



illustration by **Janelle Barone**

Into the Light

In a Florence bathtub, Zoë Coyle contemplates her deceased mother, her unborn child and what NSW lawmakers will decide about the terminally ill.

Zoë Coyle is an author, leadership facilitator and communications training leader, with experience that spans 20 years. She is based in Sydney. Where The Light Gets In is her first novel.

I am heavily pregnant, seven-and-a-half months, with my first child, and I am sitting in a bathtub. The tub is in a tiny rented cottage in the hills above Florence in Italy. I'm living there with my husband and our two long-haired dachshunds. The bathroom hasn't been updated since the 1960s and is covered in square handmade green tiles that I love. The toilet and sink are also green, giving the room the feel of being carved from an emerald. The shower is so small I have trouble fitting in it, and there is only one window; it's tiny, and as I lie in the tub, all I can see through it are the tops of a few ancient poplar trees and a slice of sky.

My large belly is like an island in the water. I cup it in my hands and am struck by a straightforward thought: *I need to get my shit together*. In a month and a half, I will be a mother. I will need to be responsible. My mistakes, failings and faults will surely be more meaningful then, because they won't affect just me. And this realisation does two things. Firstly, it teaches me that loving another person, even one I haven't met yet, inspires me to be better. So maybe all those syrupy love songs are right. And secondly, it makes me miss my own mother terribly.

She had a terminal disease. It was obscure and took ages to be diagnosed, and when they finally worked it out their prognosis was terrible. A degenerative disease that attacks the brain cells and impairs mental and motor functions. Generally, people who have it die of breathing issues or infections. It was going to kill her painfully and in slow motion. My mother, a nurse, was calm when she found out. Immediately, she said she had no intention of dying that way. That she would euthanise herself when things became unmanageable. Her autonomy and dignity were important to her. She wasn't depressed. She didn't want to die, but my mother correctly predicted there would come a time when she would want her suffering to end.

As she was living in Australia before the voluntary assisted dying laws were enacted, she had no option but to take matters into her own hands. Legally, she

had to be alone, and the classification of her death was suicide. The fall-out of all of this, of not being able to be with her, was almost insurmountable for me. But this growing baby in my womb is helping me to finally shuffle out of the dark tunnel of grief. A new life in some magical way making sense of an ended life.

This month the NSW Parliament is due to decide if it will join all other states in enabling voluntary assisted dying. I deeply hope the legislation is passed, so other patients and families don't have to go through what we went through.

When my mother was seriously unwell, I knelt down by her bath. She wore a beautiful scarf to cover her hair, so it didn't go frizzy with the condensation. I took a flannel and she leant forward, folding over her bent up knees. Turning her face to the side, she shut her eyes in pleasure as I washed her. She almost looked like a child to me, as if we'd swapped roles. She said she was sorry to miss out on future things. On my wedding, on my being pregnant, on the children of mine that she would never meet. I carried on gently washing her back as we both cried.

And now, six years after her death, she is not here to see me pregnant. Not a day passes when I don't want to ask her something, or tell her something. These green tiles, for example – she would love them. And to share with her this new realisation of mine, that we each have a responsibility to try to sort ourselves out, so we are not working our stuff out on our children, friends or colleagues. I want to do that for my unborn child, yes, and also for my mother. I want them both to be proud of me.

It's time for me to get out of this bath as my hands have gone all wrinkly, but before I move another thought occurs to me: even though my mother is dead, my love for her brings her close. Death is no match for our connection. I can hear her voice clearly saying, "This, darling, is a really lovely bathroom. The tiles are the most perfect shade of green." ■