

Chapter from *Ducks on the Pond* by Anne Summers, Penguin Books 1999.

Chapter 13 ELSIE

It is not always obvious at the time that history is being made. Not when you are far too busy and inflamed with an idea whose time you hope has come to be peering into posterity, and when at least part of what you are doing is barely legal. You don't think much beyond the moment. Certainly none of us who founded Elsie Women's Refuge had any idea we had created a service that would prove to be so necessary there would be more than 300 such refuges throughout Australia in 1999, when Elsie celebrated her twenty-fifth anniversary. Elsie was truly an Australian original. Unlike many other initiatives of the Women's Liberation Movement, this was not a local version of an American import, and although there was a women's shelter in London the one we began owed nothing to it. Elsie was the work of a very small number of women initially, but soon became a cause that would involve thousands, many of whom have dedicated most of their working years to helping other women escape lives made intolerable by domestic violence.

According to my diary, on the night of Tuesday, 4 September 1973, lying alone in my bed in Johnston Street, East Balmain, 'I had my brilliant idea about the women's shelter'. Earlier that evening I had called in to see Jennifer Dakers, a friend who worked as a publicist for Angus and Robertson, the book publishers. She had read about a place called Chiswick Women's Aid, a shelter for battered women, in the English feminist journal *Spare Rib*. 'I wonder if there is a need for a place like that here?' she had said. Her comment startled me. Even though I had been working for two years on my book, it had not occurred to me to investigate violence against women in Australia.

Once the idea had been planted by Jennifer's almost casual mention of the English shelter, I became convinced we had to do something practical immediately to help women who were homeless or suffering from abuse at the hands of men who claimed to love them. I had no idea why I felt compelled to embark upon a strenuous new activity when I had just extricated myself from the *Refractory Girl* collective because I was having so much trouble writing my book. Maybe that was why: I wanted another diversion, another reason not to have to stay at my desk. But it was more than that. I was driven, in a way I seldom have been before or since.

I had never been hit, let alone beaten, so it wasn't that. When I reflect on it all these years later, it seems obvious that personal experience of another kind was probably what propelled me. I had after all been forced to leave my home at 16 because of my father. At the time I did not think of his treatment of me as violence because it was not physical abuse. Today we recognise that it takes many forms, and making life so unbearable that a teenage girl has to flee her home, her family, even the State, would these days be labelled a form of violence. However, I certainly did not make this connection as I set about trying to interest other women in working to set up a shelter. I suppose I, too, was craving a home. Only once since the age of 16 had I lived at the same address for more than a year and that was the two years I lived with John Summers in our house in Collinswood. Mostly I moved every six months. I professed to enjoy this footloose life. I had even lived out of my car for six weeks when I was between houses, and bragged about being a gipsy, but a part of me must have mourned the fact I had no home. Ironically, I discovered later that my father, too, had felt the need to provide refuge of a kind. For years after I left home he worked overnight once a week on roster at the St Vincent de Paul shelter for homeless men in Whitmore Square, Adelaide. With him it was a case of 'there but for the grace of God go I', as he told my mother.

Whatever reasons lurked in my unconscious, they were fed by powerful present-day realities, and it was these that provided the impetus to do something practical to help these women. One afternoon in 1971 I had found an elderly

woman lying in Queen Street, Newtown. She seemed to have fainted so I helped her up.

'Where do you live?' I asked. She was evasive, but I insisted.

'You can't go home alone,' I said. 'You've just had a nasty spell.'

She gestured vaguely towards one of the large, unkempt terrace houses just a few doors away from the place Paul Blacket and I shared with two other students, Ivor Indyk and Evelyn Juers.

Now which is your flat?' I said, keeping a grip on her arm as we neared the front door.

'I'll be all right now, dear,' she muttered. 'You go along.'

'I'm not going anywhere until I've got you sitting down with a cup of tea,' I said firmly, although it occurred to me that maybe she only had a room, not a flat. 'Show me which one is yours.'

She gave a small sound of distress as she flapped a hand towards a doorway under the stairs; she fumbled for her key and handed it to me. What lay behind that door was little better than a rat's nest, with space only for an upright chair and a bundle of rags that must have been her bed. It was no more than a metre wide and perhaps 3 metres long.

The old lady began to cry with embarrassment, but I acted as if I were in the habit of visiting people living in broom closets: 'You sit down and rest. I'm going to make you that cup of tea.'

There was a filthy communal kitchen where I managed to boil a kettle. I trembled with indignation. How could this happen? Old ladies living in cupboards, fainting with hunger. What sort of society were we?

A few weeks later there were screams in the street one Saturday night. Looking over our balcony Paul Blacket and I saw a young woman being chased by a man. She pounded on our front door, calling out in terror. We rushed down to open

the door, and led her to our kitchen. While I tried to calm her, Paul called the police. Ten minutes later they still had not shown up and her boyfriend was battering so heavily on our door it started to give way. I rang the police again, this time in a panic. His girlfriend left us in little doubt about what would happen if the man broke through the door. The police when they came were far from enthusiastic about being dragged out to 'a domestic'. One of them took the heavily built man into custody while the other officer asked the girl to press charges.

'I can't do that,' she said. 'He's m'boyfriend. He'd kill me.'

There was no budging her. The police pointed out that if she would not lay charges they could only keep him for a couple of hours. She shrugged, seeming to have forgotten her earlier fear.

'There's nothing we can do,' the police told us.

In this, my first encounter with domestic violence, I learned several hard lessons: most women were too fearful to lay charges, especially when they had to keep on living with their assailant; the police did not take such abuse seriously, perhaps because of their frustration at so rarely being able to press charges; and it did not pay to interfere in other people's fights. Our landlord considered it was our fault the door was smashed, so we had to pay for a new one. It was a disturbing experience, one that I had not forgotten a year later when I was sharing a house in Annandale with Lyndall Ryan and Warren Osmond, who had been at Adelaide University with me. I arrived home at late one evening to find a greatly distressed young woman with a baby sitting at our dining-room table with Warren. He introduced her as our neighbour from across the back fence. It seemed impossible but, baby in arms, she had scaled the 2-metre-high, corrugated-iron fence that separated the two houses to escape her husband, who was chasing her with a knife. This extraordinary feat underscored her desperation and her terror, and it still haunted me when Jennifer told me about Chiswick Women's Aid. Its founder, Erin Pizzey, had opened her refuge for battered wives in London in 1971, and her book *Scream Quietly or the*

Neighbours Will Hear, when it came out in 1974, was a harrowing account of what we were not yet calling domestic violence. One night some time after Jennifer's mention of the refuge I rang Erin in London. In the background I could hear babies crying as her harassed voice asked me what I wanted.

'How did you get started,' I asked. 'What do we need to know?'

'Just do it,' she said, long before anyone had heard of Nike, and slammed down the phone.

Jennifer and I started to make plans for a Sydney shelter. We were in many ways an unlikely pair for such a project. Jennifer was an elegant and stylish young woman who favoured feminine silk dresses and antique jewellery, while I wore only long Indian dresses or denim overalls and T-shirts and had recently added to my collection of glasses some chrome-framed 'aviators' with yellow lenses. I was a student, an activist and a writer with no experience in any kind of service provision. Although Jennifer had never done anything like this either and had a full-time job already, she was an extremely good organiser, practical and focused, with lots of useful connections around Sydney, which she immediately put to use in our search for possible premises. Together we visited the existing shelters for homeless women; there were only two, one run by the Salvation Army, the other by St Vincent de Paul. We discovered that while women and their children were offered a bed for the night, they were required to leave during the day. This meant the women had to drag their kids with them, first as they went to court to apply for maintenance before a chamber magistrate, then as they waited, usually for several hours, until the State government agency awarded them emergency relief funds. It was not uncommon for desperate women to spend hours moving from one coffee shop or milk bar to another, trying to quell boisterous children, searching for places to change nappies or breastfeed babies, while they waited for 6 o'clock when the shelters would once again admit them.

It was obvious to Jennifer and me that we would need to provide some form of child care and a safe place for women to leave their belongings during the day.

We also thought that perhaps we needed a different name to distinguish what we proposed to offer from the two shelters already in existence. Violence was not yet something that the women's movement had focused on; other issues such as health, abortion, equal pay and child care seemed more relevant. In a few months this would change, but at the end of 1973 no one was much interested in what we proposed to do.

Jennifer and I knew we needed more than two people to be successful, so we posted a notice at Women's House in Alberta Street announcing a meeting on Saturday, 10 November, to discuss setting up what we had already begun to call 'a refuge'. It would, our flyer said, 'provide one or two nights' free accommodation for women in various distress situations — women who have just arrived in Sydney and cannot afford hotel or hostel accommodation, women who need to escape from a difficult domestic situation (like, their husband is beating them up), women who, for any reason, find themselves without shelter for the night.' To make this centre a reality, it concluded, 'we need, basically, a group of people who are committed to seeing it established and who are prepared to work regularly at the centre on a roster system.' It is noteworthy in retrospect that we never doubted our ability to be able to run a refuge. In fact, we had no idea what we were getting ourselves into. We were so preoccupied with finding premises that we had not thought through what might happen once we opened our doors. This was probably just as well or we might never have done it. Only four other women turned up to our November meeting, but they proved to be a dedicated and determined group and between us we made it happen, a mere five months later.

These women are the true 'mothers' of the refuge movement because without them there would have been no Elsie, and without Elsie as the catalyst it is doubtful that women's refuges would have sprouted as quickly as they did all over Australia, so that within five years there were a hundred refuges operating. We were a truly disparate group in age, background and occupation and perhaps that is what gave us our unique energy. The dark-haired, vivacious Carole Baker was an energetic member of WEL; she was an alderman on the North Sydney

Council, and would later become its first woman mayor. Margaret Power was a tall, shy woman, with long, straight blonde hair, who taught in the Economics Department at Sydney University; early in 1973 she and several colleagues devised a Political Economy of Women interdisciplinary course, which was to inform and inspire over 1500 students in the twenty-one years she taught it before leaving academic life to take up teaching yoga. Lina Clayton was there, too, but unfortunately I have been unable to discover anything about her subsequent life. Then there was Bessie Guthrie, the heart and soul of our group.

Bessie was an elderly Glebe woman, who had once worked as a publisher and was a passionate crusader on behalf of young women who were incarcerated in girls' 'homes'. The girls were sent to Bidura in Glebe and similar homes for what was known as EMD: the courts had determined that, because they were under the age of consent and having sex with their boyfriends, they had been 'exposed to moral danger'. It typified the hypocrisy of the times that the girls were charged and imprisoned while their boyfriends faced no penalty unless they were over the age of consent, in which case they were liable to be charged with 'carnal knowledge', the term used then for consensual but unlawful sex. Bessie had been a lone campaigner for years and was delighted in 1970 to discover the Sydney Women's Liberation shopfront in Glebe Point Road. She pushed open the door one evening and said to the startled group of young women inside, 'I've been waiting for you women to get here all my life.'

At the November 1973 meeting we allocated tasks to ourselves. Jennifer was responsible for raising money, Margaret for investigating food and equipment sources. Lina took on what the minutes of the meeting (yes, we were that formal — for a while!) described as welfare, while Carole and I undertook to find premises. Because of her position on the North Sydney Council, Carole knew several of the big property developers. One of them might see it as good public relations to give us a house, we reasoned. Only Ian Kiernan offered us a property, but it would have needed total renovation, including new plumbing. Much too daunting, Carole and I decided. Somehow we learned about a Commonwealth hostel in Burwood formerly used for migrants. It was much too big for us but it

was empty and in good condition, able to be used immediately. We wrote to Fred Daly, the Minister for Administrative Services, asking if we could use one of its buildings. We also asked Margaret Whitlam, who was on the board of Commonwealth Hostels Ltd, if she would use her influence to help us. She wrote back that while she approved of our plan, she felt one member of the board would be unable to influence such a decision. Fred Daly responded that he could not help us in our 'very worthwhile undertaking' because other government departments wanted the property. We were stumped. We had naively assumed that because our proposal so evidently met a social need we would have no trouble obtaining premises that were inexpensive or, preferably, free.

Then something so serendipitous occurred, I was sure it was a sign. On television one evening the ABC ran an expose of the Church of England as a slum landlord owning huge slabs of housing in Glebe and Edgecliff, which it was allowing to run down or deliberately keeping empty in order to sell to the federal government's urban renewal program. The next day I wrote to the archdiocese, setting out our plan and asking if we could have one of these houses for a moderate rental. The Church of England refused to meet with us. I was outraged that a church would deliberately keep houses vacant when there was such a need for low-income rental accommodation. My outrage gave way to a sense of entitlement. We needed a place, so we would take one. Because I had had some involvement in the resident action movement, I saw nothing wrong with squatting in unoccupied, developer-owned premises. It had been a political tactic used to save Victoria Street for low-income residents, and increasing numbers of young people who could not afford high rents were turning abandoned houses into 'squats'. The law gave 'squatters' rights' to anyone who was able to enter premises and establish residence; the owner then needed to go to court to get the squatter evicted. So I went on a walking tour of Glebe.

Eventually I found myself standing outside 73 Westmoreland Street, a single-storey terrace, with large, shuttered windows, and set back from the street. It seemed perfect: vacant, in good condition, windows intact, a big backyard for the kids to play in. Best of all it had a woman's name on the nameplate: Elsie. I could

not wait to tell the others. A few days later found Jennifer and me in the lane behind the house. While she stood guard, I scaled the fence and checked out as much of the house as I could. The bathroom, toilet and laundry were outside and although primitive, appeared to be in working order. I was relieved the Church of England had not apparently learned the developers' trick of deterring squatters by pouring concrete down the plumbing. Elsie was habitable. There was nothing to stop us now.

We were ready. We had accumulated some furniture and bedding; our enthusiasm was boundless. However, we were still short of people. We intended the refuge to be staffed, via a volunteer roster, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. There were not enough of us to do that. We had to find a way to enthuse WLM women about this project. Again a fortuitous event occurred. For International Women's Day in 1974, the movement had decided to hold a two-day commission on violence. The Women's Commission the previous year had been an emotional and cathartic experience for those present, so it was decided to repeat the format; we had all been moved by the honesty and the pain of the testimonies. Women had become braver about revealing the previously hidden sides of their lives to CR groups; however, it was quite a different thing to stand in front of 500 women and recount the story of your rape or the electric shock treatment forcibly administered after your 'nervous breakdown'. For the second commission, hundreds of us gathered again in the New South Wales Teachers Federation auditorium in early March. In sombre silence we listened as woman after woman stood up to tell her story. By the end of the first day a mood of palpable rage was emerging as we contemplated the violence that so many of our sisters had endured. On Sunday morning when we reconvened for several more hours of harrowing testimony, it was obvious that many of those present were looking for some way to channel that rage. What can we *do*? women asked each other. We can't stand by and let this happen. I decided to seize the moment. I joined the line of women waiting their turn at the microphone. By the time I had finished describing Elsie and made my appeal for more womanpower, the place was in uproar, with women screaming their enthusiastic support. The following

Thursday sixty women attended the meeting to work out the logistics for opening Elsie the next Saturday.

Early on 16 March 1974 more than fifty women assembled at a park in Glebe a few blocks away from Westmoreland Street; only those in the core group knew Elsie's address because we were afraid of leaks. If the police were tipped off they might prevent us from assuming occupancy. I felt a fluttering in my stomach as we turned the corner from St Johns Road. We were a motley band, heads high, singing, carrying balloons and buckets, streamers and shovels, taut with excitement and anticipation. Westmoreland Street was auspiciously quiet, I noted with relief. We reached Elsie and the group paused. Who was going to do it? I found myself shrinking back. I completely agreed with what we were about to do but somehow I could not bring myself to be the one actually to break in. Shayne Kelly, a tiny woman who later became lead singer in several women's bands, did it in the end. She forced a window with a shovel, hopped in and ran to open the front door. The first thing we had to do was change the locks. That was done in minutes. We had established residency. Then someone noticed that the attached house next door, which was the minor image of Elsie and shared a common backyard, was also empty. Why not? Who knows how much space we will need, we thought. Another shovel under the windowframe, a quick trip to the hardware store for another lock, and a rather larger than anticipated Elsie Women's Refuge had come into being.

The next few hours were frenzied as we worked to transform the abandoned cottages into a place of shelter. Women scrubbed walls and floors, cut grass, pulled weeds, set up the meagre furniture we had managed to accumulate. Soon the words 'Women's Refuge' in large orange capitals had been painted across the front wall of the two houses. While this activity was going on someone dropped a roneoed leaflet into the letterboxes of the street's remaining residents, explaining what we were doing and why. 'We will be orderly and quiet,' we promised. 'We hope you will support us.' By the end of the day several of the

neighbours had come to meet us and to give us bedding and kitchen utensils. Earlier in the week I had notified the media of what we proposed to do and promised to let them know the address once we were in. The television cameras soon arrived and I found myself giving a large number of interviews, explaining why we had committed this illegal action, stressing that we were the first place in Sydney to offer women sanctuary. The media treated us seriously and our actions received enormous publicity. Future refugees would keep their locations secret to avoid being harassed by angry husbands, but it was necessary for us as the first to publicise where we were so that women could find us. For the initial few days, while we waited for the women we were sure would come, I did a number of radio broadcasts, including one with John Laws, the king of Sydney morning commercial radio. He was very sympathetic and repeated Elsie's address and phone number several times after I had left the studio. We soon discovered the power of his program. More than one woman who was listening that morning jotted down the address of Elsie.

However, by the third day not a single woman had shown up. We could not help being a little apprehensive. What if we were wrong? Or what if the women were put off by our youth or our radicalism, or by the fact that we were squatting? We need not have worried. Our first resident, as they quickly came to be called to distinguish them from the collective that managed the refuge and the workers who ran it, arrived soon after. Peggy was a Scottish woman, with no family in Australia and nowhere to escape from the husband who constantly beat her. Watching television that Saturday night, she saw me talking about the refuge. Later that week, gathering only what they could carry, she and her two small boys got on a bus in the distant western suburb where they lived and found their way to our door. Peggy must have been somewhat taken aback by the rapturous welcome she received.

Peggy remained our only resident for just one day. And then reality hit. We suddenly had several dozen people to feed. Many of the women and children required medical attention or needed to talk to a social worker. We were lucky to be able to rely Leichhardt Women's Health Centre, but it was several kilometres

away and difficult to get to by public transport. So we needed a van. Often the women and kids had only the clothes they stood up in. So we needed clothes. They deserved some pleasures. So needed toys for the kids, cigarettes for their mothers, and means for an occasional trip to a film or the beach. Above all, needed several hundred dollars every week just for essentials. Where on earth were we going to get it?

I had expected the Labor government in Canberra would instantly see the need for a refuge and provide immediate fun, I think I naively expected a cheque in the next mail. The story our fight to get government money for Elsie, a battle that took over nine months before we received even temporary funding and was a key episode in the evolution of the relationship between the women's movement and the federal government, is told in the next chapter. The narrative for the moment is not about lobbying submissions; it is, rather, the story of Elsie, a rundown house that quickly became a legend and that succeeded because of the sheer determination of the women who started it and the women who lived there. Elsie survived because she had to. There was nowhere else for those women to go.

The refuge was soon in crisis. The place was overflowing with women and kids. We had unwittingly opened a floodgate. The women were invariably traumatised by the violence they had encountered at the hands of their husbands; the children even more badly affected. How can you explain to a little kid why daddy is hitting mummy? How can an inconsolable child comfort a distraught mother? The kids were an unanticipated problem: most of them had some form of behavioural problem and some of them were themselves aggressive. We didn't know how to cope with this. Nor had we foreseen that we would also attract single women with mental health or alcohol problems, who simply did not fit in with the mothers and children and whose problems were very different. Although at first we had said Elsie was for any woman who needed a bed, we had to redefine ourselves as solely a refuge for women and kids escaping domestic abuse. We also quickly learned we had to ban all alcohol and drugs from the premises. Each woman who walked through the door seemed to throw up a new, unplanned-for challenge. Above all, we had to confront the reality of violence,

something none of us had personally experienced. Some time in the first few weeks an older resident asked Margaret Power to feel her head; Margaret demurred, but when the woman insisted, her fingers felt a saucer-shaped depression. 'My husband did it,' the woman told Margaret. 'I've had a fractured skull three times.' That moment has stayed with Margaret ever since.

One night each week the collective met in Elsie's front room to discuss these problems. Each person on roster recorded in an exercise book all phone calls, new arrivals and donations and made a note of anything else that was relevant; the record became the meeting's agenda. Practical matters, such as ensuring there were enough women to keep the roster going for another week were dealt with, but there was also endless discussion of broader issues, such as how to advise women who wanted to return home. We were very divided on this subject. Some of us felt a woman was mad to go back to a man who beat her; she had to resist the patriarchy, we said. Others argued that we needed to be more compassionate towards — and realistic about — women who were facing impossible choices.

The residents were encouraged to attend the weekly meeting, and many were appalled to find that when it came to the running of the refuge we were pretty much making it up as we went along. Others, though, were too distressed to even notice our disorgani-sation. They drifted through each day like zombies, as if they were unable to comprehend where they were, and why. In the first six weeks Elsie provided refuge to forty-eight women and thirty-five children, numbers that severely strained the small, primitive houses. A few residents, disillusioned by our inexperience, went back to their husbands, but for most the chaos of Elsie was preferable to the rows and beatings they had run away from. Many of them pitched in with the cooking, pouring tins of vegetables into big pots to make stews, or tackled the endless piles of laundry. Dorrie, a woman with four children, who was one of Elsie's first residents, had been pushed down the stairs by her husband and admitted to hospital. One day listening to her battery radio in the kitchen while she did the washing up, she heard about Elsie. It was, she said later, 'a wonderful miracle'. After fourteen years of marriage she picked

up her kids and made her way to Glebe. Life was very hard for her for many years after that, but Dorrie still maintains that she never regretted leaving and that Elsie, for all its shortcomings, saved her.

While the collective sat in the front room and worried about where the next meal was coming from, a remarkable thing was occurring in the adjacent room. Those distraught and damaged women started talking to each other. Over endless cigarettes and cups of milky tea at a kitchen table where the veneer was peeling and there was nothing so nice as a tablecloth, they started to tell one another their stories. Dorrie, for instance, was shocked to learn other women had endured even worse beatings than hers. 'They'd been unconscious for days in hospital,' she said. 'They'd be black and blue all over.' Bobbie, another of Elsie's early residents, told of her incredulity at discovering that all the other women had been through 'the violence and abuse and emotional controlling' that she had experienced. That was when they realised, there can't be something wrong with *all* of us. And once that started to happen, the story of Elsie moved inexorably beyond the women who founded it, and the women who maintained the roster and answered the phones and kept the place going, and became the story of the women who sought refuge there and who together learned the strength to move on to new lives of independence and dignity. It was not easy. Many were driven back to their husbands by fear of loneliness as well as by lack of money or guilt about depriving their children of a father. Quite a few women went home, then returned to Elsie, some as many as four times, before they were finally able to leave for good.

Many of the women stayed in touch with Elsie after they had left, some joined the collective, others were happy to move on with never a backward glance. All of them, though, made Elsie what it was, giving the place a character that no institutional night shelter could hope to acquire. I don't want to give the impression that Elsie was a paradise because it was far from that. There was often not enough to eat, and when there was food it was often of the brown rice and vegetable variety that the collective deemed healthy but which most of the women, and all of their kids, simply loathed. There were clashes, many of them

heated and unresolved, as residents asserted themselves and defied the collective. We could not deny there were some class issues. Jennifer did an all-night roster duty wearing her second-hand fur coat because it was so cold, and earned the scorn of the residents and other workers. There were squabbles among the women and stand-up fights between the kids. This was hardly surprising: on some nights there were as many as twelve women and thirty children packed into the two houses. But despite this, in those early days there was a spirit of survival that was infectious. Elsie was as much in jeopardy as the women and kids it sheltered, and they knew that and were determined to keep the place alive.

Elsie also attracted a new brand of women's movement activist: those who were not interested in theory and conferences and endless debates but who yearned to do practical things to help women. These activists willingly took over the roster, drove women and kids to the doctor and did the thousand and one other things necessary to keep Elsie going. Many of them had had violence in their own backgrounds and were more able to help the shell-shocked residents than those, like me, whose heart was in the right place but had no practical experience and very little idea of what to do.

Kris Melmouth was one such activist. She not only helped with whatever needed to be done, she was not afraid to do the overnight shift on the roster, which meant sleeping in the front room and sometimes having to deal with angry husbands banging on the door. Kris kept a big piece of wood handy, just in case. She is still part of the Elsie collective. We were astounded by the generosity of many of the local merchants in Glebe, who gave us day-old bread and unsold meats and vegetables. Joyce Mayne, the furniture and whitegoods discounter, rang offering anything we needed. A truck bearing washing machines, dryers and a new refrigerator arrived a few days later. Cars would constantly stop outside Elsie and women with armfuls of clothing would run to our front door and leave these most welcome bundles. CAMP Inc., a gay organisation, donated a box of red T-shirts emblazoned with their symbol, which some residents oblivious to its meaning wore. A sex worker appeared at the door one night and handed over

\$25 — her takings from the previous day. The men from Glebe Rotary arrived one Saturday morning and asked what needed to be done. They spent the weekend putting in a new, secure back fence and building a playground for the kids. But there was no escaping the fact we were forcing already distressed women and children to live a hand-to-mouth existence. We had no income, and even with donated food we needed money to keep Elsie functioning. Jennifer and I went to see John Menadue, General Manager of News Limited, who was soon to become Whitlam's secretary of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. We explained our plight. John was immensely understanding and helpful. He arranged for the *Daily Mirror*, the group's afternoon tabloid, to run an appeal for Elsie. Each day for a week the paper ran sympathetic articles, interviews with residents and photographs of the squalid conditions. At the end of the week less than a hundred dollars had been pledged. The *Mirror's* readers were not interested. We were still totally broke.

The solution, when I thought about it, was obvious even if it wasn't legal. I lived in a house full of dope smokers, and although I didn't care much for marijuana's effects myself almost everyone I knew liked to have a little weed on hand. One of the men in my house was a small-time dealer, so I knew how easy it was to make money selling dope. Jim, as I will call him, agreed to tolerate some competition for what I assured him would be only a very short time. He even helped me get started. It was his donation to Elsie he said, as he introduced me to his supplier. Using borrowed money, I purchased a pound of marijuana (dope had yet to go metric) and laid it out on the dining-room table. I'd watched Jim divvy up plenty of times, but it was still a strange sight on my table, that pile of dried green weed, about 15 centimetres high. It represented a lot of money. A couple of the others in the house helped to divide the mound into sixteen equal lots, which we scooped into plastic baggies and sealed. I knew that most dealers divided the pound into twenty 'ounces', and even then often padded out the deals with oregano. I believed that if I did only sixteen ounces of pure weed, and thus provided undisputed value, my deals would sell quickly. I paid \$200 for the pound and sold each ounce for \$30, producing a profit of \$280. 'We can pay for

the telephone. I sold a pound of dope,' I wrote, anonymously, in the Elsie roster book. A star-studded fund-raising concert at Balmain Town Hall, featuring Margret Roadknight, Jeannie Lewis and Bob Hudson, which had taken weeks to organise, reaped less.

It quickly became known around Balmain and Glebe that I was selling 'Elsie dope' and a lot of people preferred to patronise me rather than subsidise the lifestyles (or drug habits) of the purely commercial dealers. My first pound sold out in a couple of days. repeated the exercise. Soon I was making scads of money for Elsie, so much so that the other dealers started to complain. I had to be careful not to antagonise them too much as I did not want to be dobbed in. I never went anywhere without a few 'deals' in the bottom of my shoulder bag. If, for any reason, the police had picked me up I would have been in deep trouble. I did not even think about the illegality of what I was doing because we needed the money so badly. But I did start to understand that selling drugs was an economic treadmill that might be hard to get off.

Selling fostered greed. I was shocked at how quickly I began to be tempted to do eighteen, even twenty ounces to the pound, to increase my profit margin. When the supplier tentatively suggested that there was a lot more money to be made from heroin, I started to worry about where my drug dealing might be leading. It was lucky I was never subjected to real pressure to get in deeper, and that I was never extorted or robbed — all daily risks for even small-time drug dealers. I never pocketed any of the money for myself, even though I was occasionally tempted to take a commission since at that time I was always broke, trying to live on a Literature Board Young Writers' Fellowship stipend of \$100 a week. As soon as some temporary government money for Elsie came through, in January 1975, I stopped dealing. I can't say today that I am proud of what I did, but it is difficult to overestimate the desperation of those days and the responsibility we felt to the women to whom we had promised refuge. I also justified it to myself by saying I was merely redistributing money the inner-city crowd would have spent anyway, to a service that was in dire need.

Elsie's survival created other unanticipated burdens. Even after there were other refuges — and within two years there were about six in Sydney alone — Elsie was the famous one, the place to which everyone came if they had a woman needing somewhere to stay, or they wanted to learn about domestic violence or setting up a refuge. It is exhausting simply to run through the record of visitors in the first eighteen months: founders of every women's refuge in Australia; women's groups from all over the State, 'wanting to set up refuges'; Lidcombe Hospital training-school students; nurses from King George V, Prince Henry and Sydney hospitals; psychiatrists, paramedic staff and nurses from nearby Broughton Hall, which dealt with the mentally ill; hundreds of social workers and social-work students; federal bureaucrats; international visitors from Britain, the United States and Vietnam; and at least three federal ministers.

It was a bitter irony for us that while the world was lavishing Elsie with praise and attention, we were in such a precarious financial position. We could not understand why Canberra, which after all had a Labor government, was so indifferent when what we were doing seemed so in accord with the principles of democratic socialism, providing opportunities for people who were disadvantaged. We were especially dismayed that Bill Hayden, the Minister for Social Security, spurned us. He had a working-class background, he had been a policeman before politics and must have encountered 'domestics'. He listened, however, to his adviser and friend Paddy McGuinness, later an economics journalist and editor. Paddy was of the view that we were a bunch of middle-class do-gooders who should not be encouraged. Neither he nor Hayden would budge. The Canberra Women's Refuge also sought help from Hayden but were greeted with suspicion: he thought they wanted government funds to set up holiday houses for feminists who were bored with their marriages. We at Elsie realised we had to find a way to break this circuit of neglect. Diana Kenwick, my old friend from Adelaide, now Diana Beaton, was on the Elsie collective (and still is); because of John Edwards, her boyfriend at the time, who was a *National Times* journalist and had been on Clyde Cameron's staff, she knew her way around the Labor Party. She volunteered to go up to Terrigal where, in early

February 1975, the ALP was having its federal conference, to try to get to Hayden.

She succeeded easily. John Edwards put together a restaurant dinner party, inviting journalists Michelle Grattan and John Stubbs as well as the Minister for Social Security. Hayden was not thrilled to discover that the good-looking woman seated beside him wanted to talk only about women's refuges, although perhaps to shut her up he promised to visit Elsie. Two weeks later, leaving his Commonwealth car parked around the corner and unaccompanied by any staff, Hayden knocked on Elsie's front door.

One of the residents opened the door, took one look at him and said, 'You can't come in. We don't let men in here.' 'I'm Bill Hayden, the Minister for Social Security,' he replied.

'I don't care who you are, you can't come in,' she said, before slamming the door in his face.

Fortunately someone inside recognised the name and chased the Minister down the street, apologising and brought him back. Hayden perhaps thought that by calling unannounced he would catch us at our middle-class meddling. Instead he saw Elsie for the ramshackle place it was. He was shocked at the battered and hopeless state of so many of the women and appalled at the rundown condition of the accommodation. That evening he rang Diana. 'I'll do anything,' he promised her. He was as good as his word. From then on whenever the question of refuge funding came to Cabinet, Hayden supported giving us money. However, it was not until the end of June 1975 that the government moved to fully fund Australia's eleven women's refuges.

In those early years Elsie never just provided women with refuge. It was a shining light, a call to the conscience of society to deal with violence against women and children, a prod in the sides of the law enforcement and court systems to get them to start taking the subject seriously. In 1975 an Elsie woman, a police officer, a health educator and a social worker together produced

a training module to give police some basics in social welfare and crisis intervention. They took the module to the New South Wales Minister for Police, who directed it be incorporated in cadet training courses.

Although Elsie had been started by a handful of women, most of them young and very radical even by the standards of the day, its influence was extraordinary. It was one of those rare moments when the right idea leads to an important social change. Something happened and although, sadly, we have not come close to ending the scourge of domestic violence, we now as a society accept that we owe those afflicted a safe haven and the chance for a new life. It was one of the women's movement's finest hours.