I have a lot of stuff; too much, some would say. At least Hayley would. And my husband. If you can still call him that.

I don’t like to waste anything. There’s so much waste these days. Perfectly good stuff going to landfill. Everything can be repurposed if you care to take the time. Sometimes it can take years to work out how it can be re-used but you get there in the end. Just last week, for instance, I cracked Harry’s water bowl. Removing it from his cage I slipped, smashed the blasted thing into a dozen splinters and my kneecap with it. Even as I pulled myself from the floor I was already thinking about what I could use instead. Save myself a trip to the shops. I don’t like to go out if I can help it. When she’s being nasty, which is most of the time these days, Hayley says I’m a recluse, a hermit. But I’m not really. I just prefer the company of birds.

So I was sifting through one of the piles—landmine mountains, Hayley calls them, but she doesn’t look at them right—and I find this plastic container that once held four doughnuts. There’s fluffy moss-coloured mould creeping round the insides. I stare at it for a long time. Twenty minutes, an hour maybe. I don’t own a clock. I get up when it gets light and I go to bed when it gets dark. That way I don’t have to waste money on electricity. And it’s pointless anyway, this marking out of time. Irrelevant. And the mould, it’s quite beautiful if you look closely. Like a dandelion head. I was tempted to blow at it, to see if it would puff apart in the same way, but I guess it was pretty caked on because only the surface ruffled. Then Harry squawked, telling me to get on with it.

Harry is a king parrot and a real beauty, my best mate, though the others are good company, too. I have forty-three birds and every one of them is different. Horace, now he’s a big flirt. He loves a cuddle and is most partial to a neck rub. Jupiter is people phobic—or maybe he’s just Hayley phobic—but he loves wrestling with me. You’d think he was a puppy the way he carries on. And there’s Virgil, he’s a cheeky bugger. He’ll give you a right nip if you give him the chance. He learnt to imitate the telephone so well I disconnected it. It was only Hayley who called anyway. Or salesmen types. Telling me they’d detected a problem with my Microsoft software, or some such nonsense. I don’t even own a computer. Anyway you get the point. All my birds live in Clive’s room since he had to leave. It wasn’t my fault, though Hayley insists on blaming me. If she knew he wasn’t her real dad maybe she wouldn’t care.

Some days I sit with my birds all day, forgetting to eat until the sun turns to a peach. Then if I can be bothered I might make myself a slice of bread with cheese and take it to bed. Sitting in their chitter is the most peaceful place I know. When Hayley visits she complains about the noise, says I have too many
birds and she’s going to dob me in to the RSPCA. In my view it’s people who make unnecessary noise.

Anyway Harry squawks come on and so I look for the scissors to cut out one of the doughnut wells. Eventually I find them in the bath among my collection of magazines. I’ve got every copy of Women’s Weekly dating back to 1988, the bicentennial year. The year Clive tattooed a trail of mice across his chest, one for each decade of his life. The year we stopped having sex, but not because of the mice.

The magazines don’t all fit in the bath, even though they’re piled to the ceiling. There’s also a wall of them crowding the other side of the room. To get to the taps I have to shimmy in through the doorway sideways, being careful that my elbows don’t scud against the door frame.

On one of her visits the first thing Hayley said was, ‘You stink.’

I didn’t point out that she smelled like tar.

‘Why don’t you ever take a bath?’ she said. And then, ‘Oh, that’s right, it’s loaded up with real useful stuff.’ She smiled in a way that was not pleasant and bit into a meat pie she’d bought. There was one for me, too, but I couldn’t even look at it. ‘It’s a clinical condition, Mum,’ she told me in this voice that made me think she would have made a great kindergarten teacher. Somehow she wound up as the person who holds the ‘Slow’ sign instead. You know, the ones who stand there all day next to the roadworks flipping it from ‘Stop’ to ‘Slow’ and back again. You can tell. She looks like she doesn’t move all day, the fat bunched up in places it shouldn’t be. She calls herself a traffic control manager, which is a trumped up job title if ever there was one. And certainly not the career choice I had in mind when we busted a gut to send her to the local Methodist school. Yet somehow she thinks all that extensive training in how to hold and swivel a stick has turned her into a psychologist.

‘What rot,’ I said.

‘You have what’s known as a severe over-attachment to things,’ she said.

I snorted. They’re not just things. Every thing has its own story, its own purpose.

‘More than one million Australians have a compulsive hoarding problem,’ she said, sounding like someone else. ‘It’s nothing to be ashamed of.’ And yet I see the way she clings at her own arms, tries to tie herself into a parcel and won’t touch anything. ‘You need help. For dad’s sake, too. He’s desperate to come back.’

I met Clive one July at a bar and grill. The kind with laminex tables and bench seats. The kind where you wouldn’t dare look under the table or you’d
never be brave enough to eat the food. It was a blind date. He had a mauve tie and big knuckles. We ordered soft drinks and spoke about the weather. He boasted about not having central heating and proudly showed me his chilblain-ridden fingers. Before the burgers had even arrived he said, 'I want to be up front with you. I don't want kids or commitment.' Then he went to take a leak. I almost left.

On our second date I gave him a friendship bracelet woven from three-coloured thread, because I wasn't sure. When he went to kiss me I turned my head and he stuck his tongue in my ear. On our third date we went to the movies. He whispered, 'I keep your bracelet in a tin and smell it every night before I go to sleep.'

I married him. For Hayley, I think. For the security. I wore a pale-blue dress that a friend loaned me. The sleeves were several inches too short and puffed up around my shoulders. Clive gave me a necklace. Pure gold he told me, but it wasn't. I'm not allergic to gold but I came up in great welts across my neck. When I walked up the aisle I thought of Hayley's dad. I left him because he would put on Top Gun and recite it word for word. With accents. And because he had a wife.

Clive was much older than I was. Ancient really. I can't be blamed for what happened. He's better off where he is. For both our sakes. But Hayley wouldn't let up. The problem is, she doesn't have enough to do. All that time standing on the road with only her own mind to occupy her. Well, it's not healthy. The exhaust fumes must be interfering with her cognitive processes. Why else would she come up with such a daft plan. It was for Clive, she said. So he could move back in, she said. I didn't even know they were coming. She bought a camera crew and a psychiatrist and a team of cleaners and a woman with a microphone in the shiniest red blouse I've ever see. She tiptoed through my house in matching shiny red heels. 'It'll air on Channel Ten,' she said. 'Sometime in May. We'll let you know.' And they made me sign a bunch of papers.

They rifled through my things. 'We won't take anything away without your permission,' the psychiatrist said. But they were moving everything. 'Sorting,' she said. I couldn't keep track of it all and I started to worry about them treading on things, or knocking them over, or sneaking stuff out. The birds were screaming like crazy and the psychiatrist spoke to me as if I was stupid or three years old and Hayley repeated whatever she said and the camera men poked their lenses into every private place.

'Why do you need this, Mum? Why do you need this?' Hayley kept saying. 'What're going to use all these empty jars for? There must be at least a hundred.'
And why do you need four VCRs? You don't even own a TV.' When she found a pile of cloth nappies at the bottom of the hallway closet she cried. 'These must be twenty-four years old, Mum. From when I was a baby.' She flapped her hand in front of her face as if that would stop the tears. I don’t know why she was crying.

Hayley disappeared for a while and I saw her through the window hugging Red Blouse and smoking a cigarette on the nature strip. A filthy habit.

The cameramen pretended I wasn’t there. Filmed me as if I was a puppet. ‘Fark,’ I heard one of them say. ‘This is the worst yet. Crazy old bat.’

When they found a couple of rats they pounced on them with glee. Couldn’t get the camera close enough. The man with the big hands picked one up by the tail. ‘Freakin ossified,’ he grinned, and waved it in the face of Red Blouse. ‘And see this,’ he said, picking up a Yellow Pages and flapping it at her. ‘Rats’ve chowed right through it.’

‘Put it down,’ Red Blouse said, trying to back out of the room, which wasn’t easy. ‘Just get it on film. Put one of the rats next to it.’ She took another step backwards and fell over a tureen which I use to catch drips when it rains. I was hoping she might’ve broken her pelvis like Clive did, but I guess her bones are still strong seeing as she only looks about fifteen.

They were there all day. It was a war. I had to fight for every tiny thing. They didn’t get as much as they wanted; I lost enough stories to fill a chain of public libraries. I felt as if they’d removed whole limbs. And I had no idea where anything was any more.

Hayley left a chocolate éclair on the counter, a reward. I went and sat with my birds. We were all shaking. Horace sat on my shoulder and rubbed his head under my ear. Harry let me flip him onto his back and stroke his tummy. He doesn’t normally but he knew I needed it. They’re good like that. When I finally tuck them back in for the night I found the éclair still there, sitting in its paper boat in a sea of newly scrubbed laminex. Beads of moisture on the chocolate, the cream a drooping tutu. The way it was positioned just so in all that space made me shudder.

I ate it in the end. To get rid of it. Licked out all the cream, then shoved in the bun in four mouthfuls. I left the paper boat there. A story of betrayal.

The whole song and dance was pointless anyway. Apparently it’s still not safe enough for Clive to move back in. The birds were pleased about that.