

THE GLASS HOUSE

a novel

by Brooke Dunnell

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The domestic airport had been a destination, back when Julia was a child. If a family friend or relative was flying into Perth the whole family drove out, passing through the security check on the ground floor so they could wait in the terminal for the plane. Julia had liked digging in her pockets for loose coins and keyrings, placing them in her own plastic tray and stepping through the metal detector when the agent waved her forward. She wanted people to think she was going somewhere.

The departure lounge had been fishbowl-shaped back then, with a handful of gates and an over-priced coffee shop. Julia liked to find her own little dead area, a sliver of space behind a bollard or next to a drink machine and away from check-in counters and seats. She set herself up with her knees on the dusty carpet and elbows on the windowsill, staring down to the tarmac below. The best was when she spotted a plane as a dot in the distance and watched it all the way through to the rumbling rush of the landing, and then its nose followed the line all the way to the gate her family was waiting at. It felt like being chosen.

The airport had grown over the years she'd been away. Every time she returned to see her father there were new shops, different walkways, changed entrances. Now, instead of departing from the centre of the building, passengers had to go around the back, as if they were sneaking out.

Exiting the aerobridge, it seemed like four or five planes had landed at once. Someone wheeled a cabin bag over Julia's foot. When she was finally able to funnel her way onto the escalators, she held the handrail and leaned back. She'd heard a story once of someone tripping right at the top of an escalator, hands tucked too deep in their pockets to break the fall. Now whenever she boarded one, Julia had to blink away the image of a skull cracked like an egg on the floor.

An ad over baggage claim read *Welcome to Perth!*, the colours leached with age. So she was in the right place. An old sign used to adorn the highway leaving the airport: *Welcome to Perth, A City for People*. She and Paul used to joke about what else a city could be for. Sheep? Ghosts?

That same highway was a lane wider now, Julia noticed from the taxi. There were new buildings on either side, office space and retail, half with leasing details posted in the windows. All of this couldn't have appeared since her last visit; it must have been under construction for years without her paying attention. She hadn't travelled to Perth by herself since she married Rowan.

Chatting on his phone the whole time, the driver took a route Julia could decipher, but only just, like someone speaking in the simple French you last studied in primary school. They headed west along the newly widened highway, then south on a dual carriageway, and then right onto another resurfaced arterial, the old traffic-lit intersections replaced by flyovers. She kept thinking she was in the north-eastern suburbs of Melbourne and having to correct herself. It had the same vague familiarity to it.

A shuttered corner store, its advertising for the local newspaper faded with sun. A brightly coloured childcare centre built on what had always been a vacant block. The trees that used to line the footpath outside the dentist's office and had to be shaped with chainsaws to fit around the power lines were all cut to stumps. Someone had painted blotchy white teeth on the bark.

The sign for their street appeared. Still chatting, the driver turned.

Julia had been back ten or twelve times in the past decade, but she couldn't remember feeling like this before. As if every little change had happened at once.

The driver stopped and pulled the handbrake. Julia fumbled in her wallet, imagining her father watching through a crack in the blinds. 'Thank you,' she said, reaching between the seats to swipe her card at the machine. The driver nodded at her in the rear-view mirror, his conversation uninterrupted, and drove off as soon as the boot was closed.

Unlike the roads and shops, the house hadn't changed. It was the same one her father had built when her mother accepted his proposal; the one they moved into two days after their wedding, the walls and windows uncovered. As she walked up the driveway, Julia realised it even smelled the same: of overcooked pasta and towels half-damp in the dryer.

She had a key but knew to knock. As she waited for Don she looked up into the eaves and saw the corners grey with spiderwebs, thin brown stains along the gutters.

The door opened and there was her father, stooped almost to her height. Melancholy filled her. He was always strident about good posture.

‘Oh,’ he said, seeming mildly surprised, though she’d rung from the cab rank to say she’d arrived. He leaned into his walking stick, the handle tucked against his hip at a forty-five-degree angle, rubber stopper on the other end barely catching the ground. ‘Already, is it?’

She kissed his cheek, scratchy with stubble. He wore a shirt of thick navy canvas buttoned to the neck, which seemed clean but had a faint whiff of must. His white hair was too long around his ears and had yellowed a little. Sebum shone on his scalp. ‘How are you, Dad?’

‘Ninety-two,’ he said, either mishearing her or trying to be droll. He shuffled aside to let her enter, touching his back to his closed bedroom door. ‘That cabbie,’ he went on as Julia pulled her suitcase inside, ‘a woman, was it?’

‘A man.’

He snuffled. ‘Bit of help with your luggage too much to ask?’

‘It’s fine, Dad.’

‘I hope you didn’t tip him.’

The wheels clacked against the slate floor as Julia moved along the hallway to the wing of smaller bedrooms: Paul’s, hers, and a spare. Don’s slippers scuffed behind her. ‘Not that one,’ he yelped as she stopped outside her childhood room. ‘There’s been a reconfiguration.’ He nodded to the last door. ‘I thought you’d be more comfortable.’

So, one space in the house *had* changed in the past forty years, Julia noted as she stepped inside. The room had always been a dumping ground for things that didn’t fit elsewhere: the family PC and printer, Paul’s fitness equipment, their mother’s sewing machine. Now all the junk was gone, replaced with a neat double bed and a dressing table, like a proper guest bedroom. The quilt was still crosshatched from being folded up in its packaging. ‘Dad! When did you do this?’

‘Do you like it?’

‘It’s very nice.’ She touched the metal bedframe, which squeaked. Later she’d have to find the allen key to tighten it up. ‘Well done.’

‘Thought you’d like somewhere comfortable to stay.’

When she and Rowan had come in the past, they slept in Paul’s old bunk beds, squeezing their luggage around the oversized furniture. The couple of times Evie had joined them she was next door, in Julia’s room.

'You've put a lot of effort in,' she said cautiously.

Don lifted his chin so she could see the ropes of his throat, bristled with white. 'The furniture people put it together for an extra fee.'

'That's great.'

Relaxing a little, Don brushed the end of the bed with his spare hand, the other braced against his stick. 'I thought, something fresh and new.'

'Lovely.'

'I liked the yellow. Cheery.'

Julia nodded. Flooded with sudden tiredness, she sat on the bed and yawned. 'Goodness,' she said.

'Would you like a little nap?'

'I don't know.' She picked up the pillows and smelled them: brand new. On the plane she'd had a middle seat and had to stay rigid, elbows bent into her waist to avoid disrupting the passengers on either side. 'I shouldn't. I need to adjust to the time difference.'

Don pushed his hand through the air in a dismissive gesture. 'You torture yourself.'

'No,' Julia argued, but the idea of trying to stay awake did seem overwhelming. She'd woken up at the equivalent of two a.m. in Perth, and there were still hours to go until sunset. Hours in which she'd have to be in this house; hours without contacting Rowan beyond the brief message she sent when the plane touched down. She lifted her legs from the floor and stretched along the mattress, which was firm but not unpleasantly so. It rustled underneath her. 'Just a power nap,' she said. 'Get me up in an hour, okay Dad?'

Nodding, Don reversed towards the door. 'Pull that curtain,' he said, and Julia half-rose from the bed to see the flimsy net curtains that used to adorn this room had been replaced by heavy block-outs. When she drew them closed everything darkened sweetly, like the day had been cancelled. He added unnecessarily, 'They're new, too.'

The afternoon passed in long, scattered dreams like clouds, and when Julia woke it was dark. There was no lamp in the guest room, so she had to find the light switch, blinking against the brightness.

Her stomach felt gnarled. She had no idea of the time, but she'd last eaten a dry aeroplane croissant very early in the morning. Opening the bedroom door, the light spilled out into the hallway, showing the treacherous route to the back part of the house: a chunky

telephone table piled with old *Yellow Pages*, crushed sneakers lined up along the skirting board, a mat with its corners curling at the entrance to the kitchen. How did Don navigate this obstacle course every single day?

Guessing that she'd wake hungry, Don had left a cling-wrapped plate of cheese and crackers on the bench. Julia ate it all, tapping the last knob of cheese along the porcelain to suck up any last crumbs. When she was finished, she took the plate to the sink, found a plastic cup and filled it with tap water, draining it in a few deep swallows.

The back third of her childhood home had full-length windows that looked out onto the backyard. The night was a deep grey, but Julia could make out the terracotta bricked patio and lawn beyond, both of them dry and bare. Right near the back fence was the old Hills Hoist, drooping to the right from when Paul used it to play Superman. Squinting, Julia saw a couple of items pegged out there, spinning slowly in the dark.

Footsteps tapped their way down from the front bedroom: Her father had always slept light. Julia shook her head. The dull *teck* sound of the stick was missing, meaning Don had risked a trip through the house with nothing to break his fall. Turning to face him, she put her hands on her hips and opened her mouth.

A dog stood there, peeking its snout into the kitchen. It was mid-sized, with a deep brown coat. Seeing her, its tail waved. It walked over to the breakfast bar and sat down, panting gently.

Dad doesn't have a dog, Julia thought, then reconsidered. *No one told me Dad got a dog*. 'Hey, mate,' she murmured, offering the animal the back of her wrist to sniff. It licked her arm gently and she took a hold of its collar, bright yellow with a paw-shaped tag. 'Biscuit,' she read. Thrumming its tail in recognition, the dog reached up with its front paws and revealed himself to be a boy. 'Well, there you go.' Scratching his jaw, she wondered where Biscuit had been when she got there, then remembered her father standing in the entryway with his bedroom door shut tight.

Straightening, she checked the clock and groaned. It was half-past eleven at night and she felt wide awake. If she'd felt intimidated by the endlessness of time earlier in the day, then it was much worse now, with the light gone, the silence, the appearance of a random dog. Despair sucked at her like the undertow of a wave. This was all too much, too much.

No, too big. The house was too big: that was the beginning and the end of the problem. It was a typical home for the outer suburbs, four bedrooms and two bathrooms on a seven-

hundred square metre block, with plenty of entertaining space inside and out. Even Samara's smart California bungalow didn't boast those dimensions. But instead of a middle-aged go-getter and an active teenager, this place housed only a reclusive ninety-two-year-old—and a dog, apparently. How many rooms could Don actually need? Julia ticked them off: his bedroom and toilet, the front room where he watched telly, the kitchen, the laundry. More than half the house was barely used.

But it did have a use, her father would argue; it held his stuff. The detritus of forty years of marriage, parenthood, widowerhood. Don wasn't a hoarder, but he was not organised, not tidy. Take this back area, for a start. One end of the breakfast table was piled with appliances, and sheets and blankets were stacked on the nearby sofa. To counteract the eternal cold of the slate floor, mats of various shapes and sizes had been scattered all over, ground down and dirty, their edges curling up like dead leaves. The long curtains meant to cover the back windows had segments that came away from the rod, so they didn't sit flat but gaped and bagged instead.

The house was great for children, at least those born in the eighties. Skidding Hot Wheels vehicles over the rocky landscape of the floor and jumping from chairs with arms extended to swat the slats holding up the raked ceiling. Deep baths where you could get your whole head below the surface, then crack your eyes open to find sunken toys. Slipping into the walk-in pantry or laundry cupboard for hide-and-seek, crouching low so the seeker didn't see your shadow through the louvred doors. The big backyard, the narrow space behind the shed, the shed itself with her father's woodworking tools had all been a whole universe for her and Paul to enjoy. Now the idea of her ageing father alone in this same complex space filled Julia with fear.

But he hadn't been alone, she tried to remind herself, still holding the edge of the bench. There were things in place to help him continue to be independent. His groceries were delivered, as were his medications and library books, and someone came twice a week to clean. A white button hung from a cord around his neck, ready to be squeezed in case of emergency. Julia wasn't sure what happened if it was deployed, if an agency would try to call Don first or just send someone right away, but she knew the subscription cost per month and had an app on her phone that connected to the device's battery, so she was alerted if the power was running down.

All these things had been put in place over several years, the result of many battles with Don to get him to see sense. The wins had been exhausting and only mildly satisfying. Julia and Paul knew how their father flouted the arrangements: he cancelled the cleaner if he didn't want to see anyone, he 'forgot' to loop the emergency button around his neck. Even if he'd bow down and do what they wanted, the accommodations were no longer fit for purpose. Julia was here to finalise them all, leaving her father unaided in his echoing cavern of memories. Don might consider that a victory, but even he must have known it was pyrrhic. They had to cancel the helpers because his needs were too great. It was time for him to move to a smaller place, somewhere with permanent, on-site care.

She didn't expect the process to be easy, but there was one advantage: he'd actually agreed to go. Paul couldn't give up the time to help, so it had been his task to talk their father into it. Somehow, seven years after losing his wife and at least a year since he could be said to be able to look after himself, Don had been convinced. Julia didn't know how her brother managed it. It would have been almost as much effort as packing up the house.

'Come on,' she whispered to the dog, leading him to the back door and sliding it open. Biscuit went outside, pissed obediently and came back in again, following her up the hallway. Her father's bedroom door was cracked open, his deep, regular snores seeping out, and the dog slid through the gap.

Don Lambett letting a dog in his room. Julia couldn't believe it.

She returned to the guest room and got back under the sheets. Staring up at the ceiling—beige with age, slivered with tea-coloured stains, watermarks in the corners from cracked tiles or who knew the fuck what—she imagined everything else that piled and suffocated and jammed this house: the possessions, the dog, her father, the past.