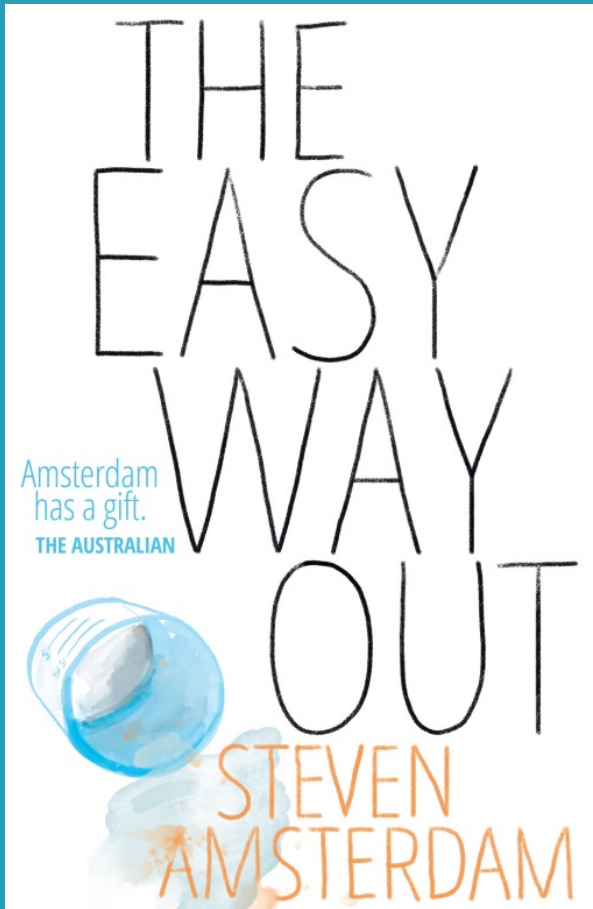


2017
LOGLIST

MILES FRANKLIN
LITERARY AWARD



PROUDLY MANAGED BY PERPETUAL



EXTRACT



‘Is this what you want?’

Despite the social worker’s previous efforts and my open posture, there’s a fresh round of gulping tears from the middle daughter. She collapses over the edge of the bed onto him, digging her head into his side, pressing against his spine. He squirms slightly to move away, even while resting the fingers of his working hand in her hair, tapping her head, there, there.

She straightens up again, trying to be good, plucking at the tuft on his head. He reaches up to catch her hand to stop her fiddling. ‘Leave it.’

The wife grabs his hand, to keep Teddy from disciplining their daughter in his last minutes. Hand over hand over hand, the three of them are caught there in a tussle over a wisp of bright blue hair. This is the family picture: three hands and wrists woven together, each with a different purpose—the daughter grooming, the father pulling back in terminal retreat, the mother trying to protect them all.

I think the youngest is named Hannah, but I won’t chance it. The longer they fret, the blanker my mind goes. She turns five next week. That I remember. They’re going through with her party, to keep things normal.

The children’s names I’m allowed to forget. They weren’t supposed to even be here. After much processing, in fact, the wife had decided that Teddy’s death would be too confronting for them. Instead, the grandparents would be with the girls today. But then, at nine-thirty this morning, without even a heads-up, the mother ushered them into Consulting Room B to wait for their father to be rolled in. I made a brave, more-the-merrier face. As they came through, Teddy’s wife told me: ‘They’ll cope. This is better.’ A short while later, each daughter signed some freshly generated paperwork so they could witness their father’s death. Barely a sniffle then. No objections.

Originally, Teddy wanted his last drink to occur in the hospital room where he’d spent his last weeks—where he knew the nurses and where there is almost a view of the park. Yesterday at three, though, the ward (or someone several floors higher, more likely) decided that it wouldn’t happen there. Management would rather confine our dirty business to the specialist wing and not have us skulking through the main wards with our Nembutal.



This room is less medical, I assured Teddy. His family would have more privacy down here. Pale pink walls, soft furniture and minimal ventilation give it the institutional comfort of a place where procedures are discussed, not performed. It also has three surveillance cameras, and a viewing room next door. Plus, it's closer to the morgue. These last were not mentioned as selling points.

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The crux of the issue is that despite this being my first assist, I have skilfully adapted to unforeseen changes this morning and kept the patient on his desired track, but here we are with his family close to mutiny. Nettie will be watching me from somewhere in the building.

I make eye contact with Teddy, looking for an answer to my long-ago query. Is this what you want?

He knows and I know that it is. I relax my mouth and forehead to convey that, even now, after all the prep and diagnostics and psych support, he has time to say so out loud.

They have time. As the research shows, you don't do this alone. He looks away, distracted by the middle daughter, saying, 'Don't, Dad.'

There, the wish to stop the administration has been seconded. As per guidelines, we may have to abort.

I allow an extra minute to let them each roam internally, consider the situation from one another's position—from the bed or bedside—or vacate the scene entirely and fly out over some long ago Christmas when the girls tore open the wrapping paper like they still believed in Santa. Or one afternoon they spent walking through strange streets looking for the dog. Or one of his band's last gigs, when the girls stood close to their mother in the front row, singing along, clapping for Dad. On return to the conversation, any response will be deepened by their brief meandering. Whatever the outcome, it will feel more real for having had the time.

I glance at the clock above the one-way mirror on the wall through which Nettie or anyone from upstairs who still has their doubts might be observing our progress. There we are, six white people fine tuning a



death. Anywhere else on the planet, Teddy would have withered from his disease months ago, no paperwork required. But his doctor was optimistic and pumped him up with six rounds of chemo. Since that didn't do the trick, here I am, sporting a pair of sweat stains under the arms of my best dress shirt, trying at least to get Teddy's last minutes right, to avoid the indignity of the inevitable.

'Let's get on with this,' Teddy says to me. His wife and children lower their heads in obedience. Dad decides. His primacy was hinted at in the interviews, but muddied by the social worker and the egalitarian fog that comes from passing around the talking stick.

The mirror offers no subtle glimmer to suggest we can or should move on.

'I need a spoken reply,' I tell him. With no perceptible second thoughts from the family. Untender, yes, but legally required.

He shifts, as if particularly humiliated at having to follow my orders at this late stage, but he knows we need to adhere. No doubt someone from Ethics will run a trace through this entire scene to make sure the words were said in the right order.

'Yes. I want to drink it.'

'Yes?' I say. Halfway there.