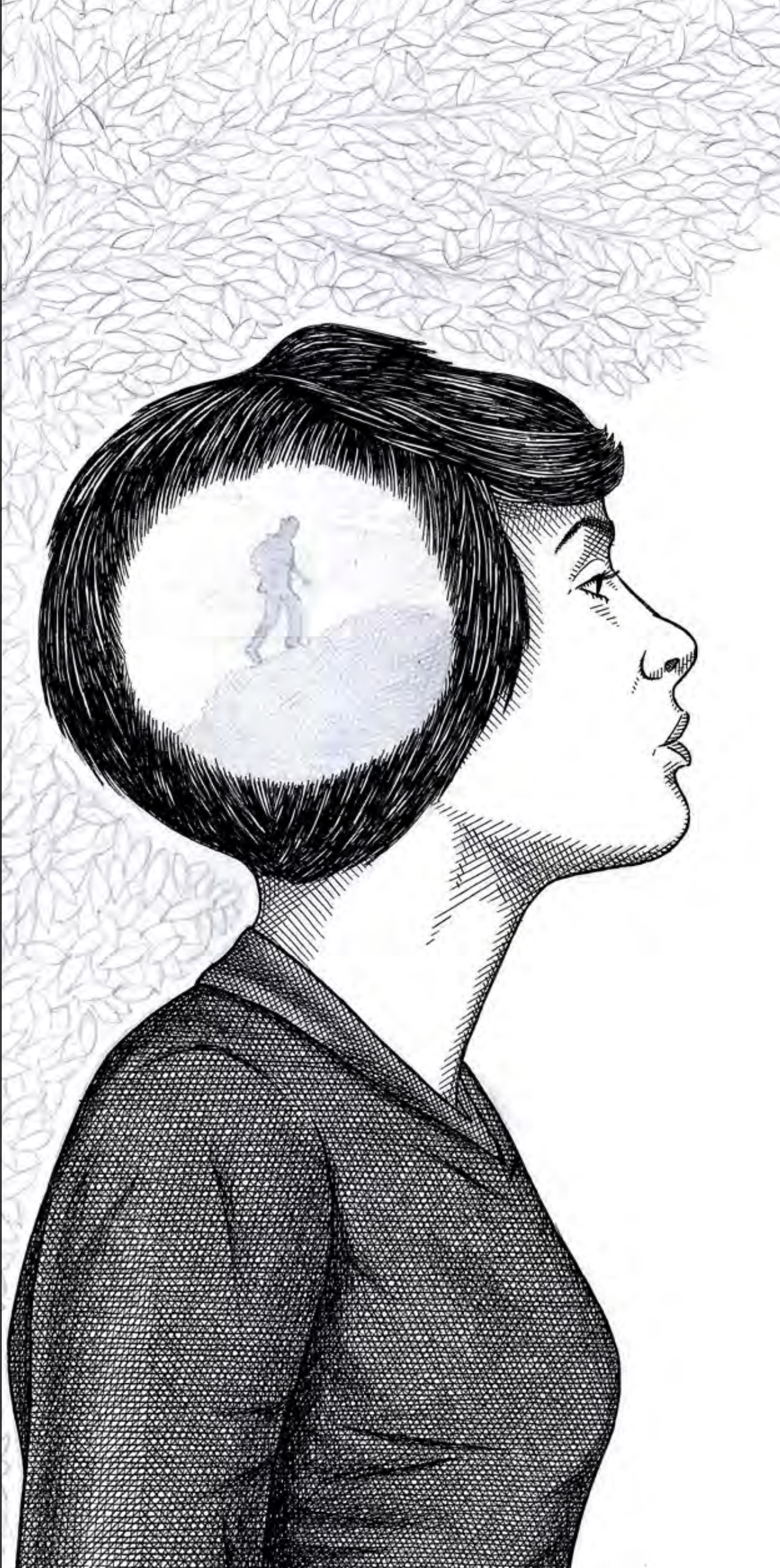


Goodbye, Julian

Lucy Palmer, a British journalist, is a new arrival in Papua New Guinea when she is introduced one night to a “good-looking, possibly pompous, hopelessly English” lawyer, Julian Thirlwall. She’s 31 and he’s 56 – a widower with four grown-up sons. The unconventional couple quickly become an item: on their wedding day, in a cathedral in [which city?], Lucy is several weeks pregnant with their first child. Eighteen months later, after a routine check-up, Thirlwall learns that he has cancer and the couple, with their young son George in tow, move to Australia. They buy a 40-hectare farm in East Kangaloon in NSW’s Southern Highlands, “within striking distance of St Vincent’s Hospital” in Sydney. Nine months after Thirlwall’s diagnosis, Palmer discovers she is pregnant with twins, but the couple’s rapture at the birth of Charlotte and Meg on December 16, 1998, is tempered by the discovery that Thirlwall’s myeloma, after a brief period of remission, is once more on the move. A subsequent bone marrow transplant fails and Palmer finds herself having to juggle the demands of her young family, the new farm and an adored husband who, by the beginning of 2001, is terminally ill



DEATH CAME in small moments. It came in the sound of cars pulling up at the house, a toilet flushing, a telephone trilling and the soft steady heartbeat of a morphine pump. It arrived in the soft touch of a hand on my shoulder and the wide-eyed gaze of a child. It moved quietly, like a lover, in the safety of the dark.

Julian lay upstairs, drifting, dreaming. Jean, the palliative nurse, arrived and put in a catheter to make Julian more comfortable and left some vials of morphine to cope with breakthrough pain if the pump was not adequate. She sat us all down and explained what was likely to happen.

She said that Julian would probably die within the next two days and briefed us on what to do if there was an unexpected haemorrhage, or if he developed pneumonia. Her matter-of-fact words floated around me as we walked outside towards her car. She gave me a heartfelt hug.

By early evening our two-year-old twins, Meg and Charlotte, had fallen asleep, seemingly oblivious to the events around them. Five-year-old George's eyes quietly betrayed his unspoken concern and he would barely leave my side. Nestled on a small mattress in front of the fire watching *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*, he refused to let me leave him until he finally drifted off.

The telephone rang again – a relative, a friend. “How is he?” Julian's sons, Oliver, Charles, Henry and Edward, stayed with him. As the evening unfolded, miraculously, a meal appeared. We ate in shifts. I sat at the table with Julian's long-standing friends, Meg and John Bell, who were visiting from England. Without hesitation they had driven five hours to be with us, to offer comfort, support. In every room there were candles burning, warming the sacred space.

My body ached and my mouth was dry. I stared down at the remnants of my uneaten dinner while above us doors quietly opened and closed. I wanted to stay there, safe and cocooned, away from what was waiting for me upstairs. Then I caught Meg's kind gaze and read her unspoken thought: You need to be with him.

I moved slowly, as though tranquillised. The journey to our bedroom was the longest walk I'd ever taken. Ten tall steps. I knew there was no turning back now, no miracle, no ambulance to call. There was nowhere left to hide.

Opening the bedroom door I saw a room full of figures. Alongside the family, half-formed

shadows now inhabited our room. I had a strong intuition that these were the spirits of people who had loved Julian and I was mystified, but strangely relieved, that such loving help in the only form that was of any use now, had finally arrived.

The bedroom was full of candles; faint lights threw unsteady patterns on the walls. From somewhere I could hear the swirling voice of Andrea Bocelli. I kneeled by Julian's side, put my cheek against his chest and drank him in. My love, my dearest love.

In my mind's eye I saw him, striding up Paga Hill in Port Moresby, a colossus full of vitality, stamina, determination. I thought I heard his deep, joyful laugh as he made fun of my short legs. “Come on!” he called. His greying hair glinted in the afternoon light as he disappeared over the brow of the hill. The sun was impossibly bright.

In the dimly lit bedroom, his breathing was becoming more laboured and he sounded uncomfortable. But was it pain? It was hard to tell what it meant. We were not doctors. We hovered around him, looking at one another.

Another hour passed. Gradually his breathing changed again. This time it was slower, heavier. From somewhere came a quiet internal nudge. It's time, be with him. I squeezed his hand, wondering if he could still hear me.

My mouth felt numb. “Jules, I love you,” I said. “We all love you.” As his breathing dropped again, I leaned in closer, my mouth brushing his cheek. “It's okay if you need to go. We're all going to be all right.”

I gripped his hand, my eyes intent on the soft folds and fine lines of his beloved, living face. And all the while I could sense he was slowly receding, being pulled away by some vast, unseen current, taking him somewhere that none of us could follow. I pressed down on a volcano of tears. Don't go. Don't leave me.

There was a long, quiet, lingering exhalation. The seconds passed as we waited for him to draw another breath. The beams of a passing car lit up the arc of intertwining roadside trees like a cathedral and the smell of jasmine, sickly and sweet, floated up through an open window.

There was a shift in the air, so brief, and then I felt my heart fill with the most profound sense of happiness. I looked around the room, imagining I would see something tangible to explain this unexpected exhilaration. The living faces I saw around me appeared frozen in sadness but I hoped this feeling was not mine alone.

Then I suddenly knew, without any hesitation, that this was not my joy at all. It was

Julian's. It was his relief that I felt, his absolute lightness now that he was free from the heavy pain of living. I stared at his face. He was absolutely gone.

I felt a soundless scream. At first it was slow, gathering like a storm in my belly. It surged upwards towards my throat then hurtled through my head, filling my ears, tearing at my hair, smothering my mouth, trapping me in silence.

The spirits who had inhabited the room only a few seconds before, faded into darkness. There were quiet prayers and then we gently washed Julian's body with lavender oil and water and removed the intrusive tubes and needles. Not knowing what more we could do, the boys went in search of a sofa to sleep on.

Eventually, just before dawn, I lay down next to Julian, careful not to disturb the sheet we had placed over his body. There was no strangeness in this at all. It felt just like any other night, creeping back to our bed after settling a child who had woken in the night. Waves of exhaustion, after several days with little sleep, carried me away.

AS MORNING light filled the room I became aware of the sound of feet drumming up the wooden stairs. Three small, anxious faces appeared beside me. I struggled out of a deep slumber, my mind coming to life to remember death. The events of the previous night pushed me into the day with a jolt.

“Mum?” said George, placing his hand on my shoulder. His wide eyes asked me the question I did not want to answer; it seemed he already knew. I got up and quietly ushered the children out of the room, closing the door behind me.

I'd not had time to really think about what to tell them. What should I have said to children who were only five and two? I crouched down and gathered them into my arms, and inhaled with gratitude the sweet earthy perfume of their bodies, their tousled, sleepy hair. We sat on the stairs while they waited for me to speak.

“Dad died last night,” I began. I could not say any more. The children all began to wriggle into me, their bony limbs jostling for space on my lap. I held them; held them tight.

“Daddy not here,” Meg sad finally, putting her arm around Charlotte's shoulder. She gazed out of the window into the clear spring morning. “He in the sky. I see his legs.”

This is an edited extract from A Bird On My Shoulder by Lucy Palmer (Allen & Unwin, \$30).