jauntily and held his hand out to her. Cheryl pulled her handbag closer to her chest and hurried on. She couldn't really afford to donate, what with the need for clothes to conceal her mastectomy and goodness knows what other expenses up ahead. And how did you decide which beggars to give to? The further she walked along Broadway, the more of them approached her. Why's it so embarrassing, she wondered as she hurried along the footpath. Maybe because I feel too poor to give them anything, yet I'm obviously wealthy enough to be holidaying here? She hid her camera in her bag, walked a few more blocks.

The crowd thickened. Cheryl looked up to multi-storeyed electronic screens shimmering with advertisements. Times Square, no doubt! This was the Manhattan she'd expected, not all those beggars. Countless streamlined images: consumer goods, logos, desirable bodies in designer clothes, pert arses and cleavage. A sudden dull ache beneath her mastectomy scar.

Bright green digital news headlines circled like sharks underneath the advertising images. *UNEMPLOYMENT FIGURES INCREASE... OCCUPY WALL STREET PROTESTORS FORCED OUT... 4000 CITY WORKERS TO LOSE JOBS.* But the glow from the advertisements outshone the bad news, illuminating the onlookers' upturned faces, softened her ache. She took a couple of snapshots and lingered there in the warm press of tourists for ten minutes, strangely cheered by the signs of capitalism's endurance in tough economic times.

A sudden drum roll drifted towards her. The float parade, maybe? She headed towards it through the growing crowd.

On the street corner next to Macy's enormous artificial white Christmas tree, a black man in a suit sang *Guess the Lord Must be in New York City,* his voice swelling above the din of spectators gathering for the parade. As he finished his song, she accidentally kicked over the paper McDonald's cup half full of coins next to the sleeping-bag at his feet.

"Hey, Sugar. Take your hands off my fortune," he joked as she bent and retrieved the coins. His suit hems were frayed around the edges, but he smelled clean enough. As she straightened up, she noticed him glance at her chest. Her coat had tugged her shirt buttons to the breastless side of her chest, causing the top ones to come undone. As he whistled almost inaudibly under his breath, Cheryl quickly pulled her coat closed over her shirt. He'd seen her scar.

Mortified, she hurried around the corner, refastening her shirt buttons. Brass instruments blared as lurid inflated plastic floats and balloons lurched into view, bearing waving people dressed as Santas, elves, turkeys, nativity figures, donkeys, a Disney Snow White and dwarves. The singing homeless man came around the corner holding his cup of coins, waved at her.

"Say, you wanna sing with me?" he smiled. His face was smooth, but his hair was grey at the temples and his teeth were a bit chipped and slightly yellowed, the same shade as his torn OBAMA YES WE CAN t-shirt.

"Haven't got the voice for it."

"Aw! That don't matter. See the wealth I got to share with you? I got food stamps, too," he winked.

Cheryl shook her head and hurried away through the press of the crowd down Seventh Avenue, her heart hammering home her humiliation. She finally slowed down many blocks away. It was early afternoon already, the shadows of the skyscrapers lengthening and darkening the streets further. She'd walked longer than she'd thought.

She pulled out her Lonely Planet guide and looked up the paragraph on Bob Dylan; she headed back downtown through Chelsea to Greenwich Village. Search in vain amongst Mexican restaurants and gay bars for the fat black cat at her Lonely Planet said was still visible on the exterior wall of Bob Dylan's first performance venue; followed the guidebook map to MacDougal Street but couldn't find a trace of Cafe Wha? or the Folklore Centre, where he'd hung out with other musicians looking for gigs. And how unrecognisable was Jones Street, where the cover photo had been taken for *The Freewheelin' album.*

A fine drizzle halved a few streetlights. The Chelsea Hotel on 23rd Street, the guide book told her, was where Bob had rented an apartment for Sarah and written her *Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands.* Only one street away from the former Chelsea Café. She hurried westward, passing the Le Veau Piccadilly, the Regency, and the Royal, where the club Nancy Sinatra had owned was sometimes known as the Chelsea. She turned up 19th Street, and a large crowd formed, curious to see who had rung the dinner bell.

"Bob Dylan," a voice called out, "is here!"

"How's he been?"

"He's been fantastic. He's got a new album coming out."

"A new album?"

"Yes, I know."

"I'm on my way."

"Bob Dylan and the Jenkinson Bros. will be appearing at the Café next Wednesday."

"I know."

"I'm on my way."

"Bob Dylan!"

"Hello."

"What's he been up to?"

"He's been around."

"What's he been doing?"

"He's been recording."

"Where?"

"He's been recording."

"What have you been doing?"

"I've been waiting."

"Why?"

"I've been waiting."

"What have you been doing?"

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"I've been waiting."

"What have you been doing?"
Maureen Dwyer’s apartment! A good omen, surely. Maybe he still stayed at the Chelsea sometimes?

From the corner of 23rd, she saw the Chelsea’s pink neon sign glowing beneath its ten-storey red brick walls. She hurried past more brownstone apartments, their basement doors bearing signs for fortune tellers, yoga classes, massage. Two young men embraced behind an uncurtained window, an overweight Siamese cat yowled from a doorstep.

Close up, the hotel appeared Victorian. Wrought-iron ornamentation over hundreds of tall narrow windows, a closed donut cafe and a guitar shop flanking its pillared entrance and dusty glass double doors. She pushed through the doors into the lobby. A beige sculpture of a fat woman on a swing hung from the ceiling above the empty reception desk. Staring up at it, Cheryl nearly collided with a man carting a pile of plaster bags in a wheelbarrow.

‘Watch out, lady,’ he shouted from beneath a cloud of plaster dust, ‘yo tryin’a turn a black man white?’ He spoke like the servants she’d seen in movies.

‘Sorry.’

A middle-aged woman wearing a tightly-skirted dress and rectangular chrome spectacles rushed out from a side room. Cheryl thought her nose looked like Bob Dylan’s, wondered if she was Jewish, too. She’d read in her guidebook that a lot of Jews lived in Manhattan.

‘Can’t you read the signs?’ The woman pointed her cigarette holder towards the door. ‘Closed to the public for renovations.’

‘Oh. Sorry,’ Cheryl stepped back. ‘So I can’t have a look inside? I’ve come all the way from Australia.’

‘You’re not understanding me.’ The woman looked over the top of her glasses at Cheryl. ‘Closed — for — reno — vations!’ She leaned closer, exhaled her smoker’s breath until Cheryl backed out.

On the footpath outside, Cheryl stood in the drizzle looking at all the plaques commemorating famous people who’d stayed in the hotel. O. Henry. Thomas Wolfe. Brendan Behan. Dylan Thomas. But no Bob Dylan. Did you have to be dead as well as famous to get your name there? She peered into the lobby again. The bossy woman had gone. A photorealist painting of a baleful-eyed horse stared back at her. Assorted kitchen chairs and a Chesterfield couch clustered around a small Arabic copper table next to the fireplace. Like a junk shop, Cheryl thought, full of rejects from different eras. Had Bob ever sat there? An elderly man in a grey woollen overcoat pushed past her and through the glass doors, carrying groceries in brown paper bags stamped Whole Foods Market. Cheryl rushed in after him.

‘Excuse me,’ she whispered. ‘This hotel is closed, right?’

‘Sure is. But some of us long-term residents still live in the apartments.’ He had the same bruise-coloured skin under his eyes as Maureen Dwyer, but kinder brown eyes.

‘How long’ve you lived here?’

‘Bout fifty years.’

‘Lucky you!’

‘It’s a roof over my head,’ he shrugged.

‘I’ve come all the way from Australia to look inside.’

‘We get all sorts from all over the world wanting to do that.’ He sounded politely bored.

‘Does Bob Dylan still stay here?’

‘Nope. Long gone.’

‘D’you know where he went?’

‘You kidding? This is a big city, ma’am, and a big country. He guards his privacy, by all accounts. Can’t say I really blame him.’

‘Did you ever meet him?’

‘Can’t say I’d know if I did. Apparently he was a bit of a dark horse. Only thing I can remember is his voice. Sang he was strangling on spaghetti. Ve-rry artistic.’

‘I was hoping to see the rooms where he and his wife Sarah stayed.’

‘Not exactly sure which ones they’d be. Sixth floor, maybe.’

‘Can I see the sixth floor?’

‘Miz Rosenberg won’t allow it. Public liability insurance ’n all. You won’t find any traces of anyone ’cept the renovators there, anyways. Most rooms had holes knocked through their walls a few months ago. New owner’surned them into luxury apartments now.’
'Know any more about what happened when Dylan was here?'

'You want history? Don't know much about Bob Dylan, but years before him Dylan Thomas and his wife Caitlin covered their room in toothpaste when they had some drunken fight. He stayed in this hotel with some other woman the night he drank himself to death. Can't remember exact dates. Sometime around the eighties a deranged feminist shot Andy Warhol in the groin right where you're standing. We kinda just avoided the bloodstains for a few weeks. Cheryl looked down for stains, but only dust smeared the marble floor. 'Probably hasn't been vacuumed much since before your hero was here,' he commented. 'Hotel management never wasted money on cleaning when the musicians stayed here. Curtains and carpets were more dust than fabric.'

'Were all the famous guests in the sixties musicians?'

'Some writers, the odd actor escaping the Broadway hustle. One famous actor who couldn't afford to pay his bill knocked a hole in the wall to get his stuff from his room after management locked him out. No one paid any attention to his banging because there was always a din in here, with all those musicians rehearsing. Just sounded like part of the performance.'

'Did anyone else besides Bob Dylan write a famous love song here?'

'Not sure about love songs. The old man looked at her warily. Leonard Cohen wrote that song about Janis Joplin in the Chelsea. I never could work out whether she gave him hell or head on the unmade bed. Bob and Leonard both mumbled too much when they sang, if you want my opinion.' The old man looked over Cheryl's shoulder, as if he were waiting for someone to appear.

'When was the last time Bob Dylan stayed here?'

'No idea. All I know is the groupies moved in after the famous musicians moved out. Be a few decades ago now.' Did this man think she was a groupie? Cheryl hastily checked her coat buttons were fastened. 'A groupie who lived in the room down the corridor from me had a baby she said was conceived there to a famous father in 1970, but she wouldn't tell anyone who he was. Kept boasting about her baby's musical cry. She got thrown out by the old manager Stanley Bard when she made her baby a crib out of the drawer she stole from the reception desk.' The man took a serviette from his grocery bag, blew his nose on it.

'Do groupies still live here?'

'Lord no. New owners moved on everyone not paying full apartment rent.' The old man edged towards the lift. Plaster dust hung in the late afternoon light slanting through the glass doors. 'Well,' he concluded, pushing the lift button. 'Wouldn't stay here unless you wanna be asphyxiated. You best get outa here before Miz Rosenberg locks you in for the night. Safe journey!'

'Thanks.'

Walking back to her apartment, Cheryl decided not to bother unpacking her suitcase properly. Only a few days left. Why on earth had she thought Bob Dylan might be interested in meeting her, anyway? Her only claim was to insignificance; the most isolated city in the world was the only place she really belonged. A sudden deluge of rain and homesickness for her work mates' laconic resignation, the unfathomable ocean separating them from the rest of the world.

Something like a baby's cry woke Cheryl early the next afternoon: almost musical, haunted, but a bit croaky.

'Dad! Daddy! Her own voice; tears had pooled either side of her nose. She washed her face in the cold shower, made herself stale coffee from Maureen Dwyer's tiny fridge before setting out for midtown.

The same man sang next to Macy's Christmas tree again. She took a sidestreet to avoid him, went further uptown to look for clothes. In Bergdorf's, each floor looked something like a museum or exclusive hotel lobby, supercilious shop assistants presiding over a few racks of sparsely hung designer garments, accessories, and jewellery in timber-framed glass cabinets. As Cheryl checked the two-hundred-dollar price tag on a t-shirt, a well-groomed blonde assistant smirked at her with barely concealed disdain.

Cheryl hurried back out onto Fifth Avenue and through the thick crowd. A transvestite wearing impeccable make-up, a five o'clock shadow and a fur coat over a red dress towered on stilettos alongside her.

'What the fuck you starin' at?' the transvestite snapped at her, throwing a Macy's catalogue onto a bus stop bench and teetering to a taxi. As the taxi sped away, Cheryl picked the catalogue up and flicked through it. Their prices certainly looked like bargains compared to Bergdorf's. She headed back towards the beacon of Macy's Christmas tree.
The singing homeless man had gone, thank goodness. Inside Macy’s, red star-spangled signs hung from the ceilings under gold Christmas wreathes: **BELIEVE**. Most of the garments on that floor were for old women; there were polyester skirts and trousers with elasticised waists, baggy pastel pullovers. A wave of panic: her life could be finished soon, decades before she was ready to wear those kinds of clothes. **Believe in what?**

‘Excuse me,’ she asked the svelte young man at the information desk near the escalator. ‘Where are the sale clothing racks for... someone like me?’

He glanced desultorily at her. ‘The bargains for senior citizens are in the basement, ma’am,’ he replied, his gold teeth filings and cufflinks glistening.

Down in the basement, a forest of **SALE** and **BELIEVE** signs. Viscose, rayon and other synthetic blends in garish colours looked little different to the Myer offerings back in Australia, apart from a few prints on windcheaters and t-shirts that Cheryl guessed were approximations of American Indian designs. She didn’t want her clothes to look that kind of American. As she searched in vain for elegant, more concealing garments, a heavily jewelled redhead prowled the racks nearby, her enormous leather bag hanging between her shoulders like a broken vestigial wing. Two shop assistants began bickering with one another behind the counter.

‘If yo don’t get offa that chair and help me clear out those change rooms, Venus, I’m goin’ a kick yo black ass,’ frowned the thinnest young woman, scratching her corn rowed hair.

‘Can’t kick m’ass if I stay sitting, Latitia.’ Venus’s cerise-painted nails gleamed as she flicked her glossy straight mane over her shoulder.

Cheryl pulled a few half-price blouses and trousers from a nearby rack. Maybe they’d do for work. She put the trousers back. Her top half was the problem. She could do with some of those nighties for the chemotherapy; she’d sweated all hers yellow after her operation. Almost unbearable, the thought of everything she had to face back home.

Then, on a rack near the change room entrance, Cheryl saw something like a dream. She rubbed the azure blue fabric between her forefinger and thumb. Nearly the colour of Sarah Dylan’s dress in that photo. **Made in New York.** Marked down from $300 to $100. Cut elegantly and gathered above the bust, the dress had the impalpity of silk and the texture of fine linen. She lifted it from the rack, held it against her. The jewelled redhead glared.

The change rooms’ white fluorescent-lit cubicles exaggerated how pale and gaunt she’d become since her operation. She tried on the blue dress first. The fabric fell fluidly over her skin and scar, concealing her chest perfectly. She’d experienced nothing like this kind of pleasure for years. Her face glowed softly. She turned a full circle and stood for a minute admiring it in the mirror before hanging it over the chair’s armrest in the change room. She quickly tried on several blouses. The larger sizes concealed her problem adequately. A sign on the change-room wall advertised free shipping for purchases of $100 or more. How much could she buy before she’d be over her baggage allowance? She pulled on her old clothes, hurried to the till.

‘If I buy over a hundred dollars of stuff, can I get free shipping to Australia?’

‘Lessee, we need someone **smart** to answer that. Not too many of them around here,’ said Venus, elbowing the other assistant in the ribs.

‘Free shipping’s only within the United States,’ Latitia replied. ‘Say, you from Australia?’

‘Yeah.’

‘You talk so cool.’

‘I reckon you do, too,’ replied Cheryl.

‘**Ar reckon.** See what I mean? Cool’

‘I’ll just go and get the stuff I want from the change rooms.’

Cheryl gathered up the large blouses, but couldn’t see the blue dress. She looked under the chair and in the other change rooms, but saw only other rejected clothes from China. Heart escalating, she hurried to the till as Venus handed the redheaded her purchases in a white Macy’s bag emblazoned **BELIEVE** under a swathe of little red stars. The redheaded put her wallet in her handbag and sauntered off.

‘Excuse me. I had a blue dress in my change room I wanted to buy, but it’s gone,’ she told Venus.

‘Sort of a silky sky blue? That other woman just bought it. So-ry,’ said Venus.

‘She said it’d cover her lifetime of mistakes. She meant her fat butt and belly,’ explained Latitia.

‘It was the only one I really wanted! Can’t you call her back? Tell her I had it first?’

The two assistants stared at each other. ‘That’d be **tricky.** She’s one of our regular **difficult** customers,’ said Latitia.
Cheryl hurried after the redhead.
‘Excuse me! I had that blue dress first!’
‘Really? I found it abandoned in the change room. Finders keepers I guess,’ the woman drawled, hurrying off. Cheryl returned to the till.
‘Guess that leaves me with the blouses and nighties,’ she told Venus and Latitia. All prepared for more work and illness back in the most isolated city in the world.
‘We’ve given you 10% visitor discount on top of the sale price,’ said Latitia consolingly. ‘Have a nice afternoon,’ chimed Venus. ‘Safe journey,’ added Latitia, handing her two BELIEVE bags.
The bags didn’t feel full enough, considering the money she’d paid. She walked towards the entrance. *I’ve wasted my time and money in Macy’s buying badly cut rayon garments made in China, same as the shops back home.* She’d read somewhere that people who are depressed make more mistakes shopping.

As the automatic glass doors opened, a garlanded BELIEVE sign rippled overhead in the draught. Another wave of panic welled in her. **Believe in what?** Her life could be over soon, and she didn’t even know the answer to that. All she knew for sure was that the lost forever azure blue dress had made her look younger than she’d ever appear again.

Outside, the homeless man was singing *Down by the Riverside.* Hands pressed together under his chin, his profile aquiline, almost handsome. She hurried away so he wouldn’t see her. Despite the traffic noise, his powerful, lilting voice followed her all the way down the block, but when she got to the next corner and looked back at him, he was almost indistinguishable from the dark shadows cast by the skyscrapers. With better luck, she thought, he might’ve become famous.

On her last day, after spending the previous one queuing for hours to see the Empire State Building, the Statue of Liberty and the Museum of Modern Art, Cheryl could only just cram her new clothes into her suitcase. She didn’t have much money left to buy more, anyway. She flicked through her Lonely Planet, decided against spending her last afternoon on the museum mile. She walked back down Broadway, still hoping to experience the real New York, whatever that was. Maybe she’d even find another azure blue dress.

‘Hi again, Sugar,’ a man said softly. Because he wasn’t singing, she hadn’t noticed the homeless man on the Macy’s corner until she was standing right next to him.
‘Oh. Hi.’ She only glanced briefly at his face. Intimacy with him was the last thing she wanted on her last day. ‘You look sad. You from Australia?’
‘Yeah.’
‘Penny Aussies comin’ here now, what with your strong dollar ‘n’ all.’ He gestured surreptitiously towards her chest, lowered his voice. ‘Scuse me for asking, Sugar. I seen your scar the other day. Mastectomy, right?’ he murmured softly. ‘Wife had one.’
‘You have a wife?’
‘Had. Long time ago.’
Cheryl tugged her shirt hastily, felt the rub against her scar. Had his wife died from this disease?
‘Sorry to hear that,’ she said.
‘S’okay. She just moved on.’ Was that his euphemism for death? ‘Why you come all this way so soon after an operation like that?’
‘A holiday I guess.’ She pulled her coat tighter around her. ‘Actually, I came to look for clothes to conceal my... chest. The sales, you know. Today’s my last day here.’
‘You want bargains? You should go to the Goodwill Thrift Store on 25th. Got my suit there,’ he said proudly, wagging the lapels. The worn cuffs, the moth holes.
‘Thanks,’ she said. ‘But I don’t have much time left, and not much room in my luggage. I was also hoping... to save Bob Dylan a letter. D’you know where I could do that? I’m a fan of his.’
‘It’d probably never reach him. That ol’ hipster can’t stand fans. Hides out somewhere on the west coast when he’s not touring. Since you were a kid, and that’s a long time.’
‘Oh. Thanks,’ she said.
‘Fo’ what?’
The information.' She felt around in her pocket for some coins for him.
'Keep it. You have a good day now.'

Nearly a whole lifetime too late to make contact with Bob Dylan. As she entered Macy's, she told herself she didn't care. Anyway, he was probably a chauvinist. You could hear this clear enough in some of the lyrics to *Just Like a Woman*. She'd only ever really identified with its lines about it being time to quit.

'He hittin' on you?' a cosmetician in a white coat called from behind the closest counter. Her dazzling teeth. Probably bleached.

'Pardon?'

'That panhandler. He asking you for money?'

'Sort of.'

'You sound like an Aussie, right? Those panhandlers can spot the tourists. Best ignore 'em. Free makeover with quality product?'

'How much do I have to buy?'

'Zilch. No strings attached. Sit right here.' Cheryl sat on the high chrome chair like an infant while the cosmetician tied a large black bib around her neck and cleaned her face. 'Sure look like you could do with some colour.'

Cheryl could only just hear the homeless man outside, singing *Happy Holiday*.

'I've been ill.'

'He-e-ey! That's too bad. But you're an Aussie, right? Not as tough as New Yorkers, but tough enough. We'll fix you right up.' The cosmetician brushed some beige liquid over Cheryl's face in a loose cross, like a blessing. 'This is from our ultra-sheer translucent hypo-allergenic range.'

The glass doors hissed open and closed, admitting customers, shutting out snatches of the homeless man's song. The cosmetician anointed Cheryl's eyelids and cheeks with coloured powders, loaded her lashes with mascara.

'That blusher and shadow give you a real warm winter's glow.' The cosmetician stepped back, held up a mirror. 'Sure look radiant, honey.' Almost the same glow as Sarah Dylan's face in that web photo. 'You take care now,' the cosmetician beamed, unfastening the large bib with a flourish.

'Thank you.'

'And just ignore the panhandlers.'

Cheryl sprayed herself with some DKNY perfume from a sample bottle on the way down to the basement. She bought some I LOVE NY t-shirts for Zoe and Willow, a few more blouses for herself.

Outside, twilight already approached as the homeless man concluded his song, his fingertips pressed together under his chin. *As if he's praying*, Cheryl thought. People hurried past him. She tossed a few coins into his empty cup. The banks back home wouldn't buy back foreign coins, anyway.

'Thanks. Singin' my heart out for a dime,' the man smiled at her, 'but everyone else too busy shoppin' or goin' home.'

When Cheryl woke in the plane miles above an ocean at dawn, the other passengers around her were still sleeping. She turned to look behind her at the blue horizon leading to the rest of the world. It looked deeper than it ever had from Port Beach.

Already the details of her dream had begun ebbing away. Who'd she been speaking to? Not Bob Dylan, she was sure. She closed her eyes again and saw the singing homeless man, whose name she'd never thought to ask. Unable to find her way any further back into her dream, she rummaged through her handbag, felt the crumpled edge of her returned letter to Dylan. She took her digital camera out, clicked through the images of the Chelsea Hotel, the Statue of Liberty, the Empire State Building, and Times Square, to the photo she'd taken of the man as they'd farewell each other outside Macy's. When she zoomed in close on the little camera screen, she could see his chipped teeth, the worn cuffs on his Goodwill thrift store suit. A homeless man. A tourist's snapshot of surfaces.

Was that all? A minute before she'd taken that photo, he'd leaned towards her, his hands pressed together like a little shelter under his chin. She'd looked him directly in the eyes for the first time, and had seen in them another immense city she barely knew. *Should've sung with him. What did he show me?* Something she really needed, but her thoughts and hands had been too full of shopping back then.

'I never bought anything in Macy's,' he said, eyeing her bags. She pulled them close to her. 'Hope you had a real good holiday here, ma'am,' he'd said. 'I'd sure love to go to Oz one day. Being so far away must be really
something. The peace and quiet. I never bin for a holiday anywhere, y’ know.’ Foreigners to each other. Then, he’d reached right over and brushed her cheek with his hand. She’d almost screamed. Her new foundation smeared. ‘Scuse me. Just seeing if you skin’s still real. Say, look at that.’ He’d smiled at the pale pigment marking his dark hand. ‘A face full of product.’

‘Well, you know, it didn’t cost anything,’ she’d replied to him. ‘And life’s been hard lately. I had to do something to keep my spirits up.’

‘Sure.’ He’d looked her in the eye, nodding as if he understood. ‘I bin there lots, Sugar,’ he murmured, ‘why you think I sing my songs? I bin there, too.’