

EBONY IS HOME

'Tread lightly, she is near
Under the snow,
Speak gently, she can hear
The daisies grow.
All her bright golden hair Tarnished with rust,
She that was young and fair
Fallen to dust.'
Oscar Wilde

Here she is. A little girl spun from gold, from her hair to her heart-shaped face to her skin and smiling eyes. She grins, happy and beloved, a precious girl, forever nine. This is where she belongs, in a unique space forged from pain and tears and a mother's ferocious love.

Here she is, Ebony Simpson, although you can't see her.

Winter is in the air this Monday morning in Captains Flat, east of Canberra, but it's toasty inside the Outsider Gallery & Coffee Lounge, where Christine Simpson and her partner, artist Gunther Deix, welcome us warmly. With my hands thawing around a mug of Gunther's special Honduran coffee, we pass tables and chairs commandeered by diners on weekends, through to the back of the room where we settle in on couches by the fireplace in Ebony's Corner, a section of the café crammed with art, photos, and press clippings that tell of Christine's late daughter, whose silent voice calls from every crevice of these reclaimed rooms.

For Christine, this place is much more than a home and means of income. It is the place she says she had to build, a sacred space pulsating with the presence of her flower of a girl, where the violet walls tell a story of beauty, horror, despair, love and – yes – hope. Though Christine travels often to Ebony's grave at Thirlmere Cemetery to 'keep it tidy' and tend to the daisies – flourishing from a cutting that grew outside Ebony's bedroom window – she doesn't feel her daughter there. 'When Ebony died, people said, "Put her behind you and get on with your life," but I said, "No, I'll take her with me and get on with my life,"' says Christine, sixty, silver-haired and straight-backed. 'Ebony is our silent partner. I believe she's here. Everywhere you look, she's somewhere.'

The nation wept in 1992 when Ebony, nine, from Pheasants Nest, 100 kilometres south-west of Sydney, was abducted, sexually assaulted and murdered on her way home from school on a chill and blustery August nineteenth. Her sweet face smiled from the front pages, her uniform pristine and pressed for school portrait day, while the accompanying newsprint described her last moments of incomprehensible horror. The picture and the swarm of black words had no business being side by side. Ebony's death – as with the murders of Anita Cobby and Janine Balding before her – was branded onto the public consciousness, giving rise to a communal howl of rage. Once again, here was a reminder that to treasure your child, to present them loved and scrubbed on photo day, would never be enough to shield them from harm.

After losing Ebony, Christine delivered herself to grief. The spaces within that had once held her laughter, her essence, the sparks that made up who she was, were bare. Her body was a house

that once trilled with life and chatter and now lay echoing and desolate after the people had moved out. Her outside changed too. Grief carved a map of despair into the soft flesh of her face and her dark-blond hair withered to grey, the colour of the shroud that muted her world. 'Everything was grey. There was no sun, no flowers in the garden, no colour,' says Christine. 'Everything is grey, that's all you can see. It's like someone's pulled a blind down. Everything is grey.'

Empty of hope, of light, her arms empty of her baby; she took to her bed to mourn. Her sister and mother arrived to help Christine and her then husband, Peter, take care of their sons Tasman, fourteen, and Zackery, fifteen, and the shell of Christine followed instructions. 'My sister used to say, "Now get up and go and have a shower, then come back out here and eat that sandwich and have that cup of tea,"' says Christine. The basics of living – brushing her teeth, washing her hair, driving the car – became too much to handle for Christine, paralysed by a monstrous truth. 'It's just overwhelming, it's like another world, it's unreal,' she says, in a quiet, calm voice. 'It's like a movie you've watched, but it's not your life, it can't possibly be your life. Someone couldn't possibly have taken your daughter.'

It was at around this point, six months after Ebony's death, that she foresaw her future. 'I was lying in bed, just staring at the ceiling, and I left my body. I was up here and my body was down there and I was looking down on it,' says Christine. 'I hovered over myself for quite a while and I saw this place. I remember thinking, I have got another life in me.'

Here, in the hidey-hole of the former mining town of Captains Flat, is where Christine's second life has taken flight. 'I've built my own mental institution and retirement village. I had to build it myself because no one else would understand what I needed,' she says, laughing, and in her laughter I think I glimpse Ebony at sixty. The fact that Christine can laugh again is a testament to the healing powers of this stand-alone place, a century-old former pool hall the couple bought derelict in 1999 and moulded into something magical. 'I've done it all, I've built all this,' Christine says proudly, pointing out the skylight, the walls, and the masterpiece of a staircase leading up to a cosy loft. Her skill is astonishing.

From Friday to Sunday, the Outsider is a bustling restaurant and art gallery. Christine is a creative force, a gifted cook who whips up scrumptious cakes, pies, quiches and pastries (like a cook from a fairytale, without so much as glancing at a recipe) and serves up the hearty, flavoursome fare the café is renowned for. Barely minutes after Anibal and I arrived this morning, we're sitting down to the most delicious cooked breakfast we've ever had; through nurturing others, Christine nurtures herself. She pours the life that was denied her daughter, the unfulfilled promise of her golden future, into her wholesome meals.

Yet the food is only one aspect of what makes the Outsider special. There's Gunther's art, for he too is prolific in his celebration of life and love. Canvases of voluptuous women and sensuous landscapes crowd the walls, many painted in his signature technique of tiny hearts locked together. 'Nobody does it, it's original,' says Gunther, sixty-four, of his artistic method. 'I'm not part of the popular art movement, that's why we called it the Outsider Café.'

Christine's suffering also made her an outsider. Emptied of herself following Ebony's death, she merely drifted away from the world, as insubstantial as a meandering balloon. The further she floated, the less she cared about the trappings of 'normal' life. Chores such as paying bills and registering her car were rendered meaningless, and even though she's recovered something of her former self in this restorative setting, she continues to struggle with everyday tasks. 'I can't

have stress. I've been with Gunther for twelve years and we've never had a fight,' says Christine, whose marriage to Ebony's father ended five years after their daughter's death. 'I can't owe money, I've got no mortgage. I'm battling – mentally, not financially – to pay the phone bill, rates, the electricity. I've got to keep everything really simple, and here, I've got it down to the bare basics.' When a loved one is murdered, it tilts and cracks the earth beneath your feet, nothing is safe, nothing is secure. Untethered, those left behind wander an alien landscape where nothing is the same, yet everything is. 'Where do you go after murder? Has anyone got an answer to that? What do you do when someone murders your child? I mean of all things, your child, so precious and innocent,' she weeps. 'It's just unforgivable.'

On the wall behind me in Ebony's Corner hangs a mammoth painting by Gunther telling the story of Ebony's life. Parts of it are difficult to behold. Anchoring the artwork is Christine's cracked and wretched face, a searing depiction of naked sorrow, and around her, the stages of her little girl's life and death. There is her joyful, smiling face, her school, the bus she hopped off before the killer grabbed her, her last moments – a mask of pain reminiscent of Munch's 'The Scream' – the damn where she was drowned with her own schoolbag, her killer (a grey face behind bars), her funeral, and on it goes, beautiful and terrible. 'You know, I walk past that every day and people must think, 'Fancy having that hanging up there!' but it's just part of my life,' says Christine. 'Every day, people say, "Sorry to remind you," and I say, "What happened to Ebony, you can't take it away from me and I don't want you to take the pain away any more." It's my life. I've just learned to live with it.'

In the early years she survived by funnelling her rage and pain into a tireless fight to ensure that her daughter's killer, unemployed local Andrew Garforth, twenty-nine, would be jailed for the term of his natural life. She won. She sought and secured an official letter, the first of its kind, from the state government guaranteeing that he would never be released. 'I wanted justice,' says Christine, who also co-founded the Homicide Victims Support Group and established Ebony House, a sanctuary in Sydney's south for the families of murder victims. 'I knew if I didn't get justice, I wouldn't be standing here today and neither would my two sons.'

Today, her boys are fathers themselves and Christine delights in spoiling her five grandchildren when they come to visit. 'From the second they walk through the door, they're placing orders for pancakes, milkshakes, and strawberries served in bed,' she says with a chuckle. Of the two girls, the youngest, Georgia, four, 'is the spitting image of Ebony,' says Christine, who marvels at the chance to gaze again upon her daughter's eyes, her hair, and her beautiful smile. So much love enlaced with so much pain – like Gunther's tiny hearts, they are interconnected. It only takes a glance of a school uniform, or the turning tail-lights of a school bus, to return Christine to that winter's day when she sent 'Eb' to school, snug in her pink parka ... or to the night before, when she sat up in bed with her reading a story. Afterwards, they'd discussed 'stranger danger', a topic that had been broached in class. It was the last night Ebony slept in her bed. Coming here, to Captains Flat – where she's turned a crumbling relic into a haven and a thriving business – has slowly returned Christine to a semblance of 'normal'. The presence of her little girl helps her travel through each day: 'Sometimes I have to pinch myself to think she's gone, because I feel her around me so much.' In the mornings, she and Gunther sit in bed sipping tea, watching the bush wake up outside their bedroom window, and they talk. Sometimes, a mob of yellow-tailed black cockatoos soar past and Gunther will remark, 'Ebony's around,' knowing how the birds in their sombre suits mourned from the treetops at her funeral, a scene he

depicted in the painting about her life. And if it's a cold day dawning, they'll light the Outsider's three fireplaces before returning to bed for another cuppa. Winter days haunt Christine. 'When it's really windy and cold, I think, Gee, I wonder if she's got her coat on?', she says, and I fear my heart will burst. 'I still think of trying to keep her warm.'

After we've eaten an ample breakfast, had coffees and even sampled a smooth cab-merlot by the fire, Christine and Gunther lead the way next door, where a permanent exhibition of Gunther's work in an adjoining building pays tribute to Australia's murder victims. Every August, Christine and Gunther hold an opening here, where families come to remember their loved one, to toast their lives, to tell their stories.

More than thirty boxes – 'time capsules,' the artist calls them – line the walls, each encompassing an abbreviated life. Here is the stunning Anita Cobby; there is the girl-next-door Janine Balding, and so many others. Using photos and keepsakes supplied by the families, Gunther tenderly reconstructs the life, not death, of an absent mother, father, son or daughter. It's also such a tender way, it strikes me, for Gunther to bear some of his partner's burden. There's not a sound, other than our footfalls, inside this solemn space, where the reverence for the dead is palpable. Ebony is perhaps not the only spirit to dwell at the Outsider. But she is the youngest. I wander over to the little box capturing her life like a stilled butterfly. Here she is, from snowy-haired toddler, to schoolgirl and budding athlete. Pinned to the wall around it is a Christmas card to her mum signed, 'Form Ebony' [sic] and her sporting ribbons: she placed first in the 800-metre race and second in shot-putt. She wanted to be a policewoman, her mother tells me. She loved animals. Her favourite song was the Daryl Braithwaite pop hit, 'The Horses'. One year after Ebony died, Christine dreamt that she wandered into the lounge room to deliver a message. 'She said, "I can't stay very long. I'm in South Africa and I'm working with children, I've just come back to tell you I'm alright,"' recalls Christine. 'I've never forgotten it.' Now neither will I. It joins my memory of Angela Wood telling me, for Spirit Sisters, that in her vivid dream of her late daughter, Anna, the teenager told her that she was helping 'all the little ones who have gone too soon.'

On our way out, we explore the backyard by the river, where Christine's industrial-looking welded sculptures are blooming across the landscape. Her creativity seems to know no bounds. She's busy even in her sleep. 'Only about a month ago,' she says, 'I had a dream that I was building a wooden bed beside our bed, along the wall, just this little bed for Ebony to sleep in. I could see her clear as anything. She was the same age. It was just a little bed, 'cause you know, she was just nine.'

There is a sense of otherness here, I think, as we say our farewells. This could only be Christine and Gunther's place. And Ebony's. She's by her mother's side, though we can't see her, a little girl with honey-blond hair and smiling eyes, happy to be home.

It took me a year to even begin to draft this chapter. My heart broke every time I considered it, though I felt immensely privileged to be trusted with these women's stories. Researching Trevor Mason's story, which features in another chapter but is also set in Captains Flat, I stumbled upon an article about Christine rebuilding her life in that sleepy place, and wrote to request an interview. I was thrilled when she responded a couple of months later. I met Christine Simpson in May 2010 but didn't transcribe the interview until the following March. Ebony's fate, Ebony's face, haunted me.

When I returned from Captains Flat, it rained incessantly, mocking, it seemed to me, the tears I fought to bottle up. Having children was far from my thoughts in 1992, when Ebony was taken, but the story gouged a hole in my heart. One night, shortly before completing this book, I couldn't sleep for thinking of Ebony, of honouring her faithfully. Twice I opened my eyes and saw violet lights dancing in my bedroom. They were the colour of the walls at the Outsider Café and I wasn't afraid. Instead, I turned around and finally slept, thankful for a postcard from a faraway place lit up by children's smiles and the music of their laughter.