

Mother and child reunion

Listen

By Kate Veitch
Viking, \$32.95

SAD THINGS SHOULDN'T happen at Christmas time but we all know that they can. Rosemarie, a 30-year-old English woman with a husband and four children, begrudgingly stuffs a chicken, resentful at how small and domesticated her life has become.

With remarkable economy, Kate Veitch skilfully builds a picture of discontentment and regret. It's Christmas Eve 1967 and Rosemarie's kind but cloying husband Alex is an endless source of irritation. The children are bickering and the suburbs are sweltering.

You know the camel's back is about to break and Veitch strings out the tension expertly while her readers wonder which straw will do the job.

It happens, of course, in a very ordinary and low-key way.

For Rosemarie marriage and children are the cruel joke no one let her in on. "Getting married was like slamming a great big door and living in just one tiny room. That babies tore you from the bliss of unbroken sleep as ruthlessly as any torturer and you never got back to that lovely

place again. That raising children and running a household was mostly tedious donkey work."

Rosemarie has had it, and a Bex and a good lie down aren't going to help. She decides to pop out and get some twinkling lights for the Christmas tree — and doesn't come back.

Listen then jumps 40 years and we witness the impact Rosemarie's vanishing act has had on her husband and children. Broken into several segments, we get to know the people she left behind in a way that she never did.

Alex, now an old man, is suffering the early stages of dementia. Her children are middle-aged and older with children of their own.

The eldest, self-possessed Deborah, is married to Angus and has her own strong-willed daughter, Olivia; James, the peacemaker, is married to an American; Robert, ever sensible, is married to Vesna; and Meredith, the youngest sibling, struggles along with her teenage son, Laurence.

The coping mechanism that each of the siblings used when their mother abandoned them is still in place. They are like watches that stopped the moment their mother left their lives. Ordinary on the outside, inside their emotional cogs

and wheels are jammed.

Deborah is still very much at home in the role of bossy big sister. Meredith, emotionally immature, finds solace in the bottle, Robert develops a nervous tic and James goes in search of the truth.

Veitch smoothly manoeuvres the reader in and out of each of their lives, delving into secrets, addictions, relationships, bedrooms, past indiscretions, triumphs and humiliations. She covers a massive amount of emotional territory, the weight of which could easily have dragged the story down, but she doesn't allow it. Her characters are authentically flawed and fascinating, especially Olivia, who, despite her youth, becomes Alex's steady point as his mental health declines.

But just when everyone is standing, Veitch sweeps in and drags the rug out from under their feet. Along with Rosemarie's children, this is the reader's chance to find out why she walked out. Her answer will surprise many.

Listen might be Veitch's first novel but it doesn't read like one. It's a self-assured, moving, hopeful story about the frailties of one — all — families, and the capacity to rage and to forgive.

Kate Veitch discusses writing with her brother Michael Veitch at noon today at the Age Melbourne Writers' Festival.