

**LIGHT THE TOWEL: NARRATIVE AND THE NEGOTIATED
UNCONSCIOUS**

by

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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November, 2012

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Preface

The PhD thesis 'Light the Towel: Narrative and the Negotiated Unconscious' is submitted by Julia Prendergast, a candidate in the School of Communication and Creative Arts at Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia.

The thesis is based on a series of publishable works. The thesis is not conventional in structure.

This format is 'an alternative model, sometimes called a "thesis by publications", where the thesis comprises a series of papers, some or all of which may have been published by the time of submission' (Deakin University: 39).

One of the difficulties with this model is that some repetition of material is unavoidable. Each paper is written for a new audience and it is necessary to contextualise the inquiry so that it meets the stringent requirements for publication. Deakin University recognises that '[i]n many cases papers include duplicated material' and candidates who adopt this alternative model are encouraged to 'minimise repetition' (Deakin University: 40). The attempt to minimise repetition must be balanced against the exacting requirements for peer-reviewed publication: a balanced, coherent argument, which inevitably involves the (re-) definition of key concepts and the (re-) introduction of key theorists.

The theoretical component of the dissertation 'Light the Towel: Narrative and the Negotiated Unconscious' investigates the operation of authorial intention at a primal moment of narrative composition, drawing crucially and primarily on the concept of alterity (Derrida) and the work of the unconscious (Freud) as it organises memory and creativity.

Chapter one concentrates upon Derrida's early work, for this is where Derrida's concept of alterity originates. Derrida's alterity is a response to the perceived limitations of the Saussurean and Husserlian linguistic traditions. Derrida's impetus is juxtaposed with the preoccupations of the practice-based inquiry, with the observation that consciousness and logic do not sufficiently explain the 'coming to expression' of the novel's themes and preoccupations.

Chapter one charts the direction of the inquiry by referring to the body chapters of the theoretical component of the thesis. Derrida's alterity is discussed within the context of the linguistic tradition to which it belongs. Reference is also made

to Derrida's later work, as well as to Hillis Miller and Whish-Wilson. This places the practice-based inquiry in the context of more recent scholarship.

Chapter two introduces the creative component of the thesis, with reference to the discontinuous style employed by Moorhouse. Framed by examples from the novel, this chapter outlines the original concept of 'experiential representation'. With reference to philosophy (Nietzsche), linguistics (Lakoff and Johnson) and psychoanalysis (Laub), chapter two links remembering with the experiential act of representation at the heart of the creative process. In this way, chapter two deploys an argument against Bakhtin's privileging of intentional and conscious processes.

Chapter three and chapter four explore how the work of the unconscious, in the context of 'experiential representation', relates to the editorial work that supplements the initial work of creation. To unpick this process, reference is made to Freud's distinction between the latent and the manifest content of dreams and, that is, to the work of the unconscious as it applies to representation and, by extension, creative writing.

It is suggested that the relationship between the latent and the manifest content of narrative relies upon a metaphorical connection. The work of condensation and displacement are examined in the context of the 'uncanny' involuntary repetition of symbols and themes. In this way, Freud's earlier and later work, together, explain the metaphorical manoeuvre that is understood to inform unconscious, alogical processes of association, in narrative representation. Schacter's work on memory is used to explain how mnemonic processes might be applied to narrative. It is argued that ethical editing means being attentive to the work of the unconscious at a primal moment of narrative composition.

Chapter five introduces the related concepts of hypnagogia and hypnopompia (Mavromatis). With reference to these concepts, this chapter investigates how it is possible to track back from the sign, to the operation of thought that produces the sign. This chapter investigates how processes of association, as they operate in the context of memory and dreams, mimic unconscious processes of association, as they operate within creative writing. Reference is made to mnemonic trace (Freud) and the operation of 'similarity' in hypnagogia (Mavromatis).

This discussion assists in returning the reader to the issue of narrative composition, because these concepts are concerned with the metaphorical, idiosyncratic nature of the 'coming to expression' in language. This final chapter collates the discussion about memory and metaphor (chapter two), and the analysis of the unconscious in the context of dreams, (chapters three and four), and returns to the issue of being and presence (chapter one).

In this way, the reader returns to Derrida's concept of alterity, and to the enigma of the otherwise empty sign. The concept of hypnagogia is a means for explaining how presence is simulated, because the concept illustrates how signs are empty but for the permanent traces that simulate presence and transform them.

The concept of alterity gives voice to the ghostly shadow of the unconscious in writing. In this way, the issue of 'coming to expression', via alterity, is crucial to both the theoretical component, as well as the creative component, of the dissertation. In conclusion, it is suggested that it may be counter-productive to assess the work of the unconscious in the context of the strictures of full-consciousness and logic.

At the heart of the theoretical argument is the desire to investigate the concept of alterity in the context of authorial intention. In particular, the focus is on the work of the unconscious at a primal moment of narrative composition, and the relationship between conscious and unconscious processes. The link between Derrida and Freud is crucial because it shows how Bakhtin's prioritising of presence is superseded by 'otherness', by the work of the unconscious that is neither present nor absent, by work that invests and reinvests the sign with meaning in a never-ending chain of inversion and supplementation.

The creative component of the dissertation is a novel: 'The earth does not get fat'. The novel represents a quest: Annie's daughter, Chelsea, attempts to find her 'bygone' family. This represents Chelsea's quest for the memories that her mother, Annie, is incapable of accessing. The story is told in multiple first person voices, beginning with Chelsea's voice in Book One, moving to a cacophony of voices from Annie's past in Book Two, and concluding with Annie's voice in Book Three.

In this way, the narrative explores the 'coming to expression' of the expressionless: Annie's story, Annie's voice, the repressed 'other'. The novel is

thematically connected to the theoretical analysis, in the exegetical component of the dissertation, for at the heart of Derrida's concept of alterity is a question: if the sign is empty, how does it mean? Derrida's concept of alterity configures meaning in the context of trace, deferral, Différance. A fractured narrative, in its reliance on the connection between characters and events (and, that is, on the 'other' that does not form part of the manifest content of the narrative), makes Derrida's alterity a particularly apt line of theoretical inquiry.

The exegetical inquiry derives its momentum from the concept of alterity as 'otherness', and this momentum is based upon the findings of the practice-based inquiry: the experience of the operation of the 'other' in the 'I' at a primal moment of narrative composition. The creative component of the dissertation comprises more than two thirds of the thesis as a whole. By necessity, the theoretical discussion is sharply focussed around the issue of the 'coming to expression' in the context of authorial intention.

Crucial to this theoretical inquiry, is the link between Derrida's concept of alterity, on the one hand, and Freud's identification of the relationship between the manifest and the latent content of dreams, on the other. The crucial aspect of this link, in the context of the dissertation, is the resemblance between Derrida's concept of alterity, as the shadow that lurks behind the sign, investing and reinvesting the sign with meaning, and Freud's identification of the latent content of the dream, as a useful tool for extrapolating meaning from the manifest dream-content. In each instance, Derrida and Freud explain the magical, metaphorical manoeuvre that accounts for the 'coming to expression' of the expressionless.

This connection between Derrida and Freud is central to the theoretical analysis, an analysis that is motivated by the observation that consciousness and logic do not sufficiently explain the 'coming to expression' of the novel's themes and preoccupations and, that is, by the observation that the novel might, simultaneously, be both strange and familiar to the writer.

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Abstract

The thesis consists of two parts.

- The theoretical component of the thesis is a collection of research articles, collectively titled - *Light the towel: narrative and the negotiated unconscious*.
- The creative component of the thesis is a novel titled: *The earth does not get fat*.

The theoretical component –

Light the towel: narrative and the negotiated unconscious

The theoretical component of the thesis is a collection of research articles investigating the operation of authorial intention at a primal moment of narrative composition.

To try to understand the nature of authorial intention and, in particular, the play of unconscious processes at a primal moment of narrative composition, is to encounter alterity, or otherness, in various guises. To plot the operation of alterity is to ask: how does language mean? Alterity recognises that the present (surface narrative) is infected by a past (primal moment of narrative composition) that one cannot access in a definitive way.

The thesis investigates a primal moment of narrative composition, a moment that is not necessarily consciously determined or logical; the surface of the narrative becomes a metaphorical map, and the inquiry engages with the possibilities for meaning that the map encompasses. This constitutes a quest for the unstable *how* of meaning attribution.

The analysis of authorial intention focuses upon the influence of altered states of consciousness upon narrative material. The analysis explains how narrative material might, simultaneously, be both strange and familiar to the author.

The novel –

The earth does not get fat

The creative component of the thesis is a fractured narrative, a novel in multiple first-person voices.

Plot outline

Annie leaves home when she is 17 because her brother's friend rapes her and her Mother doesn't want to know about it. Annie moves to the seaside and sets up house with Dean: a dope-smoking waste of space. Annie has two children: Teddy and Chelsea.

With little money and no opportunity, Annie prostitutes herself in various ways; she supports Dean's insatiable dope habit and tries to make ends meet for her children. When her son Teddy drowns at the beach, Annie collects him from the morgue; she buries him in the back garden; his coffin is an old kelvinator fridge.

Annie's partner, Dean, sees Annie as a means to an end, a vehicle for his drug habit; sometimes he doesn't see her at all. Dean is vacant, empty; he cannot tolerate Annie's grief. This is the breaking point, the end of the line. Annie leaves Dean, taking Chelsea with her.

Annie moves back to suburbia, away from the sea, her only solace. She moves into her Father's house. Annie's Father suffers from dementia; her mother is no longer alive; her brother is long gone. Annie shuts down: she stops talking, she stops eating, she stops living; she drinks, she pops pills. This is how we find Annie at the beginning of the novel: dysfunctional and emaciated, useless.

Chelsea is 17 when the novel begins. She is the caregiver to both her Mother and her Grandfather. She wants to help her Mother; she wants her Mother to live again before she dies. The novel is Chelsea's quest to unravel the secrets of her Mother's past. Chelsea doesn't remember a brother. She doesn't know about her Mother's awful life. She wants to know.

In an attempt to understand why her mother is the way she is, Chelsea speaks to the people from her Mother's past. Chelsea meets Pelts, a man who claims to have loved Annie forever. Pelts helps Chelsea; he tells Chelsea his version of Annie's past; this story leads to another story, another narrator, and so it goes.

Chelsea and Pelts collect stories about Annie; they tell Annie the stories; they force her to remember.

In the end Annie speaks: we hear the story from Annie herself. We understand that memories are stories too.

Preface to the theoretical component of the thesis

Structure: thesis by publications

The thesis is submitted in the form of a thesis by publications because the thesis comprises a series of publishable works. The thesis consists of a collection of theoretical articles and a novel, some have been published while others are under assessment for publication.

Chapter 1

Introduction - 'Where I'm calling from: alterity and the other I of the unconscious'

This chapter has been accepted as part of the refereed proceedings of *The Australasian Association of Writing Programs* (AAWP) annual Conference (Victoria, Australia, November 2012). This chapter was presented at the conference and online publication is pending. An extended version of this chapter has been submitted to *Text: Journal of Writing and Writing Courses*.

Chapter 2

'Discontinuous narrative: the trace dance'

This chapter appears in *Current Narratives*, a peer-reviewed journal published by the School of Journalism and Creative Writing / the Faculty of Creative Arts & the Faculty of Education, at the University of Wollongong. The journal publishes narrative research from a multidisciplinary perspective. This chapter forms part of a special edition of the journal: 'Losing the Plot: Grappling with Narrative Complexity'. The special edition includes selected papers from a conference of the same name. The conference was convened by Narrative Network Australia in conjunction with Victoria University (Melbourne, Australia, July 2010).

Prendergast, Julia, Discontinuous Narrative: The Trace Dance, *Current Narratives*, 3, 2011, 25-34

Available at: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/currentnarratives/vol1/iss3/5>

Chapter 3

'A house with a boat on its roof: the shadowy flux of alterity'

This chapter was presented at *The Oral, the Written and Other Verbal Media* (OWOVM) conference (Melbourne, Australia, December 2011). The theme of this Poetics and Discourse Conference was: 'Testimony, witness, authority: the politics and poetics of experience'. This chapter will be included in an anthology of OWOVM contributions; the anthology will be published in 2013.

Chapter 4

'The strange and the familiar: seeing beyond when we know'

This chapter was presented at *The Australasian Association of Writing Programs* (AAWP) annual Conference. The theme of the conference was: 'Ethical Imaginations: Writing Worlds' (Byron Bay, Australia, November 2011). This paper forms part of the refereed conference stream; the paper was subject to peer review and is available online.

Details:

Prendergast, J 2011 'The strange and the familiar: seeing beyond when we know' *The Ethical Imaginations: Writing Worlds Papers* - the refereed proceedings of the 16th conference of the Australasian Association of Writing Programs, 2011 ISBN 978-0-9807573-0-9 Copyright 2011

Available at: http://aawp.org.au/files/Prendergast_0.pdf

Chapter 5

Conclusion - 'Light the towel: narrative and the negotiated unconscious'

This chapter was presented at: *Great Writing 2012*, the 15th Anniversary International Creative Writing Conference (Imperial College, London, June 2012).

This chapter is available at *New Writing: International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing*.

<http://www.newwriting.org.uk/>

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Where I'm calling from: alterity and the other I of the unconscious

Abstract

As I assess my fractured novel manuscript, a narrative in multiple first-person voices, I engage with writing that I produce at a primal/generative moment of narrative composition; I encounter writing that is both familiar and strange, known and other.

The sense in which I produce writing that is 'other' to me is intriguing. I recognise that a dichotomy between 'self' and 'self-as-other' exists in my writing and, in this, I am drawn to Derrida's concept of alterity: to the idea that language is ghosted by the trace of the other. I am intrigued by the haunting shadow of trace: by the 'other' that simulates presence and makes the otherwise empty sign 'full' of meaning.

When I acknowledge that my writing is at once strange and other, as well as familiar and known, I realise that the writing that I produce at a primal/generative moment of narrative composition is produced under the delusion of self-presence; it is produced under the delusion that meaning is present to consciousness 'at a given moment'; it is produced when I am both 'I' and 'not I'. This leads me to ask: 'What is my attitude to the effects that I produce when I am not I? What is my reaction when the other takes the floor?'

To engage with these questions in the context of my fractured novel manuscript, is to engage with the possibilities for meaning that narrative, as a language map, encompasses; it is to engage in an inquiry about the relationship between language and semantic intention; it is to ask how my attitude toward the voice of the other in my writing affects the 'finished' product of the narrative text.

As I tackle these questions, I plot the operation of alterity; I plot the work of the

unconscious as it operates at a primal/generative moment of narrative composition; I ask: how does the language of my fractured narrative mean? I ask: what is the relationship between meaning and authorial intention?

The concept of alterity explicates the ghostly shadow that lurks behind the sign, simulating presence and making the otherwise empty sign full. The concept of alterity therefore explains how my writing might be strange to me, in the sense that I am estranged from it (because it is not consciously, logically determined) but, simultaneously, how my writing is familiar, strangely familiar (in the sense of a latent, ghostly shadow, a web of unconscious associations).

Alterity recognises that the present (surface narrative) is infected by a past (primal/generative moment of narrative composition) that I cannot access in a definitive way.

Keywords

Authorial intention - alterity – unconscious

Introduction – My writing as other

As I assess my fractured novel manuscript, a narrative in multiple first-person voices, I engage with writing that I produce at a primal/generative moment of narrative composition; I encounter writing that is both familiar and strange, known and other.

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As I tackle these questions, I plot the operation of alterity; I plot the work of the unconscious as it operates at a primal/generative moment of narrative composition; I ask: how does the language of my fractured narrative mean? I ask: what is the relationship between meaning and authorial intention?

To try to understand the nature of authorial intention and, in particular, the play of unconscious processes at a primal/generative moment of narrative composition, is to encounter alterity or otherness, in various guises.

In their introduction to 'Différance', Rivkin and Ryan paraphrase Derrida's argument most succinctly. They suggest that:

all ideas and all objects of thought and perception bear the trace of other things, other moments, other "presences". To bear the trace of other things is to be shadowed by "alterity" which literally means "otherness. (Rivkin & Ryan 2004: 278)

The shadowing aspect of alterity is the haunting trace of the other in writing. The concept of alterity describes how language is ghosted by otherness and the concept therefore captures the mystifying sense in which my writing might be both strange and, simultaneously, familiar. I discuss this process of mystification at length in 'A house with a boat on its roof: the shadowy flux of alterity' (Prendergast 2012). For the purposes of this investigation, I note that Freud unpicks this scenario of strange familiarity in 'The Uncanny' when he suggests that:

[...] this factor of involuntary repetition [...] surrounds us with an uncanny atmosphere that [...] forces upon us the idea of something fateful [...] where otherwise we would have spoken of chance only [...] we do feel this to be uncanny. (Freud 1919: 27)

As I encounter the work of the unconscious at a primal/generative moment of narrative composition, the 'atmosphere' is indeed 'uncanny' because I recognise that signs in language are employed without recourse to conscious determination and logic. While these signs appear to be disparate, I argue that they are linked at a latent level: they are linked in the latent shadow of alterity.

I unpick this 'uncanny' encounter with my fractured narrative at some length in 'The strange and the familiar: seeing beyond when we know' (Prendergast 2011). In the context of the current discussion, it is suffice to say that I draw from Freud's 'The interpretation of dreams'; I identify a likeness between Freud's 'interweaving of [...] reciprocal relations' between the 'manifest' and the 'latent' content of the dream (Freud 1900: 404, 400, 400) and my identification of the relationship between the surface narrative and the latent structure of the narrative: between the surface map and the trace of the other.

In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida writes: 'The trace is *nothing*, it exceeds the question *What is?* and contingently makes it possible' (Derrida 1976: 75). This definition goes to the heart of the question: How does language mean? This is the question that I ask my writing, not what do you mean but how?

I encounter the concept of alterity from the perspective of writing, rather than from the perspective of philosophy. This frames my approach in particular ways.

I need to be conscious of '[w]here I'm calling from' (Carver 1989: 278). I borrow this phrase from Raymond Carver, from the title of one of his short stories.

Deconstruction as a way of thinking

Derrida writes:

For that future world and for that within it which will have put into question the values of sign, word, and writing, for that which guides our future anterior, there is as yet no exergue. (Derrida 1976: 5)

This extract comes from the exergue of Derrida's *Of Grammatology*. The term exergue is derived 'from [the] Greek *ex* [meaning] outside + *ergon* [meaning] work' (Collins English Dictionary 2003). Exergue might therefore be understood as something outside of the work that locates it in time and thought. According to this extract, Derrida's deconstructive work is aiming towards something that, as yet, has no language outside of it that is capable of locating it. Derrida (1976: 5) calls this future a 'future anterior'.

The problem is that the reference point in the future, the 'future anterior', is conditional upon an incomplete action in the present. In this instance, the reference point in the future (which will have put into question the values of sign, word, and writing) is conditional upon an epistemological outlook that is outside these values, and Derrida suggests that there is, as yet, no exergue for such an outlook.

The exergue as outside explains Derrida's position regarding the 'future anterior'. The same Derridean reasoning that prohibits us from understanding that which guides our future anterior, also implies that we cannot fathom that which is outside what we know: we cannot know what we cannot know. When I whittle Derrida's reasoning down to this tautology, I move towards understanding the concept of alterity in the context of sign, word and writing.

As Derrida (1978: 268) says: 'Who will ever know what it is to know nothing?'. The idea is that we cannot escape the context of our knowing. There is no exergue (for that which guides our future anterior) because we are limited by our inability to be outside of a reading that we cannot yet envisage. We cannot envisage a future that puts into question the values of our linguistic codes, because our epistemological outlook is, in the first instance, framed by those very values and shackled by those very codes.

Trace and metaphoricity: meaning as desire

The concept of alterity is a means for talking about narrative effects in the context of a cause (even if this cause is something one cannot put one's finger on, precisely). This constitutes a conversation about meaning as desire.

My desire for meaning prompts me to track the signs in the surface content of my fractured narrative in the context of a shadow: the trace of the other that shadows the otherwise empty sign. The shadow changes shape: it is all and it is nothing, half of all and all of nothing, depending upon where I'm calling from. Derrida unpicks this concept of metaphor as all and nothing:

Being nothing, it does not itself appear, it has no proper and independent phenomenality, and not showing itself, it withdraws; it is structurally in withdrawal, as [...] differentiality, trace. (Derrida 2007, p.75)

This extract is taken from the 'The Retrait of Metaphor', where Derrida defines metaphor 'in the sense of direction — transport[ing] a familiar predicate [...] toward a less familiar, more remote *unheimlich*' (Derrida 2007, p.69). Derrida thereby accounts for the metaphorical manoeuvre that allows one thing to become other. To plot this manoeuvre is to trace the ever-shifting shadow of alterity. This constitutes a quest for the unstable 'how' of meaning attribution.

Kevin Brophy refers to the work of Christopher Alexander, an American architect who suggests that 'at the core of all successful acts [...] and processes' lies the quality of being 'alive' (Brophy 2009: 119). Brophy suggests that: 'the word *alive* used in this way is of course used as a metaphor, and this is where it fails to truly name the quality we are talking about' (Brophy 2009: 120). This failure to truly name the quality that is being referred to, which Brophy identifies as the premise for the operation of metaphor, is in fact the condition for naming (for attaching meaning to the sign) as it occurs at the primal/generative moment of narrative composition, where meaning is intended without full consciousness.

Brophy suggests that: 'you can only understand a metaphor (make the leap of understanding that it requires) if you already understand the quality that it stands in for' (Brophy 2009: 120). This is a reminder that metaphorical play relies upon a reservoir of associative meaning and understanding. The surface content of the narrative also relies upon a reservoir of associative meaning and understanding. This reservoir is the trace of the other in narrative.

Otherness cannot be located because it is not a definitive, tangible, meaning as presence-in-time fact, but a symptom of one's non-self-present presence in writing, a web of pre-conscious associations that are capable of meaning both one thing and the other. This is the mystifying process Freud outlines in 'The Uncanny' where 'the word *'heimlich* [...] develops in the direction of ambivalence until it finally coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich*' (Freud 1919: 421). A sign's capacity to mean both one thing and the other is precisely the capacity that is afforded to signs in narrative by the operation of alterity, and it is the multi-faceted capacity of the sign that accounts for the 'uncanny atmosphere' Freud describes (Freud 1919, p.427).

The quality of ambivalence underlies the operation of alterity and explains why: from the logical perspective of the editorial chair, the surface of my fractured narrative may appear to be connected in an arbitrary and random manner. Associative relations determine the shape of the narrative at the primal/generative moment of narrative composition and associative relations occur in the realm of the unconscious. In this way, narrative may be seen to represent an elusive area of language-learning and language-understanding, an area in which 'processes that formulate ideas and shape them [...] are hidden from consciousness', an area in which 'it would seem that some kinds of learning could take place outside consciousness' (Brophy 2009: 48).

It is within the context of learning that takes place outside consciousness that David Whish-Wilson (2009: 85) refers to: 'The real shift [that] occurs when self-consciousness is lost [...]the move [...] from propositional language to figurative and symbolic understanding, and feeling' (Whish-Wilson 2009: 96-7). In the context of alterity, the cause (of the sign as effect) is metaphorical; it is other; it fails to truly name. This is why meaning, in the context of the elusive other of alterity, might be explained in the context of meaning as desire. The operation of associative thought, and the production of meaningful language, that occurs in the context of a moment that is outside full-consciousness, is precisely, exquisitely, the very moment that I am trying to 'catch', as I engage with a primal/generative moment of narrative composition.

Narrative: the yearning rebuttal against empty self-presence

At a primal/generative moment of narrative composition, the mind's ability to produce its effects without full consciousness is foregrounded as other: those things that I see beyond when I know, those things that I know without knowing, these things take centre stage. In these moments, unconscious processes make-full the otherwise empty sign in ways that I could scarcely have envisaged and this, the possibility of 'empty' self-presence, is the haunting aspect of Derrida's alterity; this is the possibility that I produce when-I-am-not-I.

Narrative is a yearning rebuttal against the idea that consciousness might be empty, for at the heart of narrative lurk questions: *Do you hear a story? Do you understand?* When the mind produces its effects without full consciousness, when the unconscious takes centre stage at a primal/generative moment of narrative composition, these questions metamorphose; they become: *Do you hear the story that I don't mean to tell? Do you understand what I say when I don't understand what I'm saying? Can you see what I don't mean to say?*

The yearning rebuttal against the idea that consciousness might be empty seems to be amplified in these questions, and this is somewhat unsettling, considering that the yearning rebuttal is amplified in questions that take, as the very premise of their existence, the idea that meaning is produced, at least in part, by effects that the mind produces without full consciousness.

An analysis of the work of the unconscious, at the primal/generative moment of narrative composition, is an evaluation of this work from the conscious, logical perspective of the editorial chair. This a schizophrenic encounter between self and self-as-other, but it nevertheless leads me to where I'm calling from: to an understanding of Derrida's statement that '[t]here is nothing outside of the text' (Derrida 1976: 158). This encounter leads me to the realisation that, as I engage with the strange/familiar content of my fractured narrative, I cannot be outside of the work of the unconscious that occurs at a primal/generative moment of narrative composition.

Context and the possibility of meaning

My understanding of the meaning of the surface narrative is based upon the combination of my close proximity to, and simultaneous estrangement from, that surface narrative. In other words, the fact that the text baffles me, despite the fact that I have produced it, leads to an analysis of the work of the unconscious at a

primal/generative moment of narrative composition, a moment in which the mind produces its effects without recourse to full consciousness and logic.

Simplistically speaking, the fact that I have produced a text that baffles me invites an analysis of the operation of the 'other' in the 'I'. This is the context that I cannot be outside of as I engage with my writing, and it is this analysis that leads me to Derrida's concept of alterity, to the seductive proposition that signs in language are shadowed by the trace of the other.

Within this context, I approach Derrida's (1973: 93) views about the possibility of meaning 'as such':

My nonperception, my nonintuition [...] are expressed by that very thing that I say, by that which I say and because I say it. This structure will never form an "intimately blended unity" with intuition. The absence of intuition—and therefore of the subject of intuition—is required by the general structure of signification, when considered in itself. It is radically requisite: the total absence of the subject and object of a statement—the death of the writer and/or the disappearance of the objects he was able to describe—does not prevent a text from meaning something. On the contrary, this possibility gives birth to meaning as such, gives it out to be heard and read.

The context that I cannot be outside of, as I engage with my writing, is my engagement with the work of the unconscious at a primal/generative moment of narrative composition. This context can be paraphrased in the form of the following questions: What is my attitude toward the effects that I produce without full consciousness? What is my reaction when the other takes the floor?

The voice of the other seems to be the radically requisite premise that Derrida speaks of: the premise that opens up the very possibility of meaning because, according to Derrida, the possibility of meaning occurs in the context of the absence of intuition, in the context of the absence of the subject of intuition, and this is the state of affairs at the primal/generative moment of narrative composition, where effects are produced without recourse to fully, consciously-determined authorial intentions.

Whish-Wilson (2009: 85) refers to 'the "splitting" of normal consciousness whilst in the creative state' and therefore to the idea that writing is a collision between work that occurs associatively, at a pre-conscious level, and work that operates with conscious attention to the demands of logic and self-presence. In the context of authorial intention, the question: how does language mean (?) manifests as a play-off between the surface content and the latent content of the narrative,

between the registers of the conscious and the unconscious, between the writer's sense of self-as-I and self-as-other.

As I argue at length in 'Light the towel: narrative and the negotiated unconscious' (Prendergast 2012), the unconscious employs signs on the basis of their associative value. In this context, '*similarity* [...] *does not mean to the subconscious what it means to conscious reasoning*' (Mavromatis 1987: 178). This is why the surface narrative may appear to be strange: a random collection of signs. I recognise that my fractured narrative is tainted not only by my inability to be outside of my idiosyncratic, associative ties to the language I employ but, also, by the blatant disregard, on the part of the unconscious, for the accepted rules of play within that language system.

Derrida (1980: p.59, 63) argues that the law of genre is 'a principle of contamination, a law of impurity, a parasitical economy'; he suggests that contamination is 'the law of participation without membership. I suggest that the surface narrative, when viewed from the perspective of full-consciousness, is contaminated by strangeness: by the participation of the unconscious at a primal/generative moment of narrative composition. The system of narrative is contaminated to the extent that signs have been deployed without recourse to conscious, authorial intention and, thereby, under the delusion of self-presence. The narrative is contaminated by the 'imposter' participation of the unconscious.

As I edit my fractured narrative I become attentive to the operation of the 'other' in the 'I' and the input of the unconscious at a primal/generative moment of narrative composition. I accept that this 'other-I' operates without recourse to concepts of self-presence in time, and without conscious intention as it pertains to the sign's ability to 'deliver' semantic intention. Is my editing practice therefore 'hospitable' to the imposter: to the 'other-I' of the unconscious?

Derrida suggests that:

[...] "hospitality" is a Latin word (Hospitalität, a word of Latin origin, of a troubled and troubling origin, a word which carries its own contradiction incorporated into it, a Latin word which allows itself to be parasitized by its opposite, "hostility," the undesirable guest [hôte] which it harbors as the self-contradiction in its own body'. (Derrida 2000, p.1)

In my editing practice, the conscious-I is host only to the extent that it is a means for me to articulate the voice of the other as it stakes its claim in my fractured narrative: the conscious-I is host only to the extent that it is a means for me to

articulate where I'm calling from. At a primal/generative moment of composition, the unconscious leads the dance; to suggest otherwise would be to put the cart before the horse; to forget that 'metaphors of perception are metaphors' rather than 'the things themselves' (Nietzsche 1873, p. 264); to forget that I cannot be outside of the work of the unconscious as I engage with the issue of authorial intention at a primal moment of narrative composition; to pretend that we are something other than 'passengers, comprehended and displaced by metaphor' (Derrida 2007: 48). For these reasons, I describe my hospitable editing practice as my faith in 'a vision that I intend beyond when I know' (Prendergast 2012: 9).

Conclusion – Where I'm calling from: textor, textum, textus

'Textor, textum, textus: the Latin terms for weaver, web, and the various structures (whether threads or language) from which these are made' (Williamson 2011: 4). I am aware that both conscious and unconscious forces are at play in the web of my fractured narrative and, in this, I subscribe to Hillis Miller's (Hillis Miller 1992: 233) proposal that:

Each word inheres in a labyrinth of branching interverbal relationships going back not to a referential source but to something already, at the beginning, a figurative transfer, according to Rosseauistic or Condillacian law that all words were originally metaphors.

In a Derridean style of reasoning, Hillis Miller pinpoints the 'always already' metaphoricity that underlies a sign's propensity to mean (Derrida 1978: 211).

It is the complexity of a sign's propensity to mean that Derrida refers to when he suggests that:

[...] when a text you write comes back to you in one form or another, it is never the same text [...] there is no echo, or, if there is, it's always distorted [...] It can be a very pleasant or very unpleasant experience. It can reconcile you with what you've done, make you love it or hate it. There are a thousand possibilities. Yet one thing is certain in all this diversity, and that is that it's never the same. (Derrida 1985: 158)

I am grateful for the concept of alterity because it questions the very possibility of meaning: 'how hazardous is every word of thought (every thoughtful word) [...] that addresses itself to Being [?]' without questioning our desire for meaning-in-time: 'Being speaks through every language; everywhere and always' (Derrida 1968: 298).

Alterity recognises that the otherwise empty sign is shadowed by associations that simulate presence. The concept of alterity therefore gives me the means for talking about effects in the context of a ghostly cause. In this way, meaning is constituted in terms of a yearning desire.

Derrida says:

Perhaps the desire to write is the desire to launch things that come back to you as much as possible in as many forms as possible. That is, it is the desire to perfect a program or a matrix having the greatest potential, variability, undecidability, plurivocality, et cetera, so that each time something returns it will be as different as possible. That is also what one does when one has children—talking beings who can always outtalk you. You have the illusion that it comes back to you, that it comes from you—that these unpredictable words come out of you somewhat. This is what goes on with texts. (Derrida 1985: 158-9)

In this, I see a meeting place for Derrida and I, a place where we seem to be calling from together, a place that celebrates the unforeseeable in a voice that seems to arise from me but is, of course, other.

Fractured narrative is characterised by dissemination, shifting points-of-view, and meaning that is riddled with otherness. In these ways I hear Derrida in the context of my writing. In particular, I hear Derrida in the way that my fractured narrative scrambles against the possibility of prescriptive meaning, against the fullness of meaning-in-time.

In Raymond Carver's story, the first person narrator is an alcoholic, calling from 'Frank Martin's drying-out facility' (Carver 1989: 278). At the end of the story, the narrator considers calling his estranged wife; he says: 'she'll ask me where I'm calling from, and I'll have to tell her' (Carver 1989: 296). The final paragraph is riddled with estrangement, fear and desire.

It is within the context of the metaphor of 'where I'm calling from': a metaphor of estrangement, fear and desire, that I approach the concept of alterity as it applies to writing. Alterity represents the sense in which the narrative material I produce is other to me, but it also represents the ghostly language of desire that gives voice to this otherness.

CHAPTER TWO

Discontinuous narrative: the trace dance

Abstract

I am working on a novel in the form of a collection of interrelated stories. In each story, the narrative is framed by the idiosyncrasies, and prejudices, of a different first-person voice. There are gaps in narrative time, and there is disparity between the narrators' voices. The result is a 'discontinuous narrative'; this term describes the early work of Frank Moorhouse: 'an innovative narrative method using interconnected stories' (Griffith University 2011).

This paper explores Derrida's concept of alterity: specifically the 'trace' of 'otherness', as it corresponds to presence (Rivkin and Ryan 2004, p.278). I call this trace of otherness: The Trace Dance, because of the way alterity operates in discontinuous narrative. The play-off between the narrators' voices occurs in the shadowy place: in the realm of alterity. Derrida's concept of alterity explicates the gaps and disparity in discontinuous narrative: the process whereby reverberations simulate presence.

I compare the act of narrative representation with the process of remembering. In particular, I compare the relationship between the historical event of the memory, and the rememberer's sense of that event. Idiosyncratic associations determine the shape of the memory and, crucially, these associations need not be either consciously determined or logical.

I argue that remembering is an act of Experiential Representation; I formulate this concept to clarify the metaphorical manoeuvre that occurs in remembering: the attempt to capture the meaning of one thing in terms of the other. This metaphorical manoeuvre connects memory with narrative: which is the attempt to capture an idea in the context of a story.

The concept of alterity allows for a new way of looking at discontinuous narrative, because it reconfigures gaps in narrative time, and disparity in narrative voice, as crucial rhythmic forces that give the narrative its shape.

Keywords: Discontinuous Narrative - Alterity.

Introduction

I am working on a novel in form of a collection of interrelated stories. In each story, the narrative is framed by the idiosyncrasies, and prejudices, of a different first-person voice: there are gaps in narrative time, and there is disparity between the narrators' voices. The result is a 'discontinuous narrative'; this term describes the early work of Frank Moorhouse: 'an innovative narrative method using interconnected stories' (Griffith University 2011).

My novel is kaleidoscopic: shifting continuously as different ways of seeing and knowing come together. Perhaps there is a pattern, but then it is gone; a new pattern seems to emerge, but that in turn shifts. The narrative is constantly reconstituted as the voices of the different narrators intersect: as light and shade is cast, the narrative impression alters.

As I draft and re-draft the stories, I am forced to assess the interaction between the voices. I am aware of the disjuncture, and I ask myself: Why not tell the story through the eyes of one narrator? Why not choose a third-person perspective: an omniscient narrator, who might collect all of the voices together, in a coherent way?

As I second-guess my approach, I realise that I am unwaveringly attached to the style; the splintering of voices feels like the right way to tell the story, the only way to tell the story. It is when I ask myself why the fractured style feels right, that I seem to approach the question of methodology. I am aware that a sense of disjuncture arises out of the medley of voices, but I also realise that the disjuncture is carefully constructed; it is, in fact, crucial to the emotional structure of the narrative.

I would like to begin with an extract from three stories: to provide an example of the different voices and, perhaps, of the intersections between them.

Cockleshell is a story narrated from the perspective of Bullser – who tells us:

Probably I wasn't in love with her anyway. I was in love with the game, and the sex. The bottom line, the long and the short of it: I liked to be in control, and Annie prostituted herself to get dope for a deadshit (Prendergast 2012).

...and *Bygones* is a story narrated from the perspective of Annie – who tells us:

I'm edgy about the sex quiz. What will I say? For me, sex is a routine: it's like brushing my teeth. I fuck shitheads, and then wish they weren't shitheads, but I fuck them because I know they're shitheads, and shitheads are what I know. I hope that, at least, they'll be a good, hard root, and console myself that, at least, with these assholes, I don't have to pretend life's pretty. (Prendergast 2012)

...and *Awry* is a story narrated from the perspective of Pelts – who tells us:

[...] if I make a promise I'll keep it. That's why she told me, and me alone, where she was going. That's why she came to me for a bit of comfort, not because she had to. (Prendergast 2012)

The overarching narrative is kaleidoscopic: voices overlap and intersect, and the result is an interrupted, splintered style of telling. Stylistically, the narrative is messy: the stories skirt around the edges, pushing in and then retreating.

It is within the context of these observations that I arrive at a question that is both within, and outside, the narrative: Why all the voices? The obvious answer, within the context of the writing, is that the story is not so much Annie's story as a quest for Annie's story. The overarching narrative attempts to capture meaning as if it were being witnessed or remembered, and this story is told in discontinuous pieces, through different voices.

The other answer to the why of the voices, and one that exists outside the parameters of the text (in the context of a methodological examination), is that the narrative configures meaning as a discontinuous process, a process of successive additions. Discontinuous narrative is marked by 'characters and incidents [that] recur in an apparently unstructured, but actually carefully planned, manner to allow the reader cumulative understanding' (Stringer 1996, p.462). This process relies heavily on connections between characters and incidents.

Discontinuous narrative celebrates the reverberations that lurk behind the words: it celebrates the ghostly rhythm that gives the narrative its shape. In this way, discontinuous narrative foregrounds Derrida's concept of alterity, or otherness.

Derrida set about demonstrating that ideas [...] have no substance apart from networks of differences [...] that generate them as effects [...] Another term for this operation of difference that shadows presence is "trace" [...] To bear the trace of other things is to be shadowed by "alterity," which literally means "otherness". (Rivkin and Ryan 2004, p.278)

Derrida came up with trace as a means of escaping the problem of 'effect without a cause'; he believed that this problem arose from Saussure's conception of the

signified, where '[a]rbitrariness can occur only because the system of signs is constituted by the differences between the terms, and not by their fullness' (Derrida 1968, p.285). Because signs are, in themselves, constituted by emptiness, and yet they produce differences, as effects, Derrida was concerned that 'we would have to talk about an effect without a cause': a logically implausible position, which he believed would 'lead to no longer talking about effects' (Derrida 1968, p. 286).

The concept of alterity, specifically the trace of otherness, as it corresponds to presence, is a tool for talking about discontinuous narrative. The notion of trace gives a subliminal substance to the system of signs, as cause, and this in turn enables a dialogue about effect. I use the concept of alterity to understand the implications of using a discontinuous style.

The concept of alterity allows for a new way of looking at discontinuous narrative because it reconfigures gaps in narrative time, and disparity in narrative voice, as crucial rhythmic forces that give the narrative its shape. The operation of alterity in narrative is clarified further, in the context of what I have called Experiential Representation.

Exploring the narration as an act of experiential representation

Intriguing similarities exist between processes of representation, as they operate within the realm of memory, and processes of representation, as they operate within the realm of narrative.

In the case of narrative, the representation is a cognitive arrangement, produced in the context of connotative aspects of experience and understanding. In the case of memory, the representation is also produced in the context of connotation: the original event is inverted and supplemented, as it is arranged cognitively, in a particular way.

In the context of psychoanalysis, Dori Laub tells the story of a woman who, reflecting upon 'her memories as an eyewitness of the Auschwitz uprising', said she remembered 'four chimneys going up in flames, exploding' (Laub 1992, p.52). At a later time, historians noted that this woman's testimony was 'not accurate. The number of chimneys was misrepresented. Historically, only one chimney

was blown up, not all four' (Laub 1992, p.52). In an attempt to correlate image and experience, the number of chimneys is amplified in the remembered version.

The nature of inaccuracy and misrepresentation, in the context of memory, is intriguing. Janet Walker suggests that '[f]orgetting and mistakes in memory may actually stand [...] as testament to the genuine nature of the event a person is trying to recall' (Walker 2005, p.4). When she refers to the genuine nature of the event, Walker captures the sense in which the memory represents the event experientially.

The two images are at odds with one another: one chimney, in the historical version, and four chimneys, in the remembered version – the images contradict one another. Was it one, or was it all four? Which is true?

The answer is both: both are true; one is logically and historically true, and the other is true in the context of an attempt to represent the genuine nature of the event. The logically true image is insufficient in this capacity because it fails, says Laub, to testify 'to something [...] more radical, more crucial: the reality of an unimaginable occurrence' (Laub 1992, p.52). In the remembered image, we see a process of supplementation and augmentation: a representation that attempts to capture meaning in the idiosyncratic world of experience. I call this process *Experiential Representation*.

It is within this context of *Experiential Representation* that the activity of memory correlates with the activity of narrative. In narrative, we encounter a trope-like chain of signifiers, configured like an incident remembered, a representation that aims to capture the genuine experiential nature of an idea. In the case of both memory and narrative, the signifier stands for more than it is.

Nietzsche unpacks this process, whereby a signifier represents an idea:

[...] every idea originates by equating the equal with the unequal [...] every word becomes at once an idea not by having [...] to serve as a reminder for the original experience [...] but by having simultaneously to fit innumerable, more or less similar (which really means never equal, therefore altogether unequal) cases. (Nietzsche 1873, p.263)

The process Nietzsche is describing, whereby an idea in language simultaneously fits countless different cases, is a metaphorical manoeuvre, a process whereby language captures meaning imaginatively and non-literally and, in doing so,

represents an idea. The signifier is able to fit unequal others because the signifier has presence in trace, because it is shadowed by alterity, by otherness.

The relationship between the idea and the representation is metaphorical. It is based upon a process of inversion and supplementation, a play of light and shadow within the context of unequal others. So the idea is a ghostly presence of the narrative, lurking as other, outside the realm of the tangible text.

The idea that informs my writing is not fully and consciously conjured. I become aware of this idea, when I second-guess the splintered narration. For the sake of continuity I could rewrite the narrative from the perspective of one narrator; I could discard the messy bits; I could silence the disjuncture between the disparate voices - but I choose not to, and when I assess why I choose not to, I realise that I am unequivocally attached to this interrupted, splintered style of telling.

I am attracted to this discontinuous style because it foregrounds meaning as process; it foregrounds the ghostly play-off between otherwise empty signs, and it foregrounds the idiosyncratic nature of meaning attribution. It celebrates the sense in which language is alive, the very magical sense in which an otherwise empty sign becomes full of meaning.

It is this celebration of alterity that lurks beneath the surface of my discontinuous narrative. Alterity reminds us that narrative is an act of representation, because alterity is consistent with the idea that the text is constituted not only by what it says, but by what it does not say. As an assemblage of signs, the narrative is a surface milieu for ideas that lurk as other, outside the tangible text.

Milieu comes 'from Old French, *center* : *mi*, *middle* [...] + *lieu*, *place* (from Latin *locus*)' (The American Heritage Dictionary, 2009). *Lieu* is commonly associated with the phrase: in lieu of (in place of) where one thing stands for the other. Milieu, as middle place, captures the sense in which meaning in narrative arises out of the kaleidoscopic play of light and shadow. Narrative meaning is a Trace Dance, a ghostly play-off between otherwise empty signs.

The signs have presence because they are shadowed by alterity, because they bear the trace of otherness. Experiential Representation is the attempt to capture an idea in the context of the other, so the move toward meaning is a metaphorical manoeuvre. Experiential Representation is attentive to the Trace Dance that

shadows the assemblage. Meaning, as idea, lurks between illumination and darkness, in the middle place, where the gaps, biases and silences of the narrative intersect.

My novel involves a kaleidoscopic intersection of voices. Light and shade collide, and the narrative image changes, and changes again. Seeing and knowing are constantly called into question. In the middle place of the intersecting voices lies an idea, an ontological and epistemological inquiry that is problematised by the narration itself: Why do we see what we see and not something else, how do we know what we know, and, why do we see and know this, and not the other?

The play-off between the narrators' voices says as much as the voices themselves and this play-off occurs in the shadowy place, in the realm of alterity, where reverberations simulate presence. The rhythm behind the voices is the Trace Dance and this rhythm gives the narrative its shape.

The rhythm is an indirect expression lurking in the connection between the voices, in the gaps and the disparity. The notion of indirect expression captures the operation of alterity in narrative. Indirect expression is the rhythm that underpins the process of Experiential Representation and links narrative representation with processes of remembering.

Bakhtin explores the issue of indirect expression, suggesting that: 'the refracted (indirect) expression of [the author's] intentions and values' are, nevertheless, 'artistically organized [...] shot through with intentions' (Bakhtin 1934-5, p.674, 676). In this way, Bakhtin seems to argue that intentions are the determining factor in the artistic organisation of the novel. The argument from Experiential Representation emphasises that these intentions may not be fully, consciously determined. They are propelled by the desire to capture the genuine nature of an experience or an idea, in the context of a metaphorical other.

The act of Experiential Representation is informed by the absent presence of the other (as idea), although it need not be preceded by a conscious awareness of that other. Experiential Representation argues for a primal moment of narrative composition, but it does not assume that this moment is either consciously determined, or logical. The meaning is ascribed to the sign as shadow; it is not prescriptive.

Kafka unpacks the operation of these unstable processes, when he says:

My feeling when I write something that is wrong might be depicted as follows [...] A man stands before two holes in the ground [...] he is waiting for something that can only rise up out of the hole to the right. Instead, apparitions rise, one after the other, from the left; they try to attract his attention and finally even succeed in covering up the right hand hole. (Corngold 1988, p.84)

Kafka identifies a constant deviation and distraction in the form of apparitions. In trying to write the right thing, he only ever achieves an apparition of the original idea. In this way, Kafka captures the sense in which narrative relies upon the operation of metaphor; the sense in which narrative, as an act of representation, relies upon the writer's understanding of the sign as a symbol of perception, a sign that stands for more than it is.

When we remember that signs are symbols of perception, we open our minds to new possibilities for meaning. We may still approach narrative with the expectation of continuity, but when we are confronted with fractured or splintered meaning, we might be encouraged to take a step back, and ask: is our expectation of continuity relevant to our understanding of discontinuous narrative per se, or only to our understanding of discontinuous narrative, in the context of continuity and logic?

Nietzsche gets right to the heart of this question when he speaks about the seeking and finding of truth, within the realm of reason. He says: 'If somebody hides a thing behind a bush, seeks it again and finds it in the self-same place, then there is not much to boast of, respecting this seeking and finding' (Nietzsche 1873, p.264). To my mind, this hide and seek process mimics the methodology of our search for seamless continuity, in the context of discontinuous narrative.

Nietzsche's underlying premise is that if we find only what we set out to find, the process ceases to be an inquiry, because we have forgotten 'that the original metaphors of perception are metaphors, and take[n] them for the things themselves' (Nietzsche 1873, p. 264). We have put the cart before the horse, so to speak.

When I accept that discontinuous narrative is an intentional stylistic choice, I am no longer concerned with expectations of seamless continuity, but with the operation of discontinuity itself; so I begin from the perspective of what the narrative achieves, as opposed to what it fails to achieve, in the context of logic. This approach takes the narrative itself as the starting point of inquiry. The suggestion that we might begin a theoretical analysis of a narrative from within

that narrative, is captured by Hillis Miller, who claims that: 'To follow the motif of the [narrative] line will not be to simplify the knotted problems of narrative form but to retrace the whole tangle from the starting place of a certain point of entry' (Hillis Miller 1992, p.231). In the case of my novel, the starting place is the configuration of meaning as a discontinuous process; the point of entry is a sequence of successive additions.

When we disentangle our inquiry from the trappings of logic, we can reason about the riddle of discontinuity in other ways. When elements of discontinuity are understood methodologically, to be the point and the play, then any attempt to resolve them constitutes an attack on that methodology.

Discontinuity in narrative may, indeed, be a rhythm we cannot readily understand, and yet this does not mean that a logical approach is the best means to our comprehension of it. Perhaps by suspending rules of logic, we open new opportunities for meaning. Opportunities for new meaning exist when we remember that signs are symbols of perception, for example, in their extensive work on metaphor Lakoff and Johnson describe how:

An Iranian student shortly after his arrival in Berkeley, took a seminar on metaphor from one of us [...] he found [...] an expression that he had heard over and over and understood as a beautifully sane metaphor. The expression was "the solution of my problems" – which he took to be a large volume of liquid, bubbling and smoking, containing all of your problems [...] He was terribly disillusioned to find that the residents of Berkeley had no such chemical metaphor in mind. And well he might be, for the chemical metaphor is both beautiful and insightful. It gives us a view of problems that never disappear utterly and that cannot be solved once and for all. All of your problems are always present [...] And [...] you are constantly finding old and new problems precipitating out and present problems dissolving, partly because of your efforts and partly despite anything you do. (Lakoff & Johnson 1980, pp.143-4)

Fundamentally, Lakoff and Johnson see the manner in which the Iranian student comprehends the metaphor as 'a clear case of the power of a metaphor to create a reality' rather than simply giving us 'a way of conceptualizing a pre-existing reality' (Lakoff & Johnson 1980, pp.144-5). Perhaps creating a new reality is the very privilege that narrative affords, because discontinuity reminds us that meaning is unstable, that meaning is shadowed by alterity at every turn.

The image of the solution, bubbling and smoking, mimics the Trace Dance in narrative. Signs, like problems, have presence in the simmering smoke of the

assemblage, in relation to all of the other ingredients. The dynamic of the assemblage is altered at every turn as the narrative signs interact.

A novel in multiple first-person voices foregrounds the assemblage as an act of representation. In this instance, the narrative is configured like an incident remembered; idiosyncratic associations lead the Trace Dance, laying bare the tenuous world of meaning attribution.

Lakoff and Johnson's account of metaphor, as a discourse that has the power to create a new reality, accounts for misrepresentation in the context of memory and explains unstable processes of meaning attribution in language. In both of these cases, it explicates this dynamic in Nietzsche's terms, that is, in the context of finding something new behind a bush, something one could scarcely have believed possible.

Crucially, Lakoff and Johnson emphasise the 'experiential' component of metaphorical thinking (Lakoff & Johnson 1980, p.154). It is the notion of the experiential that links narrative with memory because, in both cases, the representation is underpinned by processes of inversion and supplementation; in both cases subjective, idiosyncratic and unstable processes of meaning-attribution are foregrounded.

Lakoff and Johnson's work relies upon the premise that '[m]etaphor is primarily a matter of thought and action and only derivatively a matter of language' (Lakoff & Johnson 1980, p.153). Intriguingly, Lakoff and Johnson suggest that 'the primary function of a metaphor is to provide a partial understanding of one kind of experience in terms of another kind of experience' (Lakoff & Johnson 1980, p.154). It is this relationship of unequal others, in the form of another kind of experience, that ties Lakoff and Johnson's ideas to Nietzsche's work on metaphors of perception, more than one hundred years earlier.

Conclusion

As we tackle discontinuity in narrative, the knotting, splintering and fracturing of meaning, we need to move away from the concept of continuity and toward an evaluation of discontinuity in the context of metaphor and imagination, as a methodological milieu.

Alterity allows for a new way of looking at discontinuous narrative because alterity explicates the ghosting effect in narrative, the absent-presence of a displaced, exterior logic. Absent presence is the process whereby an exterior, and perhaps illogical, logic gives meaning its shape. This is the Trace Dance, the relationship between the seen and the unseen. It explains how the Auschwitz survivor's testimony is ghosted by the original historical event; it explains how metaphor is capable of creating a new reality; it explains how the ghostly play-off between multiple first-person voices might be crucial to the emotional structure of the narrative.

It is on this point, and in conclusion, that I return to the questions that underpin this investigation, as practice-based inquiry: Why do I find processes that foreground alterity so appealing? Why am I attracted to what might be described as an interrupted style of storytelling, particularly when I am aware that this style rattles expectations of continuity and logic?

As I draft the individual stories, I realise that each story reaches a point of resolution – however the moment of resolution, as a point of knowing, is undermined by the next story, and the next – overall then, knowing is shadowed by a different way of knowing. The narrative image, as representation, is constantly shifting.

...And so we read Bullser's voice, in the story *Cockleshell*, in the context of a constantly shifting other. Bullser says:

That's the story, in a nutshell - or a cockleshell. That is the nothingness of her absence. It is the smell of the rain on the road when she left, and the smell of her skin. Some people say that rain has no smell but that's bullshit: only the rain smells like what was, and what might have been. (Prendergast 2012)

... And we read Annie's voice, in the story *Bygones*, in the context of a constantly shifting other. Annie says:

I'll just leave it at that then, ay: leave well enough alone. No one wants to grow up knowing they were the product of a rape [...] so [...] I'll sleep on it: again, and again [...] until I don't know if it's real, until I'm not sure if it ever really happened, until it's a baby in a bucket Bygone. (Prendergast 2012)

...And we read Pelts' voice, in the story *Awry*, in the context of a constantly shifting other. Pelts says:

I'd like to think I did everything I could, but I loved her like there was a time limit on it, because I was scared fuckless I would lose her. That's how it is with

angels. Sorry... Give me a sec. Sorry. We were all desperate for a piece of her, and we all used-her-up, in our way. Sorry, but that's the bottom of the barrel of the fucken truth. (Prendergast 2012)

This is the Trace Dance. This is Derrida's concept of alterity operating within the realm of narrative. In this context, continuity is shadowed by its own undoing, resolution is shadowed by its own unraveling, the known is undercut by a different way of knowing and, perhaps, by an inability to know. Knowing is a shifting kaleidoscope with truth constituted experientially, in the milieu of what it means to be and to know.

An analysis of discontinuity in the context of alterity is liberating. To say that discontinuity is a problem is just another way of saying that alterity is a methodological manoeuvre. Derrida's concept of alterity reminds me that a representation is always shadowed by otherness.

I realise that a novel in multiple first-person voices is a representation that imitates the immediacy of the spoken voice, aiming toward the genuine experiential nature of an idea, where meaning takes shape in the rhythm of the Trace Dance. I realise that discontinuous narrative configures meaning as a process of successive additions. I realise that I'm down with discontinuity, for better, for worse, I like the sound of its impertinent beat. Perhaps most importantly, I realise that I am trying to show you a story, rather than to tell you a story.

CHAPTER THREE

A house with a boat on its roof: the shadowy flux of alterity

Abstract

This paper investigates a methodological approach to writing and editing a fractured novel manuscript: *The earth does not get fat* (Prendergast 2012). The novel is a collection of interrelated stories; each story is framed by the idiosyncrasies and prejudices of a different first-person voice. There are gaps in narrative time and there is disparity between the narrators' voices. The result is a 'discontinuous narrative'; this term describes the early work of Frank Moorhouse: 'an innovative narrative method using interconnected stories' (Griffith University 2011).

Freud's analysis of dreams as 'a picture puzzle, a rebus' is an analogy for the haphazard content of a fractured narrative (Freud 1900, p.400). The discontinuous structure of the narrative is informed by the operation of the subjective subconscious: the content is not fully, consciously determined. Freud explains how meaning is produced in the context of the decentred links between the 'manifest' content: the dream-signs, and the 'latent' content: the dream-thoughts (Freud 1900, p.400). Freud's analysis provides a means for weaving together the discontinuous fragments in the novel. Freud's distinction between manifest content and latent content is a means for investigating how the stories are connected.

This constitutes a Derridean approach to narrative in that the attention to latent structure is consistent with Derrida's concept of 'alterity': alterity is the 'trace' of 'otherness' as it corresponds to presence (Rivkin & Ryan 2004, p.278). Trace is the rhythm of the other that gives meaning its shape.

In this paper, Freud's analysis is used as a methodological approach to the question: how does the novel bear witness to the writer's subjective consciousness?

Keywords: Alterity - Authorial intention - subjective consciousness

Introduction – Alterity and metamorphosis

Freud's 'The interpretation of dreams' focuses upon the relationship between the signs, in the surface content of the dream, and the operation of thought that produces these signs, in the latent content of the dream. Freud's analysis is a means for tangling with a discontinuous narrative style because Freud's analysis provides a methodological approach to the question: how does the novel bear witness to the writer's subjective consciousness?

This investigation is a practice-based inquiry. It takes place in the context of writing and editing a novel manuscript: *The earth does not get fat* (Prendergast 2012). The novel is a collection of interrelated stories told in multiple first-person voices. This paper examines how the discontinuous structure of the novel is shadowed by latent content and, in a reciprocal manner, how the latent content ghosts the surface of the text.

The connection between manifest content and latent content in narrative relies on a metaphorical connection; it relies upon what Aristotle has described as 'an intuitive perception of the similarity [*to homoion theorein*] in dissimilars' (Ricoeur 1977, p.23). The similarity in dissimilars is what Freud is referring to when he says that the manifest content and the latent content of the dream read like 'two versions of the same subject matter in two different languages' (Freud 1900, p.400). Freud suggests that the two versions say the same thing in a different way.

In this way, discontinuous narrative fits Freud's description of dreams as a picture puzzle. In discontinuous narrative, and dreams, the surface content may appear haphazard rather than linear because there are unexplained gaps, great leaps and incongruities. Discontinuous narrative and dreams appear desultory because they are propelled by imagination and metaphor, in the first instance, rather than by logic.

To discover the character of the narrative, in the way that Freud suggests that we might discover the character of a dream, and that is through an analysis of the manifest content as a surface map, is to read the sign in the context of its 'symbolic relation'; it is to engage in a process of discovery that involves 'comparing the original and the translation' (Freud 1900, p.400). This involves

tracing a metaphorical manoeuvre, configuring the process whereby one thing might represent the other.

To reflect upon the way that discontinuous narrative relies heavily on the invisible threads of latent content, is to recognise that a structure of this kind does not pretend that meaning is prescriptive. Discontinuous narrative is a reminder that signification in language is a loose process, riddled with idiosyncrasy; it is a reminder that, in the very moment that language signifies in a particular way, it entails the possibility of being other.

The connection between manifest and latent narrative content can be illustrated, on a very rudimentary level, by taking two symbols from two stories in the novel, and examining how these symbols metamorphose.

One of the stories in the novel is titled *Cockleshell*. The story is narrated from the perspective of Bullser – who tells us:

I would stare out [at the water], paralysed, listening to the whisper of the foamy wash on the sand. I'd freak out that I was never going to get away from there, I was as empty as the nothing, as hollow as a cockleshell. They say if you hold a cockleshell up to your ear, you can hear the ocean and so I would stand there and put a shell to my ear, but all I could hear was the nothing, all I could see was Annie. When I think of intimacy, that's all there is, Annie and the nothing. (Prendergast 2012)

...And *Bygones* is a story narrated from the perspective of Annie – who tells us:

He was my biggest secret. I kept him at the front of my bygone mind so I remembered that I could never tell anyone about him [...] I didn't hear him come in. I was cleaning the shower; the water was trickling and I was scrubbing. I'm nearly done, I said nervously, catching sight of him perched in the doorway, all arms and legs and a small head, like a spider. I have a boyfriend, I said desperately as he was unzipping. (Prendergast 2012)

The title of each story relates directly to a manifest symbol within the narrative; the symbol is either a tangible object within the story or a crucial turn of phrase. The symbols relate directly to the narrators' experiences of the events they describe - a cockleshell collected from a deserted shore and put to one's ear, or a bygone incident - however through a process of repetition, these symbols metamorphose.

Terence Hawkes suggests that the word metaphor 'comes from the Greek word *metaphora* derived from *meta* meaning 'over' and *pherein*, 'to carry' (Hawkes 1972, p.1). The idea that metaphoric meaning is somehow carried-over is consistent

with the idea that metaphoric meaning relies upon context. In response to Hawkes', Gay Lynch observes that 'metaphors can not be found in dictionaries' (Lynch 2008, p.2). Lynch's observation is based on the fact that the meaning of a metaphor is in flux. Flux is derived 'from [the] past participle of *fluere* [meaning] *to flow*' (The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 2009). Metaphor and flux, carrying-over and flowing, these definitions capture the sense in which metaphoric meaning is fluid rather than fixed, and it is within this context that one grapples with discontinuous narrative.

A fractured narrative foregrounds the operation of alterity. Derrida's concept of 'alterity' is defined as the 'trace' of 'otherness' as it corresponds to presence (Rivkin & Ryan 2004, p.278). Alterity relies on metaphor, on the sign's propensity to be 'other', on the ghostly shadow of latent structure.

By definition, cockleshell means: '[t]he shell of a cockle', and bygone means: 'a grievance, that is past' (The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 2009). In the context of narrative, the meaning of these words is fluid rather than fixed, because meaning emerges in the shadowy flux of alterity. Through a manoeuvre that relies upon the connection between latent and manifest content, and therefore upon the ghostly operation of alterity, meaning is capable of metamorphosis.

Lynch suggests that 'metaphors involve the purposeful shifting of meaning from one word to another which occurs in context [...] creat[ing] new meaning' (Lynch 2008, p.2). The shifting of meaning may well be purposeful, as Lynch suggests, but at the primal moment of narrative composition, this shifting is not necessarily either fully-consciously determined or logical. The surface content of the narrative may be elusive to the author, in the same way that dream-content may seem surreal, to the dreamer. Latent content is a means to understanding the surface content, because latent content, or trace, marks the ghostly shape of the metaphorical sign.

A house with a boat on its roof: surface narrative as rebus

It is within the context of metaphor and metamorphosis that one comes to understand discontinuous narrative. On the surface level, the narrative does not make perfect, continuous sense, but, as one becomes attentive to the ways in

which the latent and the manifest content reflect one other, one realises that meaning in language is a process of shifting and carrying, of flux and fluidity, rather than fixedness. Discontinuity celebrates the fluxing and carrying that is characteristic of metaphoric metamorphosis.

If the narrative were to make perfect sense then it would no longer be what it is and this, in turn, begs the question: what is it? Discontinuous narrative is an intersection of ways of seeing. Beyond this, Freud's analysis of latent and manifest content is particularly useful because it asks why the discontinuous arrangement is important to the emotional structure of the narrative.

Freud says:

[...] the dream content seems like a transcript of the dream-thoughts into another mode of expression, whose characters and syntactic laws it is our business to discover by comparing the original and the translation. (Freud 1900, p.400)

Because the dream thoughts correlate with the latent content of the narrative, they are akin to what Martin McQuillan has identified as the hauntological aspect of the text. McQuillan suggests that 'all material excluded in the process of narrative editing installs itself hauntologically within the material which the narrative presents' (McQuillan 2000, p.25). In this way, the gaps and silences in the text haunt the surface of the narrative; they are part of the telling. The splintered style of narration in discontinuous narrative resists the inclination toward continuity, tidiness and sense making, and yet this resistance is a hauntological presence within the text, an absent presence.

So when Freud suggests that we should compare the dream-content and the dream-thoughts, when he proposes that we need to articulate the former in the context of the latter, he is suggesting that the surface content of the representation has a hauntological aspect. Freud says: 'we [should] try to replace each separate element [of the manifest content] by a syllable or a word that can be represented by that element in some way' (Freud 1900, p.400). In this way, Freud suggests that we should give voice to the ghostly shape of latent content; he suggests that we should try to understand signs, such as 'a house with a boat on its roof', as symbols for underlying intentions: intentions that are grounded in the subconscious, intentions that are not shackled by the inhibitions of full-consciousness and logic (Freud 1900, p.400).

The search for meaning in discontinuous narrative is conducted in a state of aporia because, in narrative, one thing is represented by a dissimilar-similar, a metaphorical other. Aporia is the necessary quandary of narrative; it is an abyss. The origin of aporia is from the Greek: 'from *aporos*, impassable [...] difficulty of passing' (The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 2009). When Derrida's concept of alterity is understood in Freudian terms, as the latent structure of the representation, then the impassable passage becomes traversable; meaning is carried-over the seemingly impassable tract. Aporia in narrative is a muddle of dissimilar-similar; this is not so much a problem as a condition of narrative, and discontinuous narrative foregrounds this aporia.

Narrative captures ideas associatively and symbolically, rather than logically. Meaning exists as a map of signs, a surface rebus of indicators that are both metaphorical, and capable of metamorphosis. This is what Freud means when he speaks about the process of 'displacement', the idea that: 'what is clearly the essence of the dream-thoughts need not be represented in the dream at all' (Freud 1900, p.410). The dream-thought, in the context of dreams, the underlying idea, in the realm of narrative, each of these becomes other, they metamorphose. That is why dream symbols can be elusive, implausible, frightening, shocking and ridiculous; that is why narrative is open to multiple, and sometimes contradictory, interpretations.

In this way, Freud argues for lateral rather than logical connections between the latent and the manifest content of the dream. Freud therefore provides a methodological approach to fractured narrative, because he provides a means for reasoning about subconscious authorial intentions. Pertinently, Freud provides a way out of the contradiction that seems to arise at the meta-level, in the context of the current analysis, and that is: how can one speak, in logical terms, about a process that seems to exist pre-logic, or about a representation that defies logic?

One is able to reason about this process by following Freud's methodology, arguing for lateral rather than logical connections between manifest and latent content in narrative. Freud uses the concepts 'displacement [...] condensation [and] overdetermin[ation]' to explicate the decentred links between the various stages of the dream formation: dream thought, dream content and dream analysis (Freud 1900, p.410, p.401, p.404). Freud's methodology explains how one can

speak, in logical terms, about processes that may not originate in logic, or present themselves according to the conditions of logic.

When one investigates the character of the novel, in the way that Freud suggests that we might discover the character of a dream, and that is through an analysis of the manifest content as a surface map, one traces a metaphorical manoeuvre, a shift that occurs in the idiosyncratic realm of associations. Unstable processes of meaning attribution are foregrounded. While the associations themselves may be far from logical, this does not preclude one from reasoning about these processes in a logical way.

To compare the original and the translation, in the context of the current inquiry (a novel in multiple voices), is to realise that the underlying idea emerges from the representation; in other words, one becomes aware of the idea when one is attentive to the narrative as rebus. So then, the original (idea) pre-exists the translation (or surface narrative) even though one is not necessarily consciously aware of that original (idea) prior to producing the translation (or surface narrative).

Therefore it is only when one second-guesses the splintered narration, that one becomes aware of being unwaveringly attached to the style, and it is within the context of the realisation that one is unwaveringly attached to the style, that one is attentive to what one is trying to say in what one is saying, and it is through an analysis of this kind that one comes to an appreciation of what one is playing at. One becomes attentive to the operation of subjective consciousness in the production and arrangement of the narrative. Therefore, one is able to speak logically about this process because one is speaking about it retrospectively, in the context of the awareness of an underlying idea.

To consider this process of representation, equates to an inquiry in the direction of: what does one mean? What is one trying to say? This inquiry is not genuinely interested in the possibility of knowing what is said, but it is fixated upon the concept of intention as desire: what does one mean by what one is saying?

The possibility for yet another meaning exists because of what Freud describes as the process of 'condensation'; the dream means a great deal more than it says: 'dreams are brief, meagre and laconic in comparison with the range and wealth of the dream thoughts' (Freud 1900, p. 401). Freud suggests that '[t]he possibility

always remains that the dream may have yet another meaning' (Freud 1900, p. 401). The same is true in the context of narrative.

And so, when one asks: What does one mean? What is one trying to say? – This does not imply that one intends to say what one means, exactly. If one intends to say what one means, precisely, then in the first instance one would need to be fully, consciously aware of what they mean (which they need not be, at the primal moment of narrative composition, and which they are most certainly not, in the case of dreaming). Secondly, one would have no need of metaphor because they would not be interested in signs as symbols. Metaphor is utilised within narrative representation, as it is within dreams, precisely because these acts involve the attempt to capture meaning in an associative way.

Conclusion – Metamorphosis and the uncanny

The manifest content of the novel is a world of cockleshells and bygones, a world where things are what they are, but also a world where, through processes of condensation and displacement, these symbols metamorphose.

The symbol 'cockleshell' metamorphoses. Bullser says:

In my heart of smashed up cockleshells, I knew that if she left without saying goodbye, she wasn't coming back but I hung around for a bit anyway, just in case [...]

I couldn't ask her what she wanted unless that's all it was, pipes for pipe dreams, ghost-ship sex and smashed up cockleshells. (Prendergast 2012)

Through processes of condensation and displacement, the symbol 'cockleshell' is capable of representing longing, unfulfilled yearning, the nothingness of absence. The meaning of the symbol 'cockleshell' exists in context; it metamorphoses; it becomes other.

...And the symbol 'bygones' metamorphoses. Annie says:

When you're in someone else's empty house, the bygones come haunting; it's all dust and bygone bitterness, bathroom scum and bygone possibilities [She says:]

You can't rewind time with these people; they hang on to everything, with their clear heads and their untangled consciences [...] Fucking vultures, they don't know bygones. (Prendergast 2012)

Through processes of condensation and displacement, the symbol 'bygones' is capable of representing the antithesis of itself: things that are beyond forgetting.

The meaning of the symbol 'bygone' exists in context, it metamorphoses, it becomes other.

In each instance, as the symbol within the manifest content of the narrative is repeated, it metamorphoses, meaning is carried-over, in-flux. Freud suggests that the nodal points in the surface-content of the dream, 'have copious contacts with the majority of the dream thoughts', they are 'overdetermined [...] represented in the dream thoughts many times over' (Freud 1900, p. 404). In the same way, nodal points in the narrative are presented many times over, and it is precisely because they have undergone processes of condensation and displacement that they must be understood symbolically; it is precisely because they must be understood symbolically that they are open to multiple interpretations. This is the metaphorical field of the creative text, where a latent rhythm gives the surface its shape.

Pertinently, it is because the primal moment of narrative composition is not fully, consciously determined, that the repetition of symbols in the surface content of the narrative is, at least to some extent, subconscious and involuntary. Freud identifies this process of 'involuntary repetition' in 'The uncanny'; he says:

[...] this factor of involuntary repetition [...] surrounds us with an uncanny atmosphere that [...] forces upon us the idea of something fateful [...] where otherwise we would have spoken of 'chance' only [...] We do feel this to be 'uncanny'. (Freud 1919, p.427)

Freud describes the surprise the writer feels upon recognising nodal points in the context of narrative, an involuntary repetition of compatible symbols in various, dissimilar-similar, guises.

Freud describes the operation of alterity within the context of narrative, because he describes the process whereby words, as symbols, are capable of representing in a multi-faceted way. Freud says:

[...] the word heimlich [...] belongs to two sets of ideas, which without being contradictory are yet very different: on the one hand, it means familiar and congenial, and on the other, that which is concealed and kept out of sight [...] Thus heimlich is a word the meaning of which develops in the direction of ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, unheimlich. (Freud 1919, p.420, p.421)

A sign's capacity to mean both one thing and the other is precisely the capacity that is afforded to signs in narrative, by the operation of alterity. The connection

between manifest and latent content, which Freud outlines in 'The interpretation of dreams', provides a means for articulating this magical manoeuvre of alterity.

To assess discontinuous narrative in terms of Freud's 'interweaving of [...] reciprocal relations', between the surface content and the latent content, is to move towards an awareness of the way symbols metamorphose and, thereby, to an appreciation of harmony in discontinuity (Freud 1900, p. 404). Interweaving is the sum of the relation of the rebus (or the surface narrative) and the underlying idea. Whilst the idea is the origin of the rebus, it may also be unavailable to consciousness without the help of the rebus as a trigger, as a map, and this is because the original idea does not necessarily belong to the realm of conscious thought.

Narrative, like dreaming, is riddled with the desire to capture meaning associatively, and interweaving is achieved only through attention to latent content, to the otherness that shadows the surface of the narrative. To say, in the context of narrative and dreams, is not to say but to show, and this constitutes an attempt to capture meaning associatively because to be, in the context of narrative and dreams, is not to be, except as it were, in the context of the absent presence of the otherwise empty sign, except that is, in the context of alterity: of metaphor and metamorphosis.

Freud's 'The interpretation of dreams' provides a Derridean approach to narrative because Freud's analysis of latent content is consistent with Derrida's concept of alterity. Discontinuous narrative invites a Derridean approach, because discontinuous narrative seduces by virtue of the hauntological aspect of the text. Discontinuous narrative foregrounds the operation of trace: the everpresent, intangible, ghostly rhythm that gives meaning its shape.

To be attentive to processes of overdetermination and interweaving is to realise that the symbols on the surface of the narrative metamorphose. The symbols 'cockleshell' and 'bygone' are nodal points, repeated in various guises within the narrative, and strung together by a latent structure. It is this hauntological structure that gives the discontinuity an underlying semblance of continuity.

If the writer were to begin with a clear understanding of the latent structure, if the writer were to try to say what they mean, precisely, then perhaps the story would no longer be a story, but something else altogether.

CHAPTER FOUR

The strange and the familiar: seeing beyond when we know

Abstract

My novel is a collection of interrelated stories. Each story is framed by the idiosyncrasies and prejudices of a different first-person voice. There are gaps in narrative time and there is disparity between the narrators' voices. The result is a 'discontinuous narrative'; this term describes the early work of Frank Moorhouse: 'an innovative narrative method using interconnected stories' (Griffith University 2011).

As I draft and re-draft the stories, I am forced to assess the interaction between the voices. I am aware of the disjuncture, and I ask myself: Why not tell the story through the eyes of one narrator? Why not choose a third-person perspective, an omniscient narrator who might collect all of the voices together, in a coherent way?

As I second-guess my approach, I realise that the splintering of voices feels like the right way to tell the story and, in this way, I approach the question of methodology. I am aware that a sense of disjuncture arises out of the medley of voices, but I also realise that the disjuncture is carefully constructed; it is not accidental. This is an intuitive judgement.

If I edit my novel ethically, I ask what the discontinuity achieves, rather than how it fails in the context of logic. This means that I recognise that the narrative begins from a place that does not worry about logic, and I realise that second-guessing the surface content of the narrative, from a rational perspective, may be counterproductive.

The conscious mind, fettered as it is with inhibitions, may fail to see that the logical track is not necessarily the most productive route. The conscious mind may not recognise that going off-track is the way forward and, perhaps, the only way that the story can become something other than what I, in my rational mind, believe that it should be.

Ethical editing means that I am attentive to my intuitive response to the narrative; it means that I tolerate incongruous elements of the narrative, even if they do not fit the criteria of logic.

Ethical editing is a meeting of minds (both mine), the fully conscious mind meets the work of the subconscious mind with surprise and approval, at best, skepticism and derision, at worst. The work of the subconscious mind is elusive but it need not be subjugated to logical, rational considerations, for this means that I delimit the work of the subconscious; it means I assess the discontinuity on the basis of an external operating system; it means that I impose certain criteria upon the surface narrative, criteria that has nothing to do with understanding why the discontinuity exists in the first instance.

Alternatively, when I pay heed to a primal moment of narrative composition, a moment that is not necessarily consciously determined or logical, I assess the surface of the narrative as a metaphorical map, I attempt to engage with the possibilities for meaning that the map encompasses; this constitutes a quest for the unstable *how* of meaning attribution.

Keywords: Ethical-editing – Discontinuity – Subconscious – Alterity

Introduction: discontinuity in my novel

My novel (Prendergast 2012) is a collection of interrelated stories. Each story is framed by the idiosyncrasies and prejudices of a different first-person voice. There are gaps in narrative time and there is disparity between the narrators' voices. The result is a 'discontinuous narrative'; this term describes the early work of Frank Moorhouse: 'an innovative narrative method using interconnected stories' (Griffith University 2011).

As I draft and re-draft the stories, I am forced to assess the interaction between the voices. I am aware of the disjuncture, and I ask myself: Why not tell the story through the eyes of one narrator? Why not choose a third-person perspective, an omniscient narrator who might collect all of the voices together, in a coherent way?

As I second-guess my approach, I realise that the splintering of voices feels like the right way to tell the story and, in this way, I approach the question of

methodology. I am aware that a sense of disjuncture arises out of the medley of voices, but I also realise that the disjuncture is carefully constructed, it is not accidental. This is an intuitive judgement.

If I edit my novel ethically, I ask what the discontinuity achieves, rather than how it fails in the context of logic. This means that I recognise that the narrative begins from a place that does not worry about logic, and I realise that second-guessing the surface content of the narrative, from a rational perspective, may be counterproductive. Ethical editing means that I am attentive to my intuitive response to the narrative; it means that I tolerate the discontinuous structure, even if it does not fit the criteria of logic.

Gertrude Stein says:

[...] let [the writing] take you and if it seems to take you off the track, don't hold back, because that is perhaps instinctively where you want to be and if you hold back and try to be always where you have been before, you will go dry. (Preston 1955: 160)

What I refer to as intuition, Stein calls instinct. The point, in both instances, is that the conscious mind, fettered as it is with inhibitions, may fail to see that the logical track is not necessarily the most productive route. The conscious mind may not recognise that going off-track is the way forward and, perhaps, the only way that the story can become something other than what I, in my rational mind, believe that it should be.

Editing my discontinuous narrative is a meeting of minds (both mine). The fully conscious mind meets the work of the subconscious mind with surprise and approval, at best, skepticism and derision, at worst. The work of the subconscious mind is elusive but it need not be subjugated to logical, rational considerations, for this means that I assess the discontinuity on the basis of an external operating system, this means that I impose certain criteria upon the surface narrative, criteria that has nothing to do with understanding why the discontinuity exists in the first instance.

Ultimately, subjugating the work of the subconscious to external, rational considerations means that I delimit this work. Alternatively, when I pay heed to a primal moment of narrative composition, a moment that is not necessarily consciously determined or logical, I am able to tolerate incongruous elements of

the narrative, like discontinuity. Ethical editing means that I choose not to impose rational, logical strictures upon the narrative without question.

My novel is a daughter's quest for the memory-stories that her mother (Annie) is incapable of telling. At the beginning of the novel, Annie is withdrawn and dysfunctional; she relies on pills and alcohol to numb her existence; she barely gets out of bed for days at a time.

I would like to begin with an extract from one of the stories in my novel. This story is an example of the peripheral stories in the narrative; it is an example of the stories that seem to wander aimlessly away from the novel's central inquiry: why is Annie withdrawn and dysfunctional, what happened to her? I wonder why these peripheral stories are part of the narrative; I wonder how they contribute to the narrative as a whole.

The narrators of these stories are minor players, characters on the fringe of the central inquiry about Annie's demise. I struggle with these stories because they represent a diversion, and I am already grappling with a text that is riddled with diversions and potholes.

The Story 'Getting Away with Murder' is narrated from the perspective of Peter. Peter worked at the morgue when Annie's son was brought there. Peter remembers Annie, talking about her at the beginning and the end of his story. He says:

I didn't trust that mother as far as I could throw her. She was hiding something. Who takes their dead boy away in a bag? That's what I wanted to know.

[And later]

I hid in the Ti tree all night long, watching the mother and the boy in the dead bag.

[...] I stepped out in the shadowy light of dawn, in my tinted glasses and my khaki army-pants with the thermal over-jacket; that's when the mother knew that I had been there for the whole night, for the long haul, watching [...]

I am not blind, I said to her, and then I ran towards her, stopping a few steps short of the grave, taking my glasses off and yelling: You think you can get away with murder. NOT ON MY WATCH. (Prendergast 2012)

Despite these brief references to Annie, the story is about Peter. I struggle with this story because the overarching narrative is about Annie; the novel is propelled by a daughter's quest for Annie's memory-stories, and I ask myself: what has Peter's story got to do with Annie?

As I ask myself how this story relates to the overarching narrative, as I investigate how it contributes to the narrative as a whole, I interrogate the surface content of the story. I ask myself what the story *is*; I ask myself what the story *does*. The story asks: why does Peter see what he sees? How does he know what he knows? I realise that this ontological and epistemological inquiry underlies all of the first-person voices in the text, I realise that this inquiry connects the stories and that, in each instance, this inquiry is postulated in the context of the narrator's remembering.

Discontinuity and remembering: structure and content

The narrators of the stories are called on to remember Annie, and their remembering is riddled with idiosyncratic truth. In each instance, the narrator's memory is a perception about self and present, in the context of yesterday and tomorrow. The narrative thereby plays out Daniel Schacter's (1996: 308) observations about memory: '[o]ur memories are the fragile but powerful products of what we recall from the past, believe about the present, and imagine about the future'. And so, when I ask myself: what do these peripheral stories have to do with Annie's demise? I realise that the answer is: everything. Annie has withdrawn from society, she is completely dysfunctional, she is so plagued by her past that she cannot live in the present or envisage any sense of future.

When we remember, meaning is produced as the result of successive additions. Proust suggests that: 'remembering emerges from the comparison of two images: one in the present and one in the past' (Schacter 1996: 28). In the stories, we see the interaction between the cue for remembering and the remembered material. This is an example of Schacter's (1996: 70) proposal that: 'a retrieval cue combines with the engram [memory trace] in order to yield a subjective experience that we call a memory'. The memory is, therefore, more than the replica of an original event, it is a story about an original event and this story relies, as Proust suggests, upon the interaction between past, present and future in the mind of the rememberer. I realise that the narrators of these peripheral stories are able to do what Annie cannot do and, that is, combine a perceived sense of self with a remembered image, thereby creating a memory-story.

When I assess the multiple voices in my novel, I revisit Bakhtin's notion of 'heteroglossia'; translated from 'speech types [*raznorecie*]', Bakhtin suggests that the languages of heteroglossia 'live a real life' and represent 'the refracted (indirect) expression of [the author's] intentions and values' (Bakhtin 1934-5: 674, 674, 676, 676). In this way, Bakhtin argues that intentions are the determining factor in the artistic organisation of the novel.

As I edit my discontinuous narrative, the stories strike me as both strange and familiar. As I try to account for the elusive elements in the narrative, I become crucially aware that Bakhtin does not attend to the possibility that authorial intentions may not be fully consciously determined. On the contrary, I move towards an assessment of the operation of my subconscious, and an awareness of the shared ground between the stories, when I ask myself how the stories are connected. This means that I think about the narrative in terms of Freud's 'interweaving of [...] reciprocal relations' between 'manifest' and 'latent' content (Freud 1900: 404, 400, 400).

When I think about Freud's (1900: 400) appraisal of a dream (narrative) as 'a picture puzzle, a rebus', I am able to articulate a methodology that includes the operation of subconscious authorial intentions. I realise that elements of my discontinuous narrative are strange to me because I am estranged from them, and I am estranged from them because they are not consciously determined or logical, but at the same time they are familiar, strangely familiar, because they come from one and the same mind.

If the process of narrative composition were fully consciously determined and logical, it would be altogether familiar to me, and yet the opposite is true in the context of my discontinuous narrative, especially in the case of these peripheral stories, my experience is that they are quite strange. I have to work out what to make of these stories and it is surreal, like waking from a dream, and yet I become conversant with the surreal, and the strange becomes familiar, when I recognise that the picture puzzle is strung together by a common ontological and epistemological inquiry, the why and the how of idiosyncratic truth, in the context of memory.

Seeing beyond when we know

Hemingway describes the connection between the manifest and the latent content in narrative, the sense in which the former is ghosted by the latter. He claims that the subject matter of the story is-what-it-is:

The sea is the sea. The old man is the old man. The boy is a boy and the fish is a fish. The sharks are all sharks no better and no worse. All the symbolism that people say is shit. What goes beyond is what you see beyond when you know.
(Baker 1981: 780)

The notion of seeing beyond when you know is the work of the imaginative subconscious and Hemingway cuts to the core of my fascination with the nature of authorial intention.

In the primal moment of narrative composition, seeing and logical-knowing separate. In this moment seeing and knowing are alogical. This is because narrative representation is a process of seeing beyond, outside the constraints of logic. This is what David Whish-Wilson (2009: 85) means when he speaks of ‘the “splitting” of normal consciousness whilst in the creative state’. When the mind is split, voice is pluralised, and I propose that this aspect is attributable to the work of the imagination in creative texts. I argue that conscious intention does not necessarily exist at the point of inception, so that the discontinuous structure of my narrative is intended, but not consciously so; it is intended beyond when I know, doubly intended when it is endorsed at the conscious, manifest level.

In this way the operation of my subconscious ghosts the surface of the text. This is Derrida’s concept of ‘alterity’ operating within the realm of narrative; alterity is the ‘trace’ of ‘otherness’ as it corresponds to presence, and discontinuous narrative foregrounds the shadowing effect of alterity (Rivkin & Ryan 2004: 278). This ghostly play-off between otherwise empty signs highlights the sense in which signs are an absent presence in the narrative. It is because signs are otherwise empty that a latent rhythm gives the surface its shape.

I account for hybridity in the context of the push and pull of the strange and the familiar, the subconscious and the conscious mind, as opposed to Bakhtin, who accounts for hybridity in the context of ‘intertextual[ity]’; I account for heteroglossia in the realm of seeing beyond knowing, in the context of the work of the subconscious, as opposed to Bakhtin, who accounts for ‘heteroglossia’ in the context of conscious authorial ‘intention’ (Rivkin & Ryan 2004: 674, Bakhtin

1934-5: 676). My analysis differs from Bakhtin's because it allows for the possibility that authorial intentions are not fully, consciously determined.

As I edit the manifest content of the narrative I compare the stories and, in doing so, I recognise similarity in difference or, as Aristotle says (defining metaphor): 'the similarity [...] in dissimilars' (Ricoeur 1977: 23). Through the editing process, I realise that there are underlying similarities between the stories although, on the surface, they are quite different. Aristotle's definition is particularly useful because I realise that the stories are connected metaphorically, through latent content. Comparing the stories in this way is a process of equating the 'equal with the unequal'; Nietzsche suggests that:

every idea originates by equating the equal with the unequal [...] every word becomes at once an idea not by having [...] to serve as a reminder for the original experience [...] but by having simultaneously to fit innumerable, more or less similar (which really means never equal, therefore altogether unequal) cases. (Nietzsche 1873: 263)

Aristotle's theory of the dissimilar-similar and Nietzsche's theory of the unequal-equal intersect; they explain how I can reason, in a rational, conscious way, about the work of the subconscious in narrative, how latent content ghosts the surface of the narrative; how latent and manifest content are strangely diametrically opposed, and yet familiar and compatible, and they do all of these things, because they explicate the operation of metaphor in the context of alterity.

Susan Sontag suggests that, for Freud, the 'manifest content must be probed and pushed aside to find the true meaning – the latent content – beneath [she says that] to interpret is to restate the phenomenon, in effect to find an equivalent for it' (Sontag 1972: 655). As I edit my discontinuous narrative, the surface content is the starting point of inquiry. I am not suggesting that we read back and dismantle the sign, I agree with Hemingway: the sign is-what-it-is (albeit an otherwise empty *is*). I also believe that the spirit of Hemingway's definition is in keeping with Sontag's notion of 'transparence', because when Hemingway speaks of the is-what-it-is of the sign, he is referring to what Sontag calls 'the luminousness of the thing in itself, of things being what they are' (Sontag 1972: 659).

We can see through that which is luminous and transparent, and it is this condition of being see-through that is consistent with the otherwise empty sign. The sign is empty but for 'the trace of other things'; Derrida proposes that to bear the trace of other things is to be 'constituted as a fabric of differences', thereby

giving 'presence' to the is-what-it-is of the sign (Rivkin & Ryan 2004: 278, Derrida 1968: 286). Trace explains how presence is simulated, how the otherwise empty sign becomes full.

In the context of trace, and in response to Sontag, I propose that there are no equivalents for manifest content; there are only unequal equals, dissimilar similars; this is so because the manifest content is a metaphorical map, a surface rebus of otherwise empty signs. Latent content is not a means to dismantling the is-what-it-is of the sign, because latent content is itself an interpretation. Sontag (1972: 654) suggests that interpretation has merit 'only in the broadest sense, the sense in which Nietzsche (rightly) says, [""]There are no facts, only interpretations[""]'. Latent content is an interpretation, rather than a fact, because latent content is not prescriptive, but rather it attaches itself to the surface content in a non-prescriptive way, as shadow, as trace.

The relationship between latent and manifest content takes an interest in the way that signs become full. In this way, my methodology fits Sontag's (1972: 660) description of the 'function of criticism': a process that 'should [...] show *how* [the narrative] *is what it is*, even *that it is what it is*, rather than to show *what it means*'. My appraisal of the surface of the narrative, as a metaphorical map, is not an attempt to *make it mean*, but an attempt to engage with the possibilities for meaning that the map encompasses. This constitutes a quest for the unstable *how* of a meaning attribution.

Conclusion – Ethics and editing: assigning value

The concepts of alterity, the dissimilar, and the unequal, underlie J. Hillis Miller's theory of displacement. Hillis Miller (1992: 235) claims that narrative meaning arrives out of 'displacement from one sign to another sign that in its turn draws its meaning from another figurative sign'. In this way, Hillis Miller explains how latent content is an absent-presence in the text, how the relationship between latent and manifest content is metaphorical. It is this metaphorical manoeuvre that renders strangeness, strangely familiar. This manoeuvre configures content as absent presence. It is within this context, of absent presence, that I understand Sudesh Mishra's (2006: 110) discussion of 'aporetic manoeuvre[s]' in language: the 'extreme reorientation of consciousness that permits language to stand in a

radical relationship to itself'. This manoeuvre is the means by which I familiarise myself with the strange, in the context of the dissimilar-similar, unequal-equal, of latent content.

In 'The Uncanny', Freud (1919: 420) refers to this reorientation of consciousness; he speaks of 'shades of meaning', an intriguing anomaly whereby one thing is pushed to the point that it becomes 'identical with its opposite'. As shades of meaning intersect, contradiction merges into compatibility; one thing becomes the other because shades of meaning ghost the sign, intersecting at every turn, investing and reinvesting the sign with meaning. This occurs in a neverending chain of inversion and supplementation, allowing the strange to become, strangely familiar.

And so I might agree with Hemingway, that the manifest content of the narrative is a world of boys and fish and sharks, or, in the case of my narrative, a world of discontinuity, diversion and 'Getting away with murder', because these things are what they are, no more, no less, tangible, hard-core, manifest content, but this content is otherwise empty, this content has presence precisely because we see beyond when we know, because this content is informed by the reverberations that simulate presence.

When we encounter a story without knowing what in the world it could possibly mean, it is like waking from a dream. In the world of dreams, like narrative, what we see is determined beyond the point of knowing, because in this context seeing is not constrained by logic.

As I edit the text as a hybrid construction, I negotiate between manifest and latent narrative content. This is an ethical negotiation because I assign value to elements of the representation as I rewrite and rearrange the narrative material. I recognise that the manifest content of the stories is a patchwork of signs, a picture puzzle of dissimilar-similar, unequal-equals. The stories are not necessarily coherent; they may be elusive and ambiguous. I have to work out what to make of the stories, and working out what to make of them does not mean that I reconstruct the narrative in order to make it coherent, or that I rewrite the narrative to fit the criteria of logic.

Discontinuous narrative is a representation that foregrounds heteroglossia in the context of the absent presence of the unstable sign. As I grapple with the strange

and the familiar, in the context of my discontinuous narrative, I attend to the possibility that narrative representation is not fully, consciously intended; I realise that my role, as editor of my narrative, is an ethical negotiation, I accept that my discontinuous narrative is multiple-voiced, not only literally, in the context of multiple first person narrators, but metaphorically multiple-voiced, in the context of the unequal-equal, dissimilar-similar, of latent content.

I am aware that my ethical engagement with my writing is a process of negotiating between the somewhat-strange workings of the subconscious, and the more familiar workings of logic. When I am attentive to latent narrative content, as trace, I have faith in a vision that I intend beyond when I know.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

Light the towel: narrative and the negotiated unconscious

Abstract

This investigation is a practice-based inquiry. It takes place in the context of writing and editing a novel manuscript: *The earth does not get fat* (Prendergast 2012).

The unpublished novel manuscript is a fractured narrative, a tale told in multiple first-person voices. One of the problems the writer encountered, as the novel developed, was a problem from the perspective of logic and continuity, the stories did not fit together in a linear way. As a result, the writer felt estranged from the writing and, at the same time, strangely familiar with it. Despite having produced the narrative, the writer felt that it was 'other'.

This paper summarises the writer's methodology, explicating the writer's attachment to this fractured style of telling. This fractured style is assessed within the context of the mind's ability to produce its effects without full consciousness. The analysis of authorial intention therefore focuses upon the influence of altered states of consciousness upon narrative material. In particular, the writer uses Andreas Mavromatis' work on hypnagogia: described as 'the unique state of consciousness between wakefulness and sleep' to describe the experience of the operation of the unconscious in authorial intention (Mavromatis 1987: title page).

Keywords: authorial intention – narrative - unconscious – hypnagogia – trace

Introduction – Creative practice and altered states of consciousness

This investigation is a practice-based inquiry. It takes place in the context of writing and editing a novel manuscript: *The earth does not get fat* (Prendergast 2012).

The unpublished novel manuscript is a fractured narrative, a tale told in multiple first-person voices. One of the problems the writer encountered, as the novel developed, was a problem from the perspective of logic and continuity, the stories did not fit together in a linear way. As a result, the writer felt estranged from the writing and, at the same time, strangely familiar with it. Despite having produced the narrative, the writer felt that it was 'other'.

In many respects, the evolution of the novel remains a mystery to the writer. It takes a long time to structure the narrative in a cohesive way, and still it does not satisfy logical expectations of continuity. An analysis of the writer's methodology reveals that the novel is not fully consciously intended, however it is nevertheless intended by the writer, and understood by the writer, at a primal moment of narrative composition. At this primal moment, narrative material is produced without recourse to conscious determination and logic.

The novel – The earth does not get fat

The stories in the novel are bound together by the concept of memory as narration, they are bound together by the pull of the past, and the fleshy, human undertow of the present, they are bound together by the intimacy of first-person narration. Despite these connections, the narrative is disparate and fractured; it is a schizophrenic whole.

The central narrative about Annie's demise consumes Book One and Book Three of the narrative, while Book Two is made up of nine chapters in nine different voices. These voices are the people from Annie's past.

Book Two is a clear example of the problems the writer faces from the perspective of logic and continuity. The writer has trouble reconciling the voices in Book Two with the central narrative about Annie's demise. The problem from logic is, therefore, the fractured state of the narrative, it is the sense in which the writing is not consciously premeditated.

Book two, chapter one ('Awry') is narrated by Pelts, who says:

Breaks my fucken heart that things went awry. I like that word, awry. I used to say it about the dodgy bits of timber, the warped bits that the bastards would tuck away in the middle of a bundle. Now I say it about everything. Awry.
(Prendergast 2012)

Book two, chapter two ('Cockleshell') is narrated by Bullser, who says:

You might think that I treated her like a whore but you have to remember that she was fucking me to get the gear [...] I couldn't ask her what she wanted unless that's all it was, pipes for pipe dreams, ghost-ship sex and smashed up cockleshells. (Prendergast 2012)

Book two, chapter three ('Long gone') is narrated by Geoff, who says:

[I told her:] I can see the love [...] Truth is, I saw a long gone hooker but I chose my words carefully so it sounded true and believable. I could see the love when I looked at Chelsea because everything she did was authentic and true. She made me believe that you could love burnt out, long gone, druggie hookers. She made me believe that people like her Mum and her Grandad were lovable. She made me believe that cunt was a lovely thing to say. (Prendergast 2012)

Book Two: chapter four ('Starry eyed') is narrated by Dean, who says:

The thing is: if your regrets aren't the cancerous kind, you can conduct your way through the memories. You can keep some things still and quiet and encourage a bit of noise from the pretty stuff, but boozers and bongers don't have much of the pretty, that's the problem, so it's all about keeping things still and quiet. That's the starry eyed that Fuller was always on about, stillness and a bit of quietly goes. (Prendergast 2012)

In these short extracts, from the first four chapters of Book Two, the problem from logic is exposed. The problem from logic is the schizophrenic style of telling, it is the sense in which the writer is estranged from the material that is produced at a primal moment of narrative composition; it is the sense in which the writing is 'other' to the writer.

Hypnagogia and hypnopompia – an illustration

Hypnagogia describes the transitional state between being fully awake (conscious) and fully asleep (unconscious). Mavromatis suggests that 'due to its unique character of riding between wakefulness and sleep, [hypnagogia] facilitates the emergence into consciousness of material that might otherwise remain unconscious' (Mavromatis 1987: 12). The verb 'hypnagogic' originates from the 'Greek hupnos [...] meaning] *sleep* [and the] Greek aggos [meaning] *leading* [...]' (The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 2000). The etymological origin of the term is useful because it captures the sense in which the mind is led, induced to travel where it might not have otherwise gone, with the unconscious mind as muse. David Whish Wilson provides an insightful working description of the experience of hypnagogia as: 'the dissociation from

external distraction, and utter absorption in the task at hand, without totally losing self-consciousness' (Whish-Wilson 2009: 90).

Whish-Wilson pinpoints the similarities between hypnagogia, on the one hand, and the work of the unconscious at a primal moment of narrative composition, on the other. Hypnagogic images result from a mind in transition, a mind free from the shackles of logic; the emphasis is upon the emergence of material that lurks outside full consciousness. In hypnagogic representation, metaphorical associations are crucial, and this explains the nature of the link between hypnagogia, on the one hand, and the influence of altered states of consciousness in authorial intention, on the other.

Hypnagogic representation is marked by hypnopompic imagery and hypnopompic material is 'characterized by the persistence of dreamlike imagery' (Collins English Dictionary 2003). It is the dreamlike quality of hypnopompic imagery that points to its metaphorical capacity. An analysis of hypnagogia allows the writer to track back from the sign, to the operation of thought that produces the sign, this means that the writer is able to mark the path of associative processes and, therefore, to mark the path of processes that operate without recourse to full-consciousness and logic.

The process of association that underlies hypnagogic representation mimics the process of association that occurs in the realm of alterity and, that is, the process that influences narrative representation. Derrida's concept of alterity refers to the 'trace' of 'otherness' as it corresponds to presence in language systems (Rivkin & Ryan 2004: 278). A fractured narrative foregrounds the shadowing effect of alterity because it foregrounds trace as a field of play. Diametrically opposed associations germinate in the trace field and, ultimately, transform the otherwise empty sign.

Mavromatis provides a striking example of hypnopompic speech, an example he sources from Mintz (Mavromatis 1987: 165).

The example proceeds in the following manner:

A 24-year-old woman, normal, woke up one morning; her husband was already up. Seeing him, she said, 'Light the towel' (the couple [were] Russian; another translation of the Russian phrase is 'set the towel on fire'). Her husband asked her what she meant. She repeated 'Light the towel'. He again indicated lack of understanding. Thereupon she became angry; she said that he had obviously

understood what she had meant but was pedantic enough to insist that she should express herself precisely. He should light the towel, that is (after a hesitation), raise the window shade. Subsequently, when the husband stated that he still did not understand why she had spoken of lighting a towel, she explained that lighting (or setting on fire) makes light and that a towel and a window shade are similar in shape'. (Mavromatis 1987: 165)

Mavromatis suggests that this example 'illustrates the presence of symbolic meaning, of metaphor and analogy, [of] 'inexact approximation', and a state of certainty [...] regarding the validity of the subjects frame of reference' (Mavromatis 1987: 165). The example from Mavromatis clearly illustrates how one thing is transformed from dissimilar to similar, from unequal to equal, via a metaphorical process of association. In concise visual terms, the example from Mavromatis shows how processes of association operate unconsciously. Precisely the same process occurs at a primal moment of narrative composition, and precisely the same process occurs because, in each instance, one thing is represented by a metaphorical other: a dissimilar and unequal other that is, yet, similar and equal.

In hypnopompic terms, 'light the towel; light the towel', which means 'set on fire; set on fire' is the metaphorical equivalent of 'open the blind; open the blind'. Idiosyncratic associations determine the nature of the articulation, and these associations are subconscious and connotative. That is why, from the perspective of conscious determination and logic, these associations appear to be arbitrary. The example from Mavromatis is particularly striking because the process of transformation, via association, is clearly traceable.

In this example of hypnagogic representation, it is possible to trace back from the surface content as a map of signs, to the idiosyncratic processes of association that produce these signs. It is the interaction between hypnagogia, as an altered state of consciousness, and logic, as representative of full, waking consciousness, that explains how one can chart, in logical terms, the operation of the unconscious in the context of authorial intention.

This pattern of reasoning reflects the idea that:

[...] as [the writer] edit[s] the manifest content of [the] narrative [they] compare the stories and, in doing so, [they] recognise similarity in difference or, as Aristotle says (defining metaphor): 'the similarity [...] in dissimilars'. (Prendergast 2011, 'The strange and the familiar: seeing beyond when we know': 7; Aristotle cited in Ricoeur 1977: 23)

Recognising similarity in difference is consistent with recognising the equal in the unequal; this is consistent with Nietzsche's idea that 'every idea originates by equating the equal with the unequal' (Nietzsche 1873: 263). On the surface level the chapters of the narrative are different and unequal and, yet, they are similar and equal. Each first person voice treks through the messy undergrowth of memory and, in this way, the stories are fractured and unequal, however in their quest to make a story out of recollected moments, and in their relation to the central problem of Annie's demise, the stories are, yet, similar and equal.

Aristotle's theory of the dissimilar-similar and Nietzsche's theory of the unequal-equal explicate the metaphorical manoeuvre that accounts for the transformation of the narrative sign. It is the process of association that enables this transformation. The narrative sign is capable of transformation because it is shadowed by alterity, by a ghostly web of diametrically opposed associations. This ghostly web is consistent with the web of diametrically opposed associations that shadow the manifest content of a dream. Freud suggests that:

[...] the essential dream thoughts [...] usually emerge as a complex of thoughts and memories of the most intricate possible structure, with all the attributes of trains of thought familiar to us in waking life [...] Each train of thought is almost invariably accompanied by its contradictory counterpart, linked with it by antithetical association'. (Freud 1971: 311, 312)

Freud explains the operation of alterity in narrative because he shows how presence is simulated by antithetical associations; in this way he explains how a sign is capable of transformation. Just as conscious awareness is not a prerequisite for the operation of association as it occurs in hypnagogia and dreaming, so too, conscious awareness is not a prerequisite for the operation of association as it occurs at a primal moment of narrative composition.

The process of association governs the shape of the representation in the transitional state of hypnagogia, and the same process of association governs the transformation of the narrative symbol at a primal moment of narrative composition. The process of association does not require consciousness to operate.

The unconscious muse: association, transformation, narrativisation

It is the mind's peculiar ability to produce effects while in an unconscious condition, that is most significant for the analysis of authorial intention in narrative. The process of association illustrates how the mind is able to produce its effects without consciousness, and it is this process of association that links authorial intention in narrative with other processes involving altered states of consciousness.

The process of association is based, quite simply, upon Freud's idea that: '[o]ur perceptions are linked with one another in our memory [...] we speak of this fact as 'association' ' (Freud 1971: 539). The process of association therefore explains the link between narrative, on the one hand, and hypnagogia and dreams, on the other. In each instance, a network of associations is able to produce effects without consciousness.

Freud explains the operation of this network of associations when he says that 'a trace is left in our psychical apparatus of the perceptions which impinge upon it. This we may describe as a 'memory trace'; and to the function relating to it we give the name of 'memory' '(Freud 1971: 538). The operation of memory trace is consistent with alterity, with the 'trace' or shadow of 'otherness', as it corresponds to presence in language systems (Rivkin and Ryan 2004: 278). As a shadow of the historical event of the memory, mnemonic trace is consistent with alterity, with the trace that shadows the narrative sign. It is precisely because the associative relations that produce traces are unconscious, that one might be estranged from the material that is produced at a primal moment of narrative composition. Freud (1971: p.539) operates on the premise that:

[...] our memories – not excepting those which are most deeply stamped in our minds – are in themselves unconscious. They can be made conscious; but there can be no doubt that they can produce all [of] their effects while in an unconscious condition.

Freud proposes that there is a foreground or surface system that perceives, but holds no trace or memory of perception, and a background or latent system that records, and retains a trace of these perceptions. This tiered system is based on Freud's observation that:

[...] there are obvious difficulties in supposing that one and the same system can accurately retain modification of its elements and yet remain perpetually open to the reception of fresh occasions for modification [on this basis, Freud suggests] that a system on the very front of the apparatus receives the perceptual stimuli but retains no trace of them and thus has no memory, while behind it there lies a

second system which transforms the momentary excitations of the first system into permanent traces. (Freud 1971: 538)

Freud's suggestion that these permanent traces are a 'transform[ed]' version of the original 'excitation' is intriguing (Freud 1971: 538). Processes of association and transformation underpin the similarity between the operation of alterity, in narrative, and the operation of associative traces, in altered states of consciousness.

The concept of mnemonic trace is a reminder that memories are empty (unconscious), just like narrative signs, dream signs, and hypnagogic signs are empty. Memories and signs are empty but for the permanent traces that simulate presence and transform them. This process of transformation, via association, mimics the operation of alterity that occurs in the context of narrative, because the process of transformation via association is a metaphorical manoeuvre. Presence is simulated and the otherwise empty sign is transformed; in this way the sign is capable of becoming meaningful in a given moment.

The term mnemonic is broadly defined as '[a] device, such as a formula or rhyme, used as an aid in remembering' (The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 2000). Mnemonic repetition in narrative, like the repetition we observe in formulaic rhymes, is a pattern of related signs: dissimilar-similar, unequal-equal signs that are produced at the primal moment of narrative composition, and that is via altered states of consciousness.

The Greek word for mnemonic is 'mnemonikos' meaning 'mindful'; this definition describes the sense in which mnemonic repetition is of-the-mind, related-to-the-mind, without representing all of the conditions that we ordinarily associate with the mind, namely full consciousness and logic (The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 2000).

To plot the mindful appropriation of the narrative sign, in methodological terms, is to chart the stream-of-consciousness process that underlies the radical permutation of the sign. In this way, alterity can be explained in terms of 'association' and 'transform[ation]' and, therefore, in the context of Freud's analysis of memory (Freud 1971: 539, 538). The surface content of the narrative is consistent with the surface content of a memory, a dream, or a hypnagogic representation, because the surface narrative is, as Derrida (1978: p.218) suggests:

[...] not an inscribed image but a figurative script, an image inviting not a simple, conscious, present perception of the thing itself – assuming [that such a thing] exists – but a reading.

The concept of association shows how the dream thought is transformed into the dream sign, how the event in history is transformed into a memory, how our perceptions are transformed into hypnagogic representations. In the same way the concept of association explains how idiosyncratic, unconscious thought-processes shape the surface content of narrative representation. The process of association illustrates all of these things because the process of association charts the process of narrativisation, a process that allows one thing to become a metaphorical other.

To narrativise [narrativize] is simply to ‘present or interpret (experience[s], events, etc.) in the form of a narrative’ (Oxford Dictionaries 2012). Just as the surface content of the dream is a translated version of the dream thought, memories and hypnagogic representations are transformed versions of our perceptions. In this way memories, dreams, hypnagogic representation and stories are narrativised versions of unconscious processes.

It is the concept of transformation through narrativisation that illustrates the link between processes of association as they occur in dreaming, memory and hypnagogic representation (on the one hand) and narrative representation (on the other); in each instance, associations are derived from the same idiosyncratic ‘stock pot’.

Random acts of narrative: overinclusiveness and similarity

Cameron identifies problems of scope and relevance in the work of altered states of consciousness; in particular he suggests that an essential component of hypnagogia is:

[...] an inability to preserve conceptual boundaries, resulting in [the] incorporation of irrelevant ideas leading to vagueness and confusion of thought’; Mavromatis calls this ‘symptom’ of hypnagogia ‘an overinclusiveness in thinking. (Mavromatis 1987: 161)

The concept of overinclusiveness is reconfigured by Mavromatis as he identifies the interaction between multiple frames of register. Mavromatis observes the relationship between hypnopompic utterances (like ‘light the towel’) and the

explanation provided by the subjects who express these utterances. Mavromatis suggests that:

[...] the subjects [...] are not only employing a frame of reference structured according to particular rules but also [...] the very essence of these rules is to allow the crossing of a number of FsR [frames of register]. The result is often an expressed identity between normally unrelated frames and concepts.
(Mavromatis 1987: 166)

Overinclusive material is no longer deemed to be flawed because it is plagued by irrelevant, vague and confusing content but, instead, overinclusive material is noted for its tendency to include concepts broadly and metaphorically and, thereby, to move toward a concept of identity that is not bound by the rules of logic. Mavromatis' concept of overinclusiveness encompasses material broadly; it moves beyond the rules of logic and, in this way, explicates the dissimilar-similar and the unequal-equal in narrative.

The evolution of a fractured style is consistent with the loose operation of similarity that is apparent in altered states of consciousness. Citing Froeschels, Mavromatis explains how perceptions are construed more freely in hypnagogia. He says:

[...] whereas for the waking mind the law of identity is strictly adhered to, in hypnagogia 'things [...] which seem to the waking mind entirely different or slightly similar, may be identical. The transition state really identifies them'.
(Mavromatis 1987: 179)

Both Froeschels and Mavromatis identify hypnagogia as a state of consciousness that is capable of rendering the unequal, equal, and the dissimilar, similar; in fact Mavromatis uses precisely these terms; he says 'in contrast to the waking mind which seeks to distinguish between between equal and unequal, hypnagogia tends to operate on the principle of similarity' (Mavromatis 1987: 179). In the context of hypnagogia, the principle of similarity is loose; it is not bound by the strictures of full consciousness and logic; it is, instead, connotative. Froeschels identifies the tension between the concept of similarity as it is constituted in hypnagogia, and, as it exists in the context of logic; he says:

Of all the categorical terms which logic and epistemology has offered, similarity seems to be the one that characterizes best the basis upon which the subconscious works in the state of transition. But this term evidently does not mean to the subconscious what it means to conscious reasoning. The latter takes the feeling of similarity most of the time for a stepping stone on the way to thorough differentiation and identification. The subconscious on the other hand frequently

considers similarity identical with identity, and does not bother with further 'research' ' (Mavromatis 1987: 178)

The operation of similarity, in hypnagogia and altered states of consciousness, is based upon a metaphorical manoeuvre, a process of unconscious, alogical association. The same metaphorical manoeuvre takes place at a primal moment of narrative composition. Writing and editing a fractured narrative constitutes a play-off between the intuitive workings of creative process and the logical doubts of the conscious ego. The decision to keep the fractured narrative structure is consistent with the acceptance of unconscious, alogical processes of association.

Intriguingly, Mavromatis suggests that what he considers:

[...] basic [...] to hypnagogia and related states is the core phenomenon of the LEB's [the loosening of ego boundaries] which appears in varying degrees and gives rise to a number of continua and thus to a variety of experiences. (Mavromatis 1987: 269)

This phenomenon, of the loosening of the ego boundaries, is characterised, among other things, by:

[...] the blurring of the distinction between [the] ego and the external and internal environment [...] and [...] in [the] vividness of imagery [...] It lifts the filters imposed on the mind by the consciousness and logic of the waking state. This permits the emergence of material and FsR [frames of register] from deeper layers of the mind, layers which are normally relegated to the unconscious domain. (Mavromatis 1987: 270)

The surprise and confusion the writer feels about the work they have produced is evidence of the discrepancy between the work that occurs at the primal moment of narrative composition, and the later assessment of that work from the logical, rational perspective of the editorial chair. At the primal moment of composition, from the cocoon of hypnagogia, the narrative makes perfect seamless sense. This is because, in hypnagogia:

[...] self-consciousness is lost [...] the boundary between subject and object is blurred [or, as Schopenhauer suggests] 'we are no longer able to separate the perceiver from the perception but the two have become one since the entire consciousness is filled and occupied by a single image of perception. (Whish-Wilson 2009: 96)

At the primal moment of narrative composition, the writer does not second-guess the content of the narrative because there are no logical rules of play: the images are 'real' in and of themselves, and the writer does not judge the 'realness' of these images on the basis of any external, logical criteria. Similarly, in the hypnagogic moment, one does not second-guess a perception in the context of

self-consciousness and logic but, instead, one perceives without consciousness of perceiving.

Explaining how creative work is produced, Nietzsche says 'everything occurs quite without volition [...] One hears, one does not seek; one takes, one does not ask who gives; a thought flashes up like lightning, with necessity, unflinching formed' (Whish Wilson 2009: 90). According to Whish-Wilson 'Nietzsche experienced at first hand the non-volitional arrival of thought indicative of the creative moment, of thought witnessed as hypnagogic imagery' (Whish Wilson 2009: 94).

The loosening of the ego boundaries is a pre-requisite for thoughts that are experienced in hypnagogic terms. In this context, perceptions are cut loose from the policing duties of full-consciousness and logic; perceptions are experienced under trance-like conditions.

Whish-Wilson recognises that both Freud and 'humanistic psychology' recognise 'the importance of trance absorption' for creative practice (Whish-Wilson 2009: 91). Whish-Wilson refers to Inglis' text, *Trance*, and in particular he mentions what was originally Eduard von Hartmann's proposal that: 'only what is already selected emerges from the night of the unconscious' (Whish-Wilson 2009: 91). In altered states of consciousness and authorial intention alike, processes of association are derived from the same idiosyncratic 'stock pot'. This accounts for the sense in which the writer may find their work both surprising and, simultaneously, not surprising at all: strange and simultaneously familiar.

The idea that processes of association have an organised schema, even if this is not a logical schema, provides an alternative to the claim of overinclusiveness. In contrast to Cameron's suggestion that overinclusiveness is a random pulling-together of irrelevant, vague, and confused associations, the argument from similarity suggests that altered states of consciousness gather material on the basis of organised rules that operate without recourse to logic.

The concept of similarity as it exists in hypnagogia, reconfigures Cameron's definition of overinclusiveness: as 'an inability to preserve conceptual boundaries' in a new light (Mavromatis 1987: 161). Similarity is construed metaphorically: a number of frames of register are crossed and the result is the

possibility of the dissimilar-similar or, in other words, 'an expressed identity between normally unrelated frames and concepts' (Mavromatis 1987: 166).

The concept of similarity therefore reveals the nature of the problem that a fractured narrative presents for logic. It reveals how a fractured narrative might also be seamless, because it explains how discontinuous narrative fragments are connected on an associative level.

Conclusion I –

Similarity and the problem of contradiction; the bugle call and the ipso facto assembly of consciousness

The concept of similarity underlies the contradiction that a fractured narrative poses for logic. Therefore any mediation of this contradiction must involve the concept of similarity. In short, the problem from logic is the problem of the dissimilar-similar and the unequal-equal in narrative, that is, the problem from logic is the sense in which the writer is estranged from the material that is produced at a primal moment of narrative composition.

The contradiction therefore arises out of the diametrically opposed ways that logic and altered states of consciousness construe similarity. The problem of estrangement does not exist at the primary moment of narrative composition but only later, when consciousness is assembled and the work of the unconscious morphs: at this point the work of the unconscious sounds as a warning, a bugle call, it calls attention to itself in the light of the rules of full-logical consciousness. The work of a primal moment of narrative composition is judged as if consciousness were already present, however the fact that the writing is strange, in the sense that the writer is estranged from it, is evidence of the operation of association and similarity; it is evidence that the rules of full, logical consciousness were not at play.

In narrative, the concept of similarity is manifested in the concept of the unequal-equal and the dissimilar-similar. This concept holds that a thing can be both true and false, because the narrative sign is capable of meaning both one thing and the other. This is the premise of the operation of alterity: the trace of antithetical relations that shadows the otherwise empty sign.

It is the concept of similarity as it exists in hypnagogia, and, as it operates at a primal moment of narrative composition, that allows for the possibility that a representation may, simultaneously, be both one thing and the other. Crucially, this version of the concept of similarity does not construe similarity logically, so in this context, there is no problem, there is no contradiction, and there is no need for mediation, because altered states of consciousness do not care about the rules of logic.

This is why, in the example from hypnagogia, the woman could not understand why her husband insisted that she explain herself when, from her point of view, 'light the towel' made perfect (associative) sense; this is why a fractured narrative may appear to be seamless at a primal moment of narrative composition. Work that is produced associatively, in the context of altered states of consciousness, only sounds as a summons for the intervention of logical consciousness, when consciousness is already assembled and, that is, ipso facto: by the already present presence of consciousness.

The system of narrative and the system of logic operate from diametrically opposed fields of play: narrative constructs similarity in a loose associative way while logic constructs similarity in a finite way. In this, narrative and logic are foreigners. When the writer chooses to assess the fractured structure of narrative within the context of the law of similarity, as it is operates in hypnagogia, the writer admits that a fractured narrative does not fit the criteria of logic and continuity, and the writer concomitantly acknowledges that meeting the criteria of logic and continuity is not necessarily the point.

Conclusion II –

Truth and falsity in the context of art

As it operates in hypnagogia, the principle of similarity moves towards explaining Harold Pinter's claim that: '[a] thing is not necessarily either true or false; it can be both true and false' (Pinter 2005, p.1). This claim was originally made by Pinter in 1958, and reiterated in his Nobel acceptance speech in 2005; Pinter says that this assertion still makes sense and does still apply 'to the

exploration of reality through art (Pinter 2005, p.1). This is so precisely because art foregrounds alterity as the shadowing aspect of the otherwise empty sign.

From the logical perspective of the editorial chair, one can mediate the contradictory elements of the surface narrative with recourse to latent structure, or alterity, and perhaps this provides a solution to the problem of contradiction, to the extent that it provides a dialectical approach to the problems that logic poses for a fractured narrative. Dialectical thinking is described as the 'cognitive tendency toward acceptance of contradiction'; according to Peng and Nisbett, 'the key feature of Western dialectical thinking is *integration*', we begin with the 'recognition of contradiction' and move towards recognising 'basic elements of the opposing perspectives' (Peng & Nisbett 1999, p.6, p.7, p.6).

However, if alterity constitutes a dialectical approach to the problem that a fractured narrative poses for logic, then it does so only to the extent that it renders discontinuity, to some extent, continuous; that is, it does so only to the extent that it eradicates the initial contradiction.

Contradiction is eradicated because the law of noncontradiction is refuted. Logic refutes its own law to achieve its ends. The logical 'law of [n]oncontradiction [...] declares that no statement can be both true and false' (Peng and Nisbett 1999, p.10). On the other hand, the concept of similarity, as it operates in the context of hypnagogia, is consistent with Pinter's view about truth in the context of art: it says that the unequal is equal, the dissimilar is similar. In this way, from the perspective of logic, dialectical resolution is circular, irresolvable and impossible, because it says: contradiction is unacceptable to the conditions of logic, however, contradiction is resolvable with recourse to the concept of similarity, however, the concept of similarity relies implicitly on refuting the law of noncontradiction, and so we return, eternally, to the beginning – contradiction is unacceptable to the conditions of logic.

When one attends to the problem of contradiction, with the tension between full-consciousness and altered states of consciousness in mind, then one comes to understand Susan Sontag's claim that 'it doesn't matter whether artists intend, or don't intend, for their work to be interpreted' (Sontag 1966, p.9). The opportunities for interpretation are enabled by alterity, by the rhythm of the other that gives meaning its shape, by the loose processes of association and similarity.

These are opportunities for interpretation, rather than a finite set of possibilities, precisely because the narrative sign is not prescriptive.

Perhaps Sontag's words are merely a more pithy translation of Plato's claim:

He who without the Muses' madness in his soul comes knocking at the door of poetry and thinks that art will make him anything fit to be called a poet, finds that the poetry which he indites in his sober senses is beaten hollow by the poetry of a madman. (plat Phaedrus, 245 A in Housman, A 1955)

The point for Sontag is that the writer is incapable of controlling the way the work will be interpreted, the point for Plato is that the making of successful poetry requires more than the conscious artfulness and will of the writer. Both Sontag and Plato refer to unstable processes of meaning attribution, to the metaphorical masquerade that is the otherwise empty sign, to what Kevin Brophy (2009:51) calls the 'strangely generative, creative aspect of language as it operates, as it were, backstage'.

Narrative and poetry foreground the metaphorical masquerade that is the otherwise empty sign, because narrative and poetry foreground the sense in which the sign is shadowed by antithetical associations. It is this metaphorical masquerade that Donald Barthelme refers to when he suggests that art 'invites and resists interpretation' (Brophy K. 2009, p.47). It is because the sign bears the trace of antithetical relations that it displays the schizophrenic properties of invitation and resistance. These schizophrenic properties are the basis for Brophy's suggestion that 'creative writing [...] requires us to work against the normal flow of consciousness' (Brophy K. 2009, p.33).

To trust the law of similarity as it operates in the context of altered states of consciousness is to trust the law of similarity in its free form, free from the shackles of full, logical consciousness. This means that the writer does not prioritise the expectations of full, logical consciousness but, instead, the writer is attentive to the ghostly dance that takes place at a primal moment.

Conclusion III –

Derrida and otherness: purple and white places

To try to understand the work of the unconscious at a primal moment of narrative composition is to try to answer Derrida's question: 'what should dream or writing be if, as we know, one may dream while writing?' (Derrida 1976: 316).

In answer to this question, Derrida offers an extract from Rousseau, who says 'You will say I too am a dreamer; I admit it, but I do what others fail to do, I give my dreams as dreams, and leave the reader to discover whether there is anything in them which may prove useful to those who are awake' (Derrida 1976: 316).

In the context of this practice-based inquiry, and in answer to Derrida's question, the writer offers a few lines from 'The point of no return', one of the chapters in the novel manuscript. This extract speaks (from another register) of the relationship between dreams and writing, it speaks of the relationship between dreams and the capacity of words to express them.

In this scene, Chelsea is observing her Grandfather who suffers from the debilitating effects of dementia. Chelsea says:

[...] for a moment I think the dementia isn't real. I imagine that he can switch it on and off because, in that fucking hideous moment, he understands everything. He understands that I am abandoning him and that I have no choice, and he says okay because he knows that I would never do this if there were another way. For those few moments, it's like he's back from the land of the confused, he's perceptive and rational and kind: he's really back, just for a minute. I'm overcome and I try to explain it to him.

I need to get Mum better, I say. She'll die if I don't help her.

But the moment is gone. Granddad stands at the window, one hand against the glass. The wind in the magnolia tree flutters like purple and white birds and Granddad fiddles distractedly with his balls. Perhaps he sees past the strange birds to another time. Perhaps in his mind's glazed eye he sees a time and place he knows like the fluttering, somewhere purple and white, but he has no words for purple and white places; there is no language for it. (Prendergast 2012)

Preface to the creative component of the thesis

Structure: thesis by publications

The thesis is submitted in the form of a thesis by publications because the thesis comprises a series of publishable works. The thesis consists of a collection of theoretical articles and a novel, some have been published while others are under assessment for publication.

The novel: *The earth does not get fat*

Julia Prendergast was a finalist with the Northern Rivers Writers' Centre; Julia pitched her novel at the Byron Bay Writers' Festival in August 2012. Julia's novel is under assessment by Vintage Books/Random House and Harper Collins.

<http://byronbaywritersfestival.wordpress.com/>

Julia's writing/writing project was commended at the Australian Centre Literary Awards Ceremony, at the Melbourne Writers' Festival, in September 2012. Of Julia's work, the judges said: 'Julia Prendergast's stories [...] realise the full dramatic potential in the colloquial language of everyday'

<http://australian-centre.unimelb.edu.au/assets/pdf/judges-report-2012.pdf>

Book two, chapter two: 'Cockleshell' was shortlisted for the Lightship International Short Story Prize 2012. The winner and nine runners-up will be published in the Lightship anthology (Lightship Publishing Ltd and Alma Books) in 2013.

<http://www.lightshippublishing.co.uk/news>

CHAPTER SIX: NOVEL

The Earth does not get fat

The earth does not get fat

[Derrida]

The opposition of dream to wakefulness, is not that a representation of metaphysics as well? And what should dream or writing be if, as we know now, one may dream while writing?'

[Rousseau in *Emile*]

You will say I too am a dreamer; I admit it, but I do what others fail to do, I give my dreams as dreams, and leave the reader to discover whether there is anything in them which may prove useful to those who are awake.

Derrida, J 1976, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, London: The Johns Hopkins University Press Ltd, p. 316

Book one

Chapter one

Shades of grey

Shades of grey:

‘The possibility of uncertainty’

Cambridge Dictionaries online, Cambridge University Press 2011, viewed
19 March 2010,

<http://dictionary.cambridge.org/define.asp?key=95817>

~ ~ ~

(Chelsea)

I am fourteen when Mum goes down hard the first time. It is like a point of no return except that she returns.

I ask her: *Does it hurt?*

She says: *Don't you worry your precious self about it.*

I say: *Is it curable? Will it go away for good?*

She says: *It turns things to shadows; everything goes grey.*

She paces around from room to room as if she's chasing her own ghost; that's the fidgety stage. She says: *Only love is for sure. NEVER FORGET.* She says it again, desperately, dry mouthed: *Only love.* Her tongue is scratching around her mouth like sandpaper. It is dehydrating and grey, even for me, and I'm only watching.

Her lip is all sweaty, like a moustache of water, and there is sweat in the lines along her forehead. She is labouring hard. She brushes the sweat into her cowlick and it makes her hair look greasy. She talks but she's not talking to me.

She says 'Teddy' over and over again: *Teddy, Teddy, sweet-boy.* I think he's an old boyfriend. I have no idea who he is.

It's like she's pissed except she's steady on her feet and she doesn't slur. She stops in the middle of her sentences. When I talk to her, she flinches, so I just listen.

In the end she slows down and I get her into bed. She rests her head on the pillow for a moment but then she sits up straight and looks over my shoulder. She is wired and the grey won't leave her alone.

At one point she notices me and she says: *The shadows make you see hate instead of love. The shadows make you hate all the best parts of yourself.*

I pick up the brush and start on her hair. In the end she becomes still and she sleeps. After a time she moves beyond sleep, into the unwakeable stage. That's the freakiest part. I want it to end but I never want it to end. She's peaceful at last but, if she doesn't wake up, I'm the one who should have called the ambulance.

It's a circus really and so I am relieved, more than anything, when she's finally out. I tuck her in, kissing her and brushing the hair away from her face. I keep checking on her until she stops sweating. She is under for a couple of days.

When she comes out of it, we walk to the beach and sit up on the rocks. Those big, black rocks look out of place: they're too black, like they're from a faraway place, in another part of the world.

We sit on the rocks with our shoulders touching and the wind on our faces. The lost time sits between us but we ignore it. We talk about other things, ordinary things. I pretend the last two days never happened, I act like I'm Grandad, like I can't remember the simplest things. I pretend life doesn't turn to shit without the slightest warning.

We stay there, huddled together in our coats, ignoring the rain. The clouds move fast with the wind. They roll across the bay, thick and flossy and grey, like spiders' webs. Up higher there are other clouds, still white clouds, but they are irrelevant because the flossy grey is in charge of the light and the water.

The storm is below us and around us. We are a part of it somehow, holding hands in the windy wet. In the end the water flattens and the wind clouds shift off to the horizon. It's like an old movie, the weather changes so fast that it's hard to believe it's real, even though I am seeing it with my own eyes. Afterwards, the water and the sea grass become still and we sit there quietly, wallowing in the clean, wet stillness of

everything. Mum tells me: *It's like this when you have a baby, the thrashing and then the stillness.*

Her greysickness is like that too, and I start to say so, but she looks peaceful and I worry that it mightn't seem that way to her, so I stay quiet. In the calm after the storm, everything is new, and I don't want to spoil the moment. I don't realise that the grey is so cunning. I don't know, then, that it's here to stay. Somehow, for the most part, I learn to forget the shadows and roll with it. I don't care if people think Mum's an alcoholic or a pill-popper; that's only because they haven't seen what I've seen. The pills are only to ease the pain. The pills are not the problem. If that's what people think, they're getting it the wrong way around.

The pills and the grog aren't for the sake of pills and grog. Mum is trying to save herself. She's trying to survive.

I tried to save her once. I took her pills. She slapped me hard across the cheek. Now I'd stuff the pills down her throat for her, when she's writhing like that, or crush them up and put them in a cup of tea. I'd end her suffering, just like I did for Frank.

Frank is my cat... *Was*. He walked through the back door, swaying like he was pissed and meowing like someone was gutting him alive. He had bald, blistery patches on his head. I didn't know what to do. I tried to wake Mum but she was well under.

Frank toppled over and then stood up again, as if his brain was shitting itself and then restarting. I couldn't bear it. I cradled him in my arms, forced his jaw open and pushed six of Mum's pills to the back of his rough tongue. I held his jaw closed tight while he gagged and swallowed.

Frank stared at me with his glassy, scared shitless, cat eyes. I didn't let go until he'd swallowed them. I climbed into bed

with him and held him tight as he meowed himself to death. I lay there, listening to him cry, and I was thinking that I really should have belted him over the head with a hammer, ended his suffering quickly, but I couldn't do it because I couldn't work out if I was trying to save him, or myself.

When Mum came out of it, she asked me about the missing pills and I spilled the beans about Frank. He was in my bed, stiff under the covers, warm from the electric blanket. Mum and I buried him.

Do you dream when you take the pills? I said, patting the earth, pushing it down on Frank. For a moment I imagined that he was still alive, stretching his paws and clawing at the earth, but dead is dead.

It's like you're under water, said Mum, but you can breathe. Her breath was stewed and rotten, like a dying cat's breath. The grey is between you and everything, even your dreams. It's like floating underneath murky water.

Like floating underneath the windclouds, I thought. I pushed the earth down hard, kneading it down with my knuckles.

The pills don't make things grey, said Mum. You would dream clear if it weren't for the shadows. Mum knelt down beside me and looked intently at her hands. *He wouldn't have suffered, she said. What's Frank got to feel bad about?*

Mum's not a get-down-low and huddle-close sort of a person. She got right down on her knees and I thought she was going to tell me something (like what she feels bad about). In that moment, I knew there was something particular, some ugly reason for the shadows. She sucked the air in sharply and I was sure she was going to spill it, but then she stood up and went inside, and the moment turned grey.

I stayed there awhile, my hands flat against the earth, smoothing the dirt over Frank as if I was icing a lopsided cake.

He was good company, Frank. When things were bad, he'd crawl into bed with me and purr his little heart out, as if life couldn't get any better. In those moments, with my heart full of still white clouds, I could remember Mum before the grey.

~ ~ ~

The other times blend together.

Sometimes I'm at school when Mum's goes under, I'm not there to tell her that everything will be okay, I'm not there to say, all's well that ends well, not that I know how it will end, if it will ever end.

World without end. Amen.

Sometimes, by the time I get home, she's already sinking. She takes a few more pills; she washes them down with a few slugs of gin on ice, just a dash of tonic, and finally she's out, flat out, on the couch. After a few hours pass, I know she's down for good.

Getting her into bed is the hardest part because I can't carry her on my own. She doesn't weigh much but it's awkward and so I put a blanket on the floor next to the couch and I move her onto that. I reach under her shoulders and move her top-half down first. Sometimes her head bangs on the floorboards because I can't hold her head properly. Sometimes she opens one eye, just for a second, but it's like Frank on the way out, she can't see me for the grey.

I pull the rest of her onto the blanket. Her legs smack against the floorboards like old potatoes, empty, but she doesn't flinch. I drag her across the floor, pulling her along on the blanket. The floor in the bedroom is carpeted so the last stretch is the hardest.

If Grandad is being difficult, Mum has to stay there on the floor because I can't lift her on my own. I put some pillows

and a doona down there, to soften things up, but still she's left on the ground like nobody cares.

If Grandad is being cooperative, he helps me get her into bed. It's best if he doesn't realise who she is; it's best if he thinks she's Frank or a bag of potatoes. We get her into bed after a few tries. I tuck her legs under the covers and wipe her sweaty face on my sleeve. If her skin feels like cold lasagne, I get a warm face washer and lay it across her forehead.

Usually, she stays in the shadowy place for a couple of days, waking briefly to top herself up. She has a pen beside her bed and she marks a line on the paper, keeping tabs of her intake. The scribble on the sheet of paper looks like a hangman score-sheet. Ten strikes, she's out.

~ ~ ~

Grandad can sense when Mum is in trouble. He gets busy in his room, usually he tries to fix something: a broken chair leg, the handle of a pot, anything. I hear him humming. He always hums when he's engrossed in something: classical-sounding tunes, no lyrics. I ask him, again and again, if he wants some music on, but he says: *No, no, I like the quiet*, and then he starts up again.

He can't process what's going on, but he reacts to Mum's greyness in his way. I suppose you never get used to seeing someone you love all fucked-up like that, even when your mind is half gone.

After we put Mum to bed and Grandad is pottering away in his room, I make a start on the dinner. I'm standing over the boiling pasta and I hear Grandad say my name.

I turn to him and he has shit all over his hands. At first I think he's been into the Bolognese sauce but that's only because I'm exhausted and I can't see straight. He looks at his shitty hands

as if he isn't sure what it was. Then he holds his palms out to me like he's begging.

I yell at him not to touch anything. I take him to the bathroom and wash his hands and fingernails, four times with the scrubbing brush. I tell him to lean on me and I help him step out of his pants. His droopy, shit-smeared balls jangle around because he can't get his balance.

Those undies are going straight in the bin, I say. I am talking to myself, reassuring myself that I won't need to scrub that thick adult shit off his pants.

They're my favourite ones, he says. *Please don't throw them in the bin. They're not itchy and they don't dig in.* He is crying, his upper chest is heaving out like a pregnant woman's belly, but then it dips hollow near his ribcage so that he looks like a mangy bird, a sick, pathetic bird.

I tell him: *I'll get you some new undies. Really comfy ones. I'll get you a whole new packet, all different colours. You can come with me and pick out the ones you want.*

They're my favourite, he says, getting hysterical.

Well you shouldn't have shat in them, I yell, barely able to breathe for the steamy claustrophobia of the shit.

I didn't know it was coming, he says desperately. *I was busy. I didn't realise it was coming.*

Busy, I scoff, and then I think that I might vomit because I love him so much. The shit is so foul and the guilt and the love are all over everywhere and he is so helpless. Usually I can pacify him and avoid the meltdowns. If I play it right I can usually reason him out of his despair, but I'm too tired.

Then I remember that I must never forget.

No crying, I say. *Please Grand, no crying today.* I get him into the shower and adjust the taps until he says it's just right. Then I

go out to get a rubbish bag, knowing all the while that I'll go to bed feeling guilty if I throw out his favourite undies, knowing all the while that I'll be up to my elbows in old man's shit any minute.

I give him intimate instructions about how to wash himself. I show him again how to lather the soap up in his hands. I bend over and mime it for him, rubbing all around. *Then do it over again, I say, lift up your balls, get right into all the creases and cracks.*

He forgets. Each day I have to remind him about basic stuff. And he's not even that old. I didn't know you could get dementia before you were really old.

When Grandad is on the third round of lathering and rubbing, I close the shower screen and coach him from the outside. I take the filthy undies to the toilet and turn them inside out, hoping the shit will drop out in one lump, but the stubborn foulness holds fast. I go back to the bathroom and work at the basin. I use my hands and then the nailbrush, working furiously. When I've finally finished, rinsed and disinfected, I open the shower door.

Time to get out, I say. Grandad is sitting at the base of the shower, shaving his legs. He has cut himself along the shin and the base of the shower is covered in bloody water.

Don't move, I say, taking the razor: Sit there and DO NOT FUCKING MOVE. I sound like a horrible bitch because I don't have the control. Usually I manage him a lot better. It's awful.

I go to the kitchen and grab some band-aids and a tea towel. When I come back, he is sitting right where I left him and I take a good look at the cut. *FUCK! Fuck-Fuck-Fuck, I say.*

I beg your pardon, he says and that makes me laugh because he doesn't make the connection between my swearing and his bleeding leg; he has no idea. He's not even looking at me. He is

intent on the blood but he's detached from it too, he might as well be talking to the telly.

I start crying quietly then because the poor old bastard wouldn't hurt a fly. He looks up at me and his torso disappears; his head seems to sit upon his knees, long arms either side, like a white monkey, an albino monkey with silver-black hair.

Never mind, he says. Everything will be fine. Just you wait and see. He turns back to his leg. He runs his fingers up his shin, inspecting the watery blood.

I take a roll of toilet paper from the bathroom drawer.

Grandad holds the toilet paper against his shin and I dry his body. He bends forward and applies pressure to his leg.

It is pathetic. He is pathetic. I am pathetic. I should be handling it better. I'm not even done here and already the motherfucking guilt.

I dry him gently, in long firm strokes, along his back, across his shoulders. His veins are thick and strong and so exposed. His skin is wet and thin, like damp tissue paper. He looks older, with his wet skin and his wet hair, slick and silvery black against his bony skull. Suddenly he looks old enough to have dementia.

He bends forward, holding his leg, trying to be helpful and obedient, his wrinkly old balls sag between his legs. He is helpless and endearing and revolting, like a baby but old and ugly, and now I understand how the mothers can love the ugly babies, even when they're crying and covered in vomit and shit. It's because of the need. Need is very seductive.

I don't miss one drop. I dry him gently and firmly, behind his ears, inside his ears, under his armpits, behind his knees. I do it on auto because I know his body like my own.

I put bandaids over the cut and wrap the tea towel tightly around his shin to keep up the pressure. Then I roll some deodorant under his armpits and he laughs. He says it tickles. *Do it again*, he begs.

I give him a squirt of my body spray. *Ooh that's lovely*, he says. I kiss him on the forehead and hold his pyjamas out so he can step in. Then I blow the dryer over his hair and brush it away from his face.

I throw his clothes in the washing machine: hot water, double powder, pre-wash and soak. I stand still, my hands against the warm lid of the machine, and I listen to the swish of the water, mesmerised. It's like the waves are lapping the shore, right at my feet; it's as if I don't have a care in the world, as if I have nothing better to do than stand in the sun and watch the water.

Grandad comes to the laundry and stands beside me, his hand on the machine beside mine. *You're a very lucky girl*, he says. *Do you know how lucky you are?*

I don't answer him. I put my hand on his. I'm waiting for the hidden camera crew to reveal themselves; then we can all have a laugh, we can all say: *Of course that's not her real life. No one could be that far up the fucker.* We stand beside the washing machine a few more moments, still and content, as if we're watching the waves roll in and life's a holiday.

It is a lovely moment. Grandad kisses me on the cheek, softly, and then wanders off to his room. I go to the kitchen to see if I can salvage the pasta; luckily I turned off the heat. I dish it all up and put a bowl of shredded cheese beside Grandad's plate; he likes to add that by himself and I'm not up for another meltdown.

I knock on his door and step into his room. He is already asleep. My school shoes sit neatly beside his bed. He has polished them until they look like new, and they were nearly ready for the bin.

Grandad is funny about shoes. When Mum is stuck in the grey, he often goes for the shoes, scrubbing the soles and wiping the surfaces with a hot cloth. He places a few drops of eucalyptus oil inside them, polishing them up until they're so shiny, you'd think we were in the army. It's a bit of a wasted effort on his part, because I don't worry too much about school anymore, but I kiss him on the head anyway.

I say: I am a very lucky girl. I'm crying hard. I say: I know how lucky I am. He doesn't flinch, just sighs contentedly in his sleep. I know he can hear me. People can hear in their sleep you know. I talk to Mum all the time. I tell her all the things I can't say when she's awake, staring at me with her eyes full of grey.

I go back to the kitchen and pour myself a gin and tonic, a double. I decide to have Grandad's undies fresh and ready for him when he wakes in the morning.

Everything will be fine, I tell myself. Just you wait and see.

Book one

Chapter two

Sundowning

‘Sundowning: also known as Sundown Syndrome, a term used to refer to behavioral changes that often occur in the late afternoon or evening in people with [Alzheimer's disease](#) and similar conditions. The behavioral changes [...] take the form of aggression, agitation, delusions, hallucinations, paranoia, increased disorientation, or wandering and pacing about’

MedicineNet.com, viewed 11 September 2010,

<http://www.medterms.com/script/main/art.asp?articlekey=922411>

~ ~ ~

(Chelsea)

I'm up at five am because Grandad thinks it's dinnertime, he's sundowning and it's not even daylight. I'm cooking pasta and heating up Bolognese sauce by five thirty. I have extra meals plated and the dishes done by six fifteen. By eight fifteen Grandad is asleep on the couch and I decide to head into school for a few hours, see how much I've missed, see if it's still within my reach.

I sit up the back with Tiff and Jules. Andy and Dom are there of course because they don't let Tiff out of their sight. Andy has a goon bag in his big black pencil case. He has it zipped up, just the tap poking out and they're sucking back the dry white wine, pretending to get busy with their pens if Ms Luscombe looks our way. *Luscombe the Lezbombe*, she's a dyke they say, but then someone said she's married, to a man that is.

Andy passes the goon along to me. His pencil case is bursting like a fat black seal. I stand my binder book up on the desk and have a good long swig. I've been up half the night, remember, so it feels like the afternoon to me. I've been sundowning since sunrise.

Luzzy the Lezzy is called out to attend to something or other because she's the Year Eleven coordinator as well as our English teacher. We're in that class because we're capable workers, the top of the barrel, the pick of the crop, and she reminds us of this, and of the great and glorious things expected of us, and then she leaves, itching her thigh through her scratchy, grey woollen skirt, her donut ankles spewing out of her worn, black square-heeled shoes.

Dom lights a fag, right there on the floor in the corner of the classroom and I can't resist a drag. He smells like soap and aftershave and I want to undo his shirt and lay my head on his chest, blow smoke up at the roof as if we've just rooted each

other senseless. Dom has kind blue eyes and he smiles at me like he knows what I'm up against; his eyes sparkle as if he wants to root me senseless too.

I light a fag of my own and blow smoke at Dom's face. His eyes glaze over and he's grinning. It looks like he's doing some sundowning of his own. Sundowning isn't reserved for the twilight hours, you see: you can sundown any time of the day. It's the tiredness that makes things blur and shift and I'm always tired because Grandad turns night into day, day into night.

I have a great long suck on my fag until the tip is dark brown and wrong but God it tastes good. I blow smoke down at the floor because I can't even look at Dom and I have a good long slug of the wine.

By the time Ms Luzzy gets back I'm well sorted. I'm well on my way to a smashing introduction of my *Pride and Prejudice* text response. I focus specifically on Mrs Bennet but I'm thinking I'll throw Nelly in from *Wuthering Heights*. I'll talk about underhanded and overhanded manipulation, the criss-crossed blurring of the two. Everything is criss-crossed and blurry when you're as tired as I am, but things are clearer than ever too, crystal sundowning clear.

I decide I'll get the essay sorted and then head home early. I want to check on Grandad. All this talk of books, with the taste of wine on my tongue: it makes me dream of a long hot bath, nothing quite like it, a fag, a glass of wine and a good book in the bath.

I'll open the window and let the fresh air in. I'll have the bath so hot I can barely bear it and then everything will be as clear as a bell. I'll be able to hear Mrs Bennet and I'll feel Nelly lurking like a shadow in the hallway. They're sundowners from way back, those two, underhanded and overhanded line-blurrers, the both of them.

I'll see you after class, Chelsea, says Luzzy Lezzy. I'm lost in my thoughts and she comes as a shock, although she'd come as a bit of a shock anyway, big steam-train of a woman that she is. Why does she have to announce it like that? *I WILL see you.* No: *Please-may-I?* No: *Are-you-available?* She's as rude as her ankles.

Andy and Dom are giggling and snorting and Luzzy says: *Perhaps you'd like to see me at lunchtime boys?* She raises a pubey eyebrow and that shuts them up.

Everyone spills out into the hallway. Dom is the last out the door and he throws me a wink. Ms Luscombe launches straight in: *It's not good enough, Chelsea. Your results are not enough. Not on their own. You must attend at least seventy percent of classes or you will fail.*

I roll my eyes at her because she's a total fuck-knuckle. She probably memorises those lines in bed at night. She probably goes over the words in her head, all prudled up in her old-lady's pyjamas. Her husband is probably right beside her, fidgeting; he's probably desperate for a root but she wouldn't even notice. Probably he only gets a root on date night. Risqué in Luzzy's books is probably getting on top and then she'd squash the poor bastard half to death.

Luzzy says: *I'm going to have to call your parents. It's protocol. I will schedule a meeting with your Mum and Dad to discuss your future at the College.*

She says *College* to make it sound like more than it is. It's a Catholic co-ed nothing, a high school that wants to be more than it is. Mostly we only come to school so we can organise parties for the weekend. I have no idea why Mum sent me to a Catholic school: it's so yesterday.

Luzzy stares at me hard: the death-black of her pupils widen, the pores of her skin are open and exposed, like moon craters. I've never been this close. She says: *Well, Chelsea?* Her breath is

stale, not necessarily bad, but certainly not fresh. *What have you got to say for yourself?*

Whatever, I say.

It is not WHATEVER, she spits angrily, talking through her teeth. *This is YOUR future. You are cheating yourself MISS.* She says *Miss* really angrily, she hisses it out like she wants to say *bitch*, and she's only cheating herself (if you ask me) because I couldn't give a shit what she calls me and she's just missing the rush and the release of letting it out.

She says: *Have you been drinking? I can smell alcohol and cigarettes. I have a nose for it.*

She moves in so close that we're breathing each other's breath. *Chelsea, do you have a substance abuse problem?*

I'm still looking at her nose and I'm thinking that her husband probably can't get it up and that's why she's so dykey and frustrated.

I'm speaking to you Chelsea. You will do me the courtesy...

Someone should do you the courtesy, close their eyes and ignore your nose and forget about your ankles, do you hard and fast from behind. Then you mightn't be so uptight.

Luzzy says: *I am waiting Chelsea because this is not just about you. Do you HONESTLY think you are being fair to your family?'*

Fuck off: I say, under my breath.

I beg your pardon.

Go and Fuck Yourself, I say, loud and clear.

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Later in the day, Luzzy calls my house. She sounds even more dykey and frustrated on the phone.

She says: *Hello, this is Christine Luscombe. May I speak to Anne Withers?*

I say: *Speaking.*

Hello Mrs Withers...

Call me Anne, I say.

Anne. I am phoning to talk to you about Chelsea's frequent absences from school and to discuss an unfortunate misdemeanour today.

I interrupt: *Yes, Chelsea told me about today. She was very upset.*

Luzzy stays quiet so I take the lead. The thing is: Chelsea's Grandfather lives with us and he requires full-time care. He suffers from dementia.

OH.

I am not always in a position to provide Chelsea's Grandad with that care, Ms Luscombe...

Call me Christine.

Christine. I cannot always care for Chelsea's Grandfather because I suffer from rheumatoid arthritis, utterly debilitating, some days I can't turn on a tap. Some days I can barely get out of bed.

Oh. That's awful.

Chelsea is a private kid, holds her cards close. She wouldn't want the other students to know what she's contending with at home, but the reality is that Chelsea is the full-time carer.

Oh if only we'd known. Oh Anne, I'm so sorry.

Call me Annie, I say. My Friends call me Annie.

Annie. We can fill in some forms so that Chelsea won't be penalised for her sporadic attendance. Also, she should qualify for special consideration if we document the situation properly. Could you come in, fill out some forms?

I say: It would be best if you would post them or send them home with Chelsea. I'm not great at the moment and Chelsea's Grandfather

has had pneumonia, on top of everything else. That's why she flew off the handle today. She's very embarrassed that she lashed out, swearing at you like she did.

Well it makes sense now, in light of...

Poor kid, she only had a few hours sleep last night, between me and her Grandfather.

If only I'd known. I'll need to meet with Chelsea on Monday because I've documented it, you see, it's on the record, but I'm sure we can move on quickly. I'd like to clear the air with her but there'll be no repercussions: we'll just have a chat; I'll just table it with her briefly. I'll get hold of the documents this afternoon and set things in motion for the special consideration. Thank you Annie. Thanks.

No. Thank you Christine. Please, if you could keep this under your hat, because Chelsea's a private kid.

Of course...

I hang up the phone, feeling pretty pleased with myself: rheumatoid arthritis, not bad, it's supposed to be a bastard of a thing. Mum and Grandad are both asleep and so I take the chance to nick out to the bottle shop. I know Mum will be on the way out of it soon and she'll be looking for the grog when she wakes up. I'm keen for something too. I'm beyond tired and if I don't have something I won't be able to go to sleep. I'm too tired to sleep; I'm past the point.

When I get to the grog shop, there's a new face at the counter; he refuses to serve me without the proper identification. I tell him I come here all the time and Greg looks after me but he doesn't give a shit.

I go across to the supermarket for the bare essentials: toilet paper, carrots, tomato paste, then I go home to get Grandad so he can buy the booze. I only ever take him out as a last resort because it's impossible to know what he'll do. Any change to his routine can set him off. If the memories come in thick and

fast, he starts sundowning in the middle of the liquor shop and then it's all broken glass and sour grapes.

Lucky Greg was there when Grandad did that. He's a bit odd, Greg, nervous and fidgety, overly clean hands, like medical hands, but he's kind. He said: *Don't worry: I'll fix it.* He gave me a cleanskin on the house. He slips me extra stuff sometimes, promo stock or whatever. He's an everyday angel, they're hard to pick. If you didn't know him, you'd think he was queer or something, but he's divine. If I win tattslotto, he's first on my list.

I take a few deep breaths as I turn into our driveway and head toward the front door. I figure I'll bribe Grandad. I'll tell him he can have a bottle of beer for himself if he's on his best behaviour. I take another gutsy breath as I get close to our front door. I can hear him yelling.

Annie, you wake up now. You wake up RIGHT NOW. ...You're NOT dead; you're NOT dead. Wake up. WAKE UP.

When I get to Mum's bedroom, Grandad is standing over her with his fists clenched. He has tears and snot running down his cheeks and chin. He has blood on his fists; he wipes it on his face. The blood is from Mum: her nose is bleeding, there is blood at the corner of her mouth and her cheeks and eyes are shiny, rosy red from the punches.

Grandad is moaning through his teeth. It's a mixture of breathing and moaning. He sounds like an injured animal, like he's fucken possessed.

Stop it, I yell. STOP IT RIGHT NOW. I grab his arm. She's not dead, I say. She's asleep.

She won't wake up. She doesn't wake up.

She is sick, I say. That's why she can't wake up. BECAUSE SHE'S SICK. I am slurring and crying and doing the possessed

breathing too. *The sickness makes her sleep hard and deep. She can't help it.*

I put my arm around Grandad and steer him out of the bedroom. I look down at the green carpet and I think there's nothing much uglier than green carpet.

Next thing I know, I have Luzzy the Lezzy at my door. I've had time to collect myself, but it knocks me for six, for six hundred actually because she's ambushing me, arriving at my home unannounced.

I thought I'd drop over the special consideration forms, she says. Did your Mum tell you about it? She looks over my shoulder, she is trying to get a glimpse of the inside. This is after school, twilight, official sundowning time.

I move closer to the doorway and pull the door behind me, holding it behind my back. I am squeezed between the door and the outside world. Luzzy can't see a thing. How dare she arrive at my doorstep, at my home? She has no fucking right; she's not my friend.

Luzzy says: *We need to keep you at school Chelsea. It would be such a waste if you dropped out. You have a fine mind. You're the cream of the crop.*

Whatever, I say.

She sighs. *It is not WHATEVER. You don't know what you're saying. You have no idea how important this is.*

Grandad comes up behind me, holding his bowl out in front of him. He is dressed in his saggy undies and a singlet. He has Bolognese sauce all around his mouth, down his front. He says: *Can I have some more please Shells?*

I turn to Luzzy and I say: *Look I need to get back to it so...* I try to close the door.

Luzzy puts her hand in the way. She says: *Can I have a word to your Mum, to Annie?*

No.

Why not?

She is unavailable.

I would really like to speak to Annie, says Luzzy.

Annie is sick, says Grandad. That's why she can't wake up. She's not DEAD, she's sick. I thought she was dead. That's why I punched her. It was only an accident.

Luzzy looks at me for an explanation. Luzzy says: *Is it true? Did he punch her?*

He's sundowning, I say. It's true to him.

He's WHAT?

Look it up in the dictionary, I say, closing the door quietly.

Book one

Chapter three

Ghostly gum

Ghostly Gum:

‘The term was used in the "I'm Australian" song in reference to a famous aboriginal painter Albert Namatjira who painted traditional indigenous art of the native gum trees [...] "ghostly gums" refer[s] to the drooping leaves of the gum that sway like ghosts in the wind’

Answers.com, viewed 15 September 2011,

[http://wiki.answers.com/Q/What does ' paint the ghostly gums' mea
n](http://wiki.answers.com/Q/What_does_'paint_the_ghostly_gums'_mean)

~ ~ ~

(Chelsea)

I wake to the sound of a chainsaw and yelling. When I look out of the window I see the tree-men on the ground, yelling fucken this and fucken that, calling to the young man, perched half way up the grey-white gum.

I can't believe they are taking the tree down. I know it looks a bit dangerous, leaning out over the road, but they don't have to get rid of it. It's my favourite tree. I watch it when Melbourne flips from sunny calm to angry windstorm. I watch the tree in the wind before the rain, the tangle before the wash. The silvery, spear-shaped leaves gust up, up, like a madwoman's hair, and it reminds me that, even in nature, one thing is another.

The tree-man climbs the smooth grey trunk as if he is a spider. The spikes in his shoes hack into the tree, his footsteps biting angrily into the grey sheen of the trunk. The marks are sharp and definite, like a seagull's feet on wet sand.

God, I miss the water. I miss walking along the beach with the wind in my face. The waves make me feel new as they wash my old footprints away. Even in this black-rock, industrial, seaside nothing, I can pretend I am somewhere else when I have the wind in my face and the wash on my feet.

Grey-white gums are shaped like skinny-strong men, muscle and bone, nothing else. The young man is stringy and tough like the tree. He places the rope around the upper branches of the tree as if he is brushing long hair away from his lover's face. The tree-man's strength is all in his middle, as if he is a gymnast, or a trapeze artist. He digs his feet into the trunk, rooting himself in place. His arms are busy with the rope. He is engrossed by it, precise about it. He is gentle and efficient as if the tree were alive to his touch. His torso is shifting and

writhing with the movements of his arms, like he's rowing in a storm.

I ring Ellen from next door. I ask her if I can have the wood.

She says: *The men will leave the wood on the nature-strip - Of course you are welcome to it, Darling.*

I go out the front and approach the two men on the ground. They are holding the ropes that are attached to the tree's branches. I wait for the chainsaw to idle. I watch the younger man in the tree as he lowers the chainsaw down. He drops it first, just below his spiked feet and then he shakes the rope, lowering it further still. He does this seamlessly, effortlessly, as if he is shaking a tambourine against his thigh, dancing a little. The chainsaw hangs above us, whirring evenly like an electric knife.

The tree-man's torso is like a board, a concrete slab, a block that turns with the movements of his arms and legs, but always a block, a coffin of strength at his centre. The power is all his and we were all aware of this as we stare up at him, mesmerised. He is a Guru, a God.

Hi, I say, turning back to the men on the ground, my face flushed.

Morning, says one of the men. The other man grunts, eyes skyward, clutching the rope as if his life depends on it.

I just talked to Ellen, the lady inside, I say, pointing towards the front door. *She said I could take the wood.*

He smirks: *You?*

Well YES, I say. I know I'm on the skinny side but I'm strong, and so I stare back, hard, because he knows nothing about me. How dare he question what I am capable of?

So if someone stops off to ask, can you say it's taken?

*Yeh alright and I'll tell him, he says, pointing to the tree-man.
He'll be doing the clean up.*

Thanks, I say, glancing up the tree again.

I go inside. By the time I've hung out a second load of washing, the gum is level with the pitch of the roof. Ghostly, ghostly gum: turning silver-white at night, turning branches into gnarled arms and rustling to whispers. I watch the disappearing of the grey-white trunk. I watch it felled and I mourn it fallen, and I realise that it may be gone, but somehow it's still here. Ghostly ghostly gum.

The tree man stands astride the trunk, unclipping the buckle at his belt, loosening the rope so that he can manoeuvre the chainsaw more freely. He straddles the trunk then, until he's almost flat against it, and he cuts into it on an angle. With his feet so firmly rooted into the body of the tree, he seems to float in the air, as if gravity were only a state of mind.

After cutting a large wedge from both sides of the trunk, the tree-man re-clips the chainsaw to his flank, letting it hang again like a loose tambourine. He whacks the top piece of the trunk, thwacks it with the flat of his palms, encouraging it to fall in precisely the way that he would like it to fall.

I get stuck into the housework. Everything will be okay, I tell myself, and I believe it. I'm feeling good, excited about the wood. I've been rationing the last of the woodpile, trying not to use it all, because the good wood, the slow burning stuff, is hard to come by.

By the time I'm through with all of the regular washing and I'm onto the bed sheets, I hear the sound of a garden blower. I peer through the window: the cleanup is underway. The men throw all the smaller, twiggy branches onto the back of the truck and shred them to mulch. Only the logs are left.

As the truck pulls away, the older man winds down the window. He waves to the tree-man and calls: *Don't work too hard*. He is laughing through his grey-brown teeth. The tree-man waves them away with his free arm. I approach him, feeling awkward, hoping the other men told him I was coming.

It's the way he took the tree down that makes me nervous, as if he knew its nooks and crevices, as if he had spent his entire life staring at the tree. I'm not sure what to expect of him, now that he is back on the ground. When I get within a few paces, he flicks the blower switch over to idle and pushes the earmuffs down around his neck. His face is wet, dripping with sweat.

I put the wheelbarrow down. *I'm taking the wood*, I say and he nods and smiles but says nothing. His eyes are blue and I am surprised because his hair and beard are dark. I imagined his eyes would be dark too. It's as though he has someone else's eyes.

I turn away, picking up the closest log and heaving it into the wheelbarrow. Gum is such heavy wood, dense like concrete, and because the tree was in its prime, the wood is wet, weighty with life. One log is as much as I will be able to carry. I wheel it along the footpath and then into our drive. If I can just get the wood into our front yard, I'll be happy with that. It doesn't matter if it takes me the rest of the year to get it around the back.

The job is much harder than I imagined. The front of my thighs are aching, my shoulders and arms are burning. I have lugged wood before, but the dead weight of the gum is overwhelming. By the time I am on my third run, I am breathless and sweaty. I consider packing it in.

The tree-man is loading the blower into the back of the ute. As I get close, he takes the wheelbarrow, gliding up Ellen's driveway as if he were riding a scooter, continuing in the way

that I have started, but with such ease. I am too spent to argue and there's nothing to argue with anyway, nothing verbal.

Generally, I'm reluctant to accept help from anybody. I'd prefer to do the job myself, just so I don't owe anyone, but today I can't do it. I peel off my cardigan, wiping the sweat from under my eyes, between my breasts. I wrap the cardi around my hips and take a few deep breaths.

I lift the big logs with the tree-man. I don't even know if they could be described as logs, those larger pieces of the trunk. He wheels them away and I follow him, carrying a smaller log or two by hand. These I won't need to split; they're the perfect width to go over the kindling, just as they are.

When I've carried as much as I can carry, I grab his forearm and say: *Enough. That's enough.* I'm still puffing and he did most of the work. No wonder his guts are like concrete. I put my elbows on my knees and bend over, holding my head in my hands. When I straighten up, he is brushing the sawdust from his jumper. *You want a drink?* I ask.

He nods. I take my shoes off at the door and he does the same, brushing the sawdust from his pants before he comes inside. I pull a stool out from the kitchen bench and he sits. Grandad is asleep on the couch and I turn the television up so that we won't disturb him.

My Grandad, I say to the tree-man. *He's asleep.*

He nods.

I take the water-jug from the fridge but then I spy the soda so I grab that instead. I take two glasses from the cupboard and half-fill them with ice. I put the ice-tray back in the freezer and grab the vodka, pouring it over the ice, a good whack of it. I hold the bottle up, glancing at the tree man, reassuring myself that he's not a dream. He nods, the quiver of a smile at his lips,

but mostly he smiles with his eyes. The silence is not uncomfortable: it's quite cosy, but charged, fully charged.

I add a dash of lime cordial and take a small sip. I like to taste the vodka and the lime, bang on, before I add the fizz. I add the soda and whisk the glasses with a fork. I down it. The tree-man does the same.

I add more ice and make another round. We drink the second one just as quickly. Why not? I'm in a real why-not of a mood actually. I mix a third. I take the glasses and walk toward the hallway, nodding at him to follow. I am beginning to get nervous that we'll wake Grandad and I'm not ready to let the tree-man go, not yet. As we pass the bathroom he detours and I wait for him.

When we get to my bedroom, I hand him a glass and turn on the light. *I don't want to wake Grandad, I say. He needs to sleep.* I move the blankets from the chair in the corner of the room, placing them on the floor at the end of my bed, but he doesn't sit.

He takes a long sip, draining the glass, and places it on the chair. He waits for me to drink, and then he takes my glass and puts it next to his. He turns the light off. He sweeps the loose hair away from my face as if I am a ghostly gum, as if his hands know me better than I know myself. I kiss him; I know how to kiss, and I can smell cut tree: I can taste vodka and cold cut tree and him.

I can smell his clean-sweat smell. I can taste the sweat on his neck: it is bitter. His jumper is tight. As he peels it off, I smell sweat and soap and aftershave, sweet and sour like yesterday. I can smell cut trees and felled ghosts. I imagined his torso as a block, a concrete coffin, but it is warm, dark and matted like his beard, and warm.

I kiss the tree-man, I know how to kiss, and he holds me, with strong gentle hands and invisible ropes, as if he knows where

my body will give and fall. Before I realise that he has a hold, I am trembling beyond the beat, just outside time, breathless, like a tambourine.

What's your name? I say. He lifts his head, preparing to sit up, readying himself to answer me. I imagine that his voice is like his beard, dark, twisted.

Never mind, I say, and I kiss him, softly, insistently, so that he can't answer.

I prefer the sweaty tangle of the silence.

~ ~ ~

Okay that's bullshit – none of it is true.

I mean, the tree man was here and he took the tree down: I was grey about it, but that's all.

Grey is silver and silver is grey.

It's true that the tree man didn't talk but that's because he's deaf. The earmuffs must have been to keep him warm, rather than to block out the grind of the chainsaw. When I told him that I would take the wood he grunted, then snorted and spat, dirty wood-dust spit. Then he shook his head for *No* and pulled his ear for *Hear*. He smelled of ugly old sweat – he looked old and dirty and sweaty. With all the spitting and the grunting, he reminded me of a dirty monkey.

Truth is, I probably would have fucked him anyway: if he was up for it.

I was lonely enough, to fuck a monkey.

Book one

Chapter four

The riddling

Riddle:

‘-noun

1.

a question or statement so framed as to exercise one's ingenuity in answering it or discovering its meaning; conundrum.

2.

a puzzling question, problem, or matter.

3.

a puzzling thing or person.

4.

any enigmatic or dark saying or speech [...]

5.

to propound riddles; speak enigmatically.’

Dictionary.com, viewed 26 March 2011,

<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/riddle>

~ ~ ~

(Chelsea)

The package is addressed to Mum but I've been in charge of the mail and the bills forever, so I open it without a thought.

Inside the package is a melamine plate with a child's drawing on it. There are five people in the picture. Their names are written there: Annie – Chelsea – Teddy – Pelts - Dean.

There is a note. It says:

Dear Annie. You gave me this plate all those years ago and I have kept it, hanging on the wall in my kitchen. You couldn't take the plate home because I was in the picture, and Dean would have lost it.

I still want to be in the picture.

Pelts.

I decide to take the plate to the Gypsy. Then I'll show it to Mum...

~ ~ ~

The Gypsy says: *Give me your hand.* Her voice is seductive, hypnotic. I could listen to her whisper her strange little secrets forever. She has all the answers and I'm desperate because I've no idea how to help Mum. She can see the past and the future. She can see everything. I'm falling for her, I've fallen; I'm obsessed. She's the only one who can help me.

The sign draped over the front of the tent says: *Amadika's Tent of Fortune.* Even the name makes me quiver. There are blankets and shawls everywhere, draped across her body, hanging from the walls of the tent, and scattered across the cushions and low folding chairs: shawls and blankets, everywhere.

I ask her: *Where did you get the blankets?*

Aah, where did I get the blankets, a simple question you ask but perhaps you really wish to know about the hands, the dreams that wove the blankets into being? What are they like, the people who craft these items with their nimble, human fingers? The blankets look like the work of more than human hands – No?’

This is my wake up call, my cue to respond, but I’m not sure I understand so I don’t say anything. The Gypsy holds the shawls in her hands tenderly, as if they’re alive. She speaks slowly but her voice isn’t easy to understand. The words are woven together so that her English sounds like a secret language, a chant, a calling of spirits. Listening to her is like listening to my conscience, but jangled.

I crave the words that she speaks and the way that she speaks them. I try to remember what she says so that I can repeat it back to myself, but her words fall through my fingers. I can never remember them just so.

She is an oracle, a messenger. She knows how to save Mum.

To dress oneself is nothing but colours, she says, rearranging the shawls around her neck and staring at me with the black, glass eyes. To bear children is wealth, she adds. You ask your mammy. You ask Annie.

For a second I think I misheard. They sound the same: Mammy and Annie. I can’t speak so I stare at her, frightened and desperate.

Go, she says and I wonder where ten minutes went. I never know what happens to the time because it passes in slow and fast motion together, like a dream.

When I come out of the tent, Geoff takes my hands and rubs them between his own, he is trying to bring me back to him, he is trying to rub her off. I don’t tell him anything. I wait for him to ask. I make him beg me for it.

What did she say?

She said there is a man in my life, I say slowly, but he only wants sex.

Don't be ridiculous, he says, flashing me his dimple. Did she really mention me?

She says you are ripe inside like a watermelon, I say.

Did she say my name?

She doesn't usually say people's names, she...

Convenient, he says.

It's like a story, I say quickly, but I decide who is who.

She says the same thing to everyone, he says.

She does not! I say, pulling away. You have bad breath, I lie. I turn away from him and walk towards the donut van. I turn back after a few steps: How could the same thing be true for everyone? I say.

He is cupping his hands in front of his mouth and breathing into them, trying to smell his breath. He says: *She manipulates words; she says the same lines over and over ...*

You're just scared, I say.

Geoff thinks that it's unnatural to find out about the future before time. He worries that I will adjust my behaviour, drawing myself towards that future as if nothing else is possible. Geoff thinks that the Gypsy is meddling – fiddling with possibility as if it's a fixed thing, changing what might have been into something else altogether.

But it's all I have. I'm possessed by the Gypsy's words. I'm desperate because I think Mum's going to die. And what's so dangerous about believing in stories? What's the harm in believing things could be better?

~ ~ ~

A month passes before the market is on again. It's been a big month, having Geoff around all the time. Everything has changed so quickly, from grey to something else. It's like turning an abalone shell over, turning the gravelly greyness over and finding the shiny, mother-of-pearl. This last month, I've let myself believe things might be better and I don't want stories: stories aren't enough anymore. I need straight answers.

These hands have been toiling for love, she says. *Toiling; toiling; toiling for love*. She holds my hands and I'm helpless again; I'm not strong anymore because she can see the ugly grey and I can't speak.

She makes toiling sound like a different word each time. My hands are resting in hers. She is standing and I am sitting so my hands are high above my head, as if I'm praying, paying homage to her or something. She lowers my hands as she speaks and they feel heavier with each lowering, as if she is levering them down, as if she knows things about me that she shouldn't know. She can see it all.

Don't throw away the milk pails, she says. A tear rolls down my cheek and she reaches over and wipes it with her cold, soft thumb: too cold to be part of a living body, too soft to be a human hand. *It means your hope*, she says, *your last hope*.

She pulls a small wooden box across the table – the box is filled with small bottles. She turns my hands over so that my palms are facing up. She takes one of the bottles and pours two perfect drops onto each of my wrists and then she rubs them briefly in a circular motion. I think the oil is sandalwood.

She takes another bottle - one drop for each of my wrists this time – I think it is lemon. *Lemon myrtle*, she says, as if she's reading my fucking mind. I close my eyes. I can smell freshly cut wood and wild flowers.

The Gypsy pours clear oil into her hand from a large bottle and then she sets the bottle aside. She rubs her hands together,

lathering them in the oil. Her hands are wrinkly but smooth. The wrinkles are very fine, grey-white, like spider webs across her coffee skin.

Close your eyes, she says, one word spilling into the other as she takes my hand, pushing her fingers into my flesh. She begins at the wrist, pressing against the oil, muttering in a whisper, her voice multiplying into voices. She works her way into the palm of my hand, down each of my fingers. She is singing a soft song, continuous foreign words and too many sounds for one voice, like she's singing with her sisters.

The maker of a song does not spoil it, she says. She pauses, breathing with a rattle as if she might cough. *You understand, No?*

I nod, I murmur: *Yes*. I am crying. She turns me inside out. I want to know what she sees.

It means: No one should interfere because you understand your own business. You understand, No?

Yes, I say. My eyes are closed. I cry through my closed eyes.

The Gypsy pushes hard against my palm, near the base of my thumb. The pain stabs as her fingers dig deep, biting my flesh like tweezers against glass, burying it deeper and deeper. I think the pain is good, for my own twisted good.

I open my eyes briefly because I can't bear the pain. I want to check if she has a knife, something sharp, but it's only the ball of her knuckled thumb. She waits for me to close my eyes and then she starts talking again.

She says: *You don't take shelter from the rain in a pond. You are smart – No?*

Yes, I say.

Don't worry if your work is behind closed doors: "Watch me" was carried off by a crocodile.

I will be careful, I say.

NO, she says, yelling loudly and sounding like an everyday angry person. *Do not be careful; only be true to yourself. The dying of the heart is a thing unshared. These things are always behind doors.*

She presses on my other hand now. Her thumbs push hard against my palm. The pressure shoots straight from my hand to my temple. I feel it surge up my through my arm, my shoulder, my neck and I wonder whether the Gypsy is using her hands to imprint herself on my mind.

I listen to see if she will continue. I want her to stop but I never want it to end. The ache in my temple becomes sharp, fierce. I can't bear it. I open one eye. She is watching me, waiting for me – I am in love with her - I'm obsessed, possessed – it's all torment and desire.

You understand – No?

Yes, I say, quickly, desperately. I close my eyes tight. I scrunch them together until I see shards of light, shattered, splintered mother-of-pearl...

Go, she says, placing my hands on the table.

I panic. Is she sending me away? That can't have been ten minutes. I feel gutted, scared as shit, and I fire my question at her. *My Mum, I say. Is she going to die?*

The Gypsy lets out a quiet shriek. I have surprised her as I have surprised myself. I have practised this question, last night, again this morning. I had every intention of asking it, but I didn't know if I could go through with it.

I speak louder, angrily: *IS ANNIE GOING TO DIE?* It's the voice I used for Grandad, the voice that means: Don't you even think about fucking with me.

I fossick around in my bag and bring out the picture-plate with the big yellow sun and the blue sky and the bluer water and the smiling stick figures. I touch the figures: first Mum and I, and then the phantoms: Teddy and Dean and Pelts. Someone knows who these people are. Someone knows who they are to me. The picture-plate is all smiles: a happy family picture of strangers. I give the plate to the Gypsy, crying hard, and I say: *Who are these people?* I say, again: *Is Annie going to die?*

The Gypsy says: *There is no time to waste, for the earth does not get fat.*

What does that mean? I say. *What do you mean?*

I cannot tell you what I mean, she says: only what I know.

...There is a death on the water, she says. A death. Deathly. Death. And the earth does not get fat.

Today there's nothing I can tell Geoff. There's nothing to say, just fucking nothing.

~ ~ ~

Another month passes and the market is on again. I am even more determined to get some proper answers. I want the Gypsy to tell me about the death on the water. I want specific details. Names.

We stand at the gate and Geoff hunts in his pockets for some coins to pay the entry fee. Grandad holds onto his arm. I'm all set to run ahead as soon as we get through the gate.

All the regular stalls are there, just the same as last time, unaltered, like a picture, like *Déjà vu*, but I can't see the Gypsy's tent. I feel the nausea, like concrete in my guts, the crushing feeling that I've known a couple of times when I couldn't wake Mum, when I couldn't register the sound or

movement of her breathing, vivid for a split second and then gone, so gone.

I scan the stalls again but the Gypsy's tent is nowhere in sight. I think maybe she's moved to a quieter spot because usually she's right beside the food vans and it gets very noisy. I scan the walkways for the peak of black canvas. I walk more quickly. I run.

I look back at Geoff and wish I hadn't. He glances at me, but he's distracted. Grandad is handling fragile items, hand-blown glass, dazzling colours. Geoff tries to take the glass from Grandad, talking all the while.

I can't watch them. I don't want to help. I walk as fast as I can, away from them. I imagine I see the Gypsy's black hood near the toilet-block and I hurry in that direction. I'm breathless, swallowing mother-of-pearl splinters and fucked-up dreams. The tent isn't there. The Gypsy isn't there. I walk faster, passing the stalls quickly. Everything blurs together like Ti tree out of the bus window.

There are a couple of little laneways with a few small stalls in each. The laneways lead to portable classrooms: music rooms, art rooms. Today these rooms are abuzz with children's face painting and fairy floss machines, but the Gypsy isn't there. I want to tell the kids that the fun is bullshit, the colours and the sweetness are a big fucking lie, but I have no time, because I've got to keep searching for the Gypsy.

Perhaps she's sick. Perhaps she's dead. I wonder whether she can foresee her own death or whether her visions are just for strangers. She must see her own future too. How would the mind distinguish? Maybe the Gypsy knew she was going to die and that's why she told me about the unfat earth and the death on the water, but I don't understand because the puzzle is missing some pieces. I need the Gypsy to fit it together. All

that I have is a happy family picture-plate, a bunch of strangers in a family memory I don't know.

I run now, covering the market in a handful of minutes. I know she's not there. I end up back where I started, back where the Gypsy should be, where she always was. Geoff and Grandad are waiting and I don't want to be near them. I want to run away from everyone who needs me. Grandad is crying, grinding his feet into the bitumen, marching furiously on the spot. He is covered in tears: he's all foaming spit and needy ugliness.

He broke a window decoration, a butterfly leadlight, says Geoff. I had to pay for it.

I want some donuts, bawls Grandad.

I don't have any money left, says Geoff, sounding empty.

When Grandad gets upset like this, he mourns everything that he has ever been sad about in his life. Usually he cries about Mum. He thinks that I am Mum and he loves me and he hates me, more than I can bear. I can't help him because it's all a story in his mind and I am pleasure and pain to him and he begs me to bring the children home. He says it over and over: *Bring them home*, and usually I say: *Of course I will. I'm on my way*, just to settle him.

When he's like that, I can't do anything to help him and people stare at us like they want to call the CAT team. Usually I smile and if they keep staring I explain that he has dementia, but today I'm caught up in the loss of the Gypsy and I don't want to explain.

A woman with bright red lipstick approaches us. She takes the matching red scarf from around her neck and she wipes Grandad's tears. Her shiny black curls bounce around in the wind. She says: *Can I help?* She's gleaming: health and happiness and shiny red.

You can't do anything, I say. I'm sobbing. She touches my arm and I flinch. *Go away*, I say. *Just piss off*, I add, but there's no anger in it because I'm too exhausted and what do I care about her shiny red life? Geoff is trying to calm Grandad down but it's no use: he's too far gone.

I'm a nurse, Honey, says the woman with the red scarf. *I work with people who have dementia. Confused people are my thing*, she says. She reaches for my hand again and smiles. *What you are doing - it's hard work, really hard work*. She takes hold of my hand and I cry hard, remembering that the Gypsy is gone.

The lady with the red scarf takes a pen out of her handbag. She writes her name and phone number on the back of a card. *If you need some help with him*, she points to Grandad, *you ring me Honey, okay*.

She puts her hand on my shoulder, near my neck, as if she's known me her whole life, as if I'm her child, but then she's gone and Grandad is still losing his shit, and today I don't want to pacify him. I want him to shut the fuck up. I could kill him with my own bare hands, drown him (Is it Grandad? Is he the death on the water? Am I capable of it?).

I want to be free enough to thrash around, to sob and bellow and cry. I want Geoff to console me. I want someone like the shiny-red-lady to look after Grandad, just for one day, so I can look after myself, so I can have a few gin and tonics and do whatever the fuck I want...

I give Geoff the money that I had for the Gypsy and he takes Grandad to buy some donuts. When we are back on the bus, Grandad becomes quiet. The vibration of the bus engine seems to soothe him and he stares out of the window in silence.

He looks over at me, briefly, and I can see that he is back in the now. He has one donut left in the bag and the sugar sparkles around his mouth like glitter. He sucks the air in sharply because he's still rattled from the crying but he's grinning all

the same. He holds his donut-bag up to show me, grinning from ear to ear. His eyes are shiny from the crying and from the joy of hot donuts: his eyes are razzled and wonderful, sad and stupid.

I sit beside Geoff, swinging my legs around and resting them on his thighs, my back against the window. *She wasn't there, I say. I ran around the whole market.*

I know, says Geoff. I went to the lost and found tent where they take the bookings. That's it for her, they reckon. She didn't re-book.

I lurch, thinking I'll vomit, but I just get a mouthful of stale cup of tea, bitter and wrong. There's nothing to do but go home, and when I get there, everything looks stupid and useless. The house smells of simmering Bolognese and hopeless love.

It's four o'clock, close enough to the end of the day for a drink, and far enough away from happiness to have a crack at happy hour. I mix myself a gin and tonic; I mix two, kidding myself that I'm making one for Geoff. He shakes his head when I hold it out to him: Mr-Fucking-Pure.

Grandad looks exhausted. He doesn't understand money. If you don't buy him a donut, he just thinks you're being mean. I feel like the Gypsy died and unless she is dead in the irreversible physical sense (stiff and foul like Frank) then I'm pissed off that she didn't come. She knows I need her.

I need to unwind and forget her, but it's hard to forget that there is a death on the water (that there was, or there will be). I need to know what it means (the dying of the heart, the un-fat earth). I think it means that Mum is doomed but I need to know more. I need to know how to save her.

I go the bedroom to tuck Grandad in but he's already asleep. I feel like the biggest bitch in the world - a ride on the bus, a warm jam donut, that's his perfect day, it's child's play, but it

got ugly and I didn't tell him it was okay, and I didn't tell him a story about next time or tomorrow, a story that would make him forget about our shit life.

Today I watched him lose it, crying and gabbling, and I didn't try to pull him out of it. I didn't tell him about the lovely dinner I had ready for him, about the chocolate ice-cream I had in the freezer for his dessert. I kiss him on his pale, sun-spotted forehead. I smooth my tears along his wrinkles with trembling fingers.

When I come out of Grandad's room, Geoff is waiting near the front door. He has his coat on. *I should go*, he says.

Oh, I say.

I put my hands around his waist, under his shirt, and I kiss him. It's a needy kiss. *Come and lay down for a bit*, I say. When we are stretched out on my bed, I tell Geoff about the un-fat earth and I say I am worried about a death and I mention the water. I don't tell him I am quoting the Gypsy. I own the words as if they were my own and perhaps he thinks they are my words although, of course, they could only be hers.

We stretch out on my bed, gazing up at the stars that are scattered across my roof, and we could be anywhere. The stars are stickers, they glow in the dark and they look surprisingly real, especially after a few gutsy gin and tonics. I put my hands on Geoff's chest. I loved chests. *Take off your shirt*, I say. I want some skin on skin, nothing like the comfort of it.

With Geoff, it's not just about the sex. I think he loves me and that's why I hold off on the sex with him. I thought love and sex together would be complicated, but today I'm craving the comfort of the sex and so I pretend love isn't messy and broken.

Geoff falls asleep afterwards and I get up for a bit. I want to have a quick smoke, an after-sex smoke, like in the movies. I

suck the smoke down hard and wallow in the smack-bang physicality of the moment. I blow smoke up at the stars and pretend that I have a different life. I go inside and mix another drink. I wash the last of the dishes and wipe down the benches, top up my drink.

I better go Sea, says Geoff, standing in the kitchen doorway and pulling his shirt over his head. I love that he calls me Sea, not Chelsea, not Shells. Sea means I can be anything.

Don't go, I say, sounding needy, and that's why I didn't want the love with the sex, that's why I don't want people helping me, in case it made me needy.

I should go, I...

I move towards him, wrapping my arms around his back. He has very defined back muscles: they twitch beneath my fingers.

I just got up for a ss-moke, I lisp; that's the gin talking. *I couldn't sleep*, I say, speaking slowly and carefully. *I didn't want to disturb you.*

I should go, says Geoff again.

Please don't go, I say. *Come back to bed.*

Just for a minute, he says, kissing my forehead. We crawl back under the covers and have sex a second time. It's like another world, without the hurting love, but it's sad too because the shadow of his leaving lurks there, like the broken, pearly shells.

Geoff sits on the edge of the bed and ties his shoes. *Give me a second*, I say. *I'll come out for a smoke.*

Don't worry, he says. *Stay there. I'll lock the door when I leave.*

I'm not desperate for a smoke, not really, but I want to hold onto him, draw out the leaving. Anyway, I refuse to lie in bed and say goodbye when we've just had sex - that would be

pathetic, like old, married people. I get out of bed and pull on the dressing gown that Mum gave me. It used to be hers but she gave it to me. It's black and silky with pink rosebuds all over it. It's the most beautiful thing I have ever owned. It's a bit scrappy really, a few runs in the fabric that end in small fluffy balls, but it feels luxurious against my skin and it reminds me of the life Mum deserves, and it reminds me that Mum was someone else before she got so fucked up. I tie the dressing gown across my hips, put on a pair of socks.

I light up as soon as we get out the front. As I blow the first drag up at the stars, a car pulls in to the driveway. *Odd*, I say.

It's Mum, says Geoff, and Dad. ...Wonder how they knew I was here.

What? I say (Where else would you be?).

Hey. I'll catch you tomorrow, says Geoff, or Monday.

Monday? I say. There's not a day in the past couple of months that Geoff hasn't been here, not one day. He was here on Christmas-fucking-day for Christ's sake. Tonight we had sex - for the first time - for the second time...

Under the garish headlights, my dressing gown turns to scamp-glitz. Geoff turns to me: *See ya*, he says.

See ya! Where's the Sea in see ya?

Geoff? I say.

Yeh?

...Never mind, I say, and I realise how sad those words really are, such a very sad way to say: Don't worry about it.

Don't worry about it means: no sweat, whatever brother, all's well that ends well. Never mind means something else. Never mind means: Why didn't your parents know you were here? It means: Why didn't you kiss me goodbye? Never mind means: I mind, make no mistake, but perhaps you don't mind,

perhaps you never minded, mind you, you were on the game, you had all the moves, like minding was all you were mindful of.

~ ~ ~

That's the end of Geoff. He only comes back once.

He talks to Grandad, ignores me. Once or twice he talks to me through Grandad, but that's demented. I can't stand that he's not touching me, nothing at all, so I go to my room. I need a second to cry in peace. When I have regained my suit of armour, I go back out to the kitchen, finish cleaning up, make Grandad a cup of tea. Apparently Geoff had to go because when I come out he's gone.

Apparently that's the end of that. Apparently...

Never mind.

~ ~ ~

When Geoff leaves, I run a bath. I think that'll help the sleep wash in. I figure I'll take some of Mum's pills and get sleepy in the bath... but then I worry that I might be the death on the water, and what would happen to Mum and Grandad if something happens to me? So I get out of the bath and get dressed before I take the tablets.

I have some tablets left over from the ones I took to kill Frank. I dose myself up with a couple of the tablets and a few more of the usuals. I line the drinks up on my bedside table, and skull them quickly, consecutively, savouring nothing, the nothing of the nothing.

I lie down on my bed and shake my legs irritably until the relaxers kick in. I open one of my eyes a moment later. It must be more than a moment because it's dark now. The moments

have become long and short together and the Gypsy is standing there, hovering beside my bed. It's windy and her clothes fly around her like blackbirds, all black because the coloured scarves have gone. I try to tell her about Geoff but she can't understand me and I am angry that I have no control of my words: they are twisted and crumbling and they don't make sense.

You deserted me, I say to the Gypsy. *Fuck you*, I add, reaching my hand out to her, but the blackbirds flutter and fall apart like ash.

What is the death on the water? I scream but it sounds washed out and ashen like never mind.

Then the Gypsy is gone, swallowed by the un-fat earth and Geoff is there. I tell him all the things that I didn't tell him when my voice was working and he says: *Never Mind*.

I lay still then but I keep talking even though it sounds underwater. I think that perhaps I have altered the future and changed the present, all because I wanted something that was never going to happen, a fairytale ending, where even ugly things turn to mother-of-pearl.

...And then there is no one and I wonder if they were here at all. I worry that I imagined them like Mum's all-but-gone breathing, and I want to check on Mum but I can't because my legs won't work.

What have you done to yourself? I yell but there is no one to never mind.

I put my fingers down my throat, pushing and prodding until I vomit. I reach over, grabbing the hairbrush from the bedside table and I shove the handle down my throat. I push it hard against the base of my tongue until I lurch and gag, straight over the edge of my bed, in my bed.

I try to get out of bed but I fall. My legs are stupid. I crawl towards the door and down the hallway. My middle is concrete and my legs fall apart under me like blackbirds of ash.

I bump the walls. I bash my head against the skirting board. I am frightened. If I don't sharpen up, if I fall asleep like this, I mightn't wake up at all.

I lunge forward again, arms first, breathe-breathe-breathe, and then I drag my demented legs and lunge forward again. I crawl into the bathroom and I pull myself up onto the edge of the bath. I try to reach the tap but it's too much. I pull myself up higher, lift a leg, fail, lift again, fail. Then I heave myself up, crying, and I land a leg over the edge of the bath and thump myself in.

The cold porcelain is something, a reward of sorts, breathe-breathe-breathe. I reach up and turn on the cold tap, just a dribble, and I lift my head and turn my neck, trying to catch some of the water in my mouth. I sip from the dribbling tap and vomit and vomit. I turn the tap up a bit to get more pressure but I am clumsy. There is too much water and now I am freezing in my own vomit. I sob, but there is no one to never mind.

I wonder if I will die and I don't understand why I'm like this. I've taken the pills once before, but never with so much grog. Did I forget that I had taken them once and then take them again, and again and again?

Is this the death on the water?

Answer me - Gypsy Cunt, I yell, but it sounds underwater. I vomit and I sip and I can barely swallow before I vomit again. It's in my hair, everywhere, and I think that I will probably die.

...And Geoff can go and fuck himself and jerk off and take his bleeding fucken heart and offer it up to the virgin fucken Mary.

I don't care if I die, except for Grandad and Mum.

Probably it doesn't mean anything at all, the un-fat earth, and probably the death on the water is a crock of ashen blackbird shit.

~ ~ ~

The next day I'm still alive and I know it can't go on. Something will change or we will all die: Mum and Grandad and I, together. I decide to take charge like the unfat earth, because there's no one to know or care or never mind.

I take the happy family picture-plate of strangers and put it on the kitchen bench. I make sure the bench is clear and shiny-clean and I stand it there, between the salt and pepper, dead centre, on show, so Mum can't miss it.

Who are they? I say when she picks it up.

She turns away from me. She takes the plate and walks toward her room.

I've just made it back from the dead. I've got dried vomit in my hair and I won't be ignored.

I charge at her and take the plate. She wrestles me for it but she's a skinny nothing ghost and she can't wrestle. I hold it out to her and pull it away. I hold it out again, baiting her. She stands with her arms by her sides and her eyes bulge out of her yellow face of bones. Her skin is like old cheese, nothing about her is breathing and she is revolting. I hate her. I give her the plate because she's pathetic and I say again: *WHO ARE THEY?*

She looks at me with scared shitless bulging cat eyes. She drops the plate against the slate floor tiles and shuffles back to bed. She can't even lift her feet off the ground.

The plate is melamine. It breaks in one lightning break, slightly off centre, as I hurl it after her, hard, against the floor tiles. *You pathetic, gutless fuck*, I say, but she doesn't even turn around.

I take the broken plate and put it back in the post pack that it arrived in. I re-read the letter from the phantom Pelts.

I write directly underneath his message. I say:

I am in the picture and I know who I am.

You say you want to be in the picture (I underline in the picture) but who the fuck are you?

Chelsea.

I seal the envelope and write: RETURN TO SENDER.

I feel all smashed up. I believed in the Gypsy and I believed in Geoff. With all of my heart I believed in them and where did it get me? Minging in a bath of my own vomit. So fuck pictures, fuck everything.

Book one

Chapter five

Beyond the point of no return

Point of no return:

‘The point in a course of action beyond which reversal is not possible.’

The American heritage dictionary of the English language, 4th edn,
Houghton Mifflin, viewed 25 March 2010,

<http://www.yourdictionary.com/point-of-no-return>

~ ~ ~

(Chelsea)

Pelts says: *Bring her home Shells. She needs to come back here.*

I consider what he says, wondering if there's any way I could manage it.

I should never have let Annie leave, right after your brother died, he says, lighting a smoke and offering me one. I've just had a smoke but I take it anyway because I want to breathe in the word brother.

It didn't feel real, he says. It was easier to think that she'd taken Teddy with her when she left. It was impossible to believe that he was dead.

The cigarette smoke pours out of his mouth and nose as he speaks. He doesn't pause to blow it out. *It was so fast, he says. First you were all here, then Teddy was dead and you were gone. Annie up and left on the heel of it all so in my mind's eye I skipped the horrible end. I imagined you were still together.*

I'm smoking fast, giving myself a headspin. Pelts' ciggies are a lot stronger than mine and I feel tingly and sweaty, like I might throw.

I was still here, you see, so I had all the happy memories. Annie disappeared fast and it was like she took the horror with her. Probably sounds stupid but it's fucken true, dead set.

After she left, I would wander along the foreshore where all the beach-boxes are. That's where we used to walk, see, and it reminded me about the good stuff. I'm no fucken psychologist or anything but she left straight after, she had no time to remember that there was good.

I feel like time has stopped. I'm aware of my breathing and my pulse but everything else is still. I can't remember Teddy, not in pictures, but somehow he's a part of everything I know. I

can feel him but I can't see him. I'm frightened to ask anything about him because if I ask questions he might vanish. If I push he might disappear.

I've always felt Teddy, you see, I just never understood that this walking-beside-myself feeling was my own brother. Now there are words for the shadowy feeling. It was real before but untouchable, a smoky haunting that I couldn't shake. Now I understand what the ghosting is, but it's not enough. I want more but I'm scared shitless.

Pelts sucks hard on his cigarette, squashing the butt between his thumb and middle finger, squeezing a bit more out of it. *Fuck me, the dreams we had*, he says, his fingertips trembling. He ashes his ciggie with a firm tap tap to shake off the quivering and a rattly laugh echoes out of him. He's scared too, we're both freaking out.

We'd walk past all the yuppy punks on their beach-box verandahs, sipping their gin and tonic and watching the sun disappear for the day. I'd tell Annie she deserved it all: it'd all be hers one day because she was so beautiful, absolutely fucken stunning and so good, so clear in her heart and tender to you kids, so fucken tender.

Pelts death sucks on his fag, pauses again. *She probably didn't know that I was dreaming it for me too, but it was impossible not to dream about being with her. She deserved everything and I wanted to give it to her because she was the duck's guts, an absolute pearler, breaks my heart to hear she's so broken.*

He presses the butt into the ashtray, holding his breath and pressing firmly. *Bring her home Shells*, he says, blowing the idea out fast with the smoke.

~ ~ ~

First things first, I think, as I rattle home on the bus. It's a great place to think really, nothing in the way of the thinking but the stop-start of other passengers getting on and off.

I open my wallet and take out the card that Joan gave me all those months ago, well hardly months now, nearly a year ago, and I can't believe that, another year of stagnant nothing. I can't remember Joan's face; I can only remember that she is red and shiny. I have dreamt her so many times that I have turned her into a shiny-red dream.

Probably she's not even there anymore. Probably it's too late to ask for help but I will ask and it will not be a dream. I will ask for Mum's sake, not for my own, because her life is a sack of horseshit, not even a life anymore really. If there is some good in returning her to the place where my brother died, I will do it, and of course I want to go there too, so I can get a picture for this feeling that is Teddy.

I don't know how to say any of this to Mum because she never told me about Teddy, she never mentioned him, and yet he has always been moored between us. I'm frightened to talk about Teddy in case Mum gets worse, but I can't imagine how she could get any worse. I don't even know what worse would look like.

Pelts is right, we need to go back, and we need to do it before Mum sails into the eye of the storm, into the rip. We need to do it before she's lost forever. Pelts tells me about the treacherous passage of ocean between the heads, the sea passage; he knows how many ships were lost in the rip. If we're not talking about Mum, that's what we talk about, sea stories, because other people's history is safe ground.

Pelts spouts the stories like a sea prophet. He has loads of books; he even has paintings of some of the lost vessels. Just think, all those dead bodies swirling in the water, loved ones,

all mixed up in the black wash, and no one knows how it ended for them.

I want to know where Teddy is buried. I want to know if I saw him die. Surely I would remember that, seeing your brother die must be unforgettable. Unanswered questions swirl in my stomach like bodies in the water and I know that there is a time limit. I know that if the tide changes I may not be able to get Mum back. Teddy will be lost to me forever and Mum will be too deep, too far out, beyond the point of no fucken return.

If I lose Mum then I'll have no one. Well I'll have Pelts but he's more like the gatekeeper because the actual memories belong to Mum and perhaps to me, except that I can't remember them. At last everything feels like it's beginning to fit together in the right way but at the same time it's more wrong than ever.

I force myself to call Joan because there's nothing left, nothing but the sure feeling that Mum will die. This is my point of no return and I can't second-guess it. I pick up the phone in a panic, wondering whether I'm already too late.

When I hear Joan's voice on the phone I start crying. I can barely get the words out and I have them written on a piece of paper. I am so relieved that she is actually real and I didn't imagine her. I am so glad that this is still the right number and I am frightened that she won't remember me, or she won't be able to help me. When I hear her voice I lose it completely, spilling my guts and blathering into the phone.

I saw you at the market a year back, maybe two years ago now. You were wearing a red scarf. I pause because clearly the scarf is irrelevant. I laugh at myself, just one laugh and then I stop because I'm laughing and crying and she'll think craziness runs in the family.

My Grandad was crying. He was hysterical, I say. You gave me your number. I need help with him so that I can take Mum away, just for a

week, two at the most. If I don't take her now I will lose her forever and then I'll have no one.

Joan barely has time to say: *I remember you.* I'm not used to asking for help and I'm out of my skin. I'm frightened that people will find out that I'm responsible for Mum and Grandad. I'm frightened they'll think I'm not capable and they'll take Grandad away for good; they'll send me back to school and lock Mum away somewhere. But if I do nothing, I'll lose Mum anyway, so this is the lesser of two evils. It's a trade-off but still a desertion, a disloyal, hideous walking away.

Can someone mind Grandad? I sob. Someone nice. Somewhere safe, where he can't wander off. He's mostly really easy as long as you explain what's going to happen before it happens, otherwise he panics. He loves Bolognese, spaghetti Bolognese. It's his favourite.

Joan says: *Chelsea it's okay. It's going to be okay. I'm going to come and see you later today: I finish work at five. Give me your address. Don't go cleaning up or anything, not for me. I'll be there after work and we'll sort it out. When do you need to go? It's going to be okay honey, trust me.*

As it turns out, respite care is an option for Grandad. I don't have to book him in to a nursing home permanently. I am entitled to four weeks of respite relief per calendar year, as long as Grandad is assessed as meeting the criteria, and that's Joan's job so she says don't worry about that, she does the paperwork on the spot, she says that's the easy part.

She brings hot coffee for us, a warm chocolate for Grandad, and a cardboard tray of little cakes, custard tarts with glazed strawberries, chocolate éclairs, vanilla slice. Grandad eats them while we talk and I fall in love with Joan.

I realise that there are angels, they are real people, walking and breathing among us; forget about religion and bearded prophets, I'm talking about a real woman in jeans and a silky floral shirt, someone who lives her work and works her life

with the same enormous heart, loving strangers like they are her own people, flesh and blood love, patting Grandad's hand and cleaning the cake off his chin, making him laugh like they're old pals: that's Joan, my angel, and I will love her until the day I die.

I tell Grandad that it's Joan's job to make holidays for people and that he has been picked to have a turn. I tell him that there will be people to play cards with him, just like Geoff used to do, but more people, all his own age, and music concerts and lovely food, lots of lovely food, and ladies to make cups of tea for him, a real holiday.

Grandad says: *Are you coming with me?* Five fucking words: break my fucking heart.

No, I say. It's for people like you, people who have worked hard their whole life and earned a holiday.

I will go if you say, he says. Six words, gutting me senseless, so that for a moment I think the dementia isn't real. I imagine that he can switch it on and off because, in that fucking hideous moment, he understands everything. He understands that I am abandoning him and that I have no choice, and he says *okay* because he knows that I would never do this if there were another way. For those few moments, it's like he's back from the land of the confused, he's perceptive and rational and kind: he's really back, just for a minute. I'm overcome and I try to explain it to him.

I need to get Mum better, I say. *She'll die if I don't help her.*

But the moment is gone. Grandad stands at the window, one hand against the glass. The wind in the magnolia tree flutters like purple and white birds and Grandad fiddles distractedly with his balls. Perhaps he sees past the strange birds to another time. Perhaps in his mind's glazed eye he sees a time and place he knows like the fluttering, somewhere purple and white, but

he has no words for purple and white places; there is no language for it.

~ ~ ~

I ring Pelts and I tell him we'll come. *You'll need to pick us up, I say. I have to sort Granddad out first and then we'll come. She's bad, I say. I have told him that Mum was sad but never quite how bad. She's really bad, I sob. The person that you tell me about, that's not her anymore. The really beautiful one that you talk about: she's gone, but you can't judge her; you can't be disappointed by her because she can't help it, she's gone past the point.*

Somehow it's easier to tell Pelts the whole ugly truth over the phone. Then I don't have to see him suffer for it as well. *I don't know if anyone can help her but she's my Mum and you can't be mean to her. She can't get up for days at a time and her hair is greasy and her breath is bad. She can't talk to you and her eyes can't look at you but you can't think she's disgusting and horrible because she's my Mum. Her skin is yellow and wrong but you can't be mean to her because she can't help that she looks revolting.*

I love her Shells, he says and he's crying too. I could never be mean to her. I've loved her forever.

She might fight us, I say. I've never tried to take her anywhere. I've never made her get out of bed or go out of the house. She might fight.

We'll cross that bridge if and when, he says. I hear the metallic churn of the flint as he lights another smoke; he doesn't wrap his lips around the butt properly and I hear a whistling sound as he sucks it in.

I've waited nearly twenty years for her to need me, he says blowing smoke into the phone, like a gust of wind. I've never been game to move or even go on a holiday in case she showed up. You say the word, he says. I'm there.

~ ~ ~

Taking Grandad to respite care is horrible. It's a week to the day since I first talked to Joan and people usually wait months. Joan said there was an unexpected opening and I was on the emergency list. She pulled some strings. I know it.

Grandad cries when I say that I'm leaving. The crying turns to bellowing and he thrashes around, whacking Joan in the face, knocking her glasses hard into her nose. Joan takes her glasses off and it looks as though someone has clamped the bridge of her nose, puncturing it on either side. Blood drips down to her mouth. *It's okay Ted*, she says. Her eyes are watering, washing down her face so that it looks like she's crying blood. *Chelsea will be back soon Honey. It is morning-tea time now and we have chocolate cake today. I'm going to make sure you get a really big piece.*

Joan turns to me. *You go whenever you are ready*, she says quietly, wiping blood from the corner of her mouth. *I won't leave him alone. I'll stay with him.*

He will be really tired if he's had a blowout like this, I say. *He'll need a sleep in the afternoon*, I sob. *He gets weepy after he lashes out because he's sorry but he can't remember why.*

Joan takes my hand. *I will love him for you Chelsea*, she says. *I promise.*

I kiss Grandad on the head. He is still and he doesn't respond. *I love you*, I say and I'm patting his hand but I'm talking to Joan too. I kiss Grandad, once on each cheek and then on his head. *He likes to look out the window at the trees*, I say.

Then that's what we'll do, says Joan. *We will have tea and cake near the garden window. You can have my cake too, Teddy, but don't tell anyone. It's our secret.*

I heard that, says one of the other residents. He is all smarted up in charcoal slacks and a green shirt and tie, different shades

of green. His thick, silver hair is slicked back, parted on the right. He is like something from another time.

Can't get anything past you Bert, says Joan. Bert was a teacher for fifty years, secondary school boys. Can't pull the wool over your eyes, can we Bertie?

Best you get some ice on that nose as soon as possible, says Bert, wandering off to find a seat.

I'm glad Grandad is in a trance because if he could see Joan's bloody face he would take fright all over again. I squeeze her hand a last time and run. Between the respite care and the train station I stop, vomiting explosively into a bush: grief vomit, fierce as fuck.

When Pelts arrives at my place I am sitting on the front step with a fag and a vodka lime soda, still crying but softly now, exhausted. *Replacing lost fluid*, I say laughing, holding up the glass. He laughs too. I tell him about Grandad. I tell him that leaving him is the hardest thing I have ever had to do: the worst day of my life.

You could bring him to my place, says Pelts. He can come too, he adds. He lights himself a smoke. I flick mine into the fish ferns and he offers me another. Wait till you see her, I say, leaning my head against the cold house bricks. She needs both of us.

Have a rest while you're with me, he says. Let me help you Shells. Just sit on the beach and have a fucken rest.

I shrug my shoulders.

I owe you that much, he says. I knew your Dad was an unstable motherfucker and I should have done something about it. God knows I feel responsible for this mess.

Was he that bad? I can't remember him.

We're all that bad, says Pelts. All of us, conundrum and contradiction, good and bad, but he made shitty choices or no choices

at all. He was a lazy, bong-smoking, waste of space. He didn't look after you guys. He had no fucken idea how lucky he was. ...Sorry.

It's okay, I say. I don't remember him. It makes me sorry for Mum, that's all, because she deserves someone to be good to her. You can't judge her. She looks whacked out and disgusting but you have to remember that she's really beautiful.

~ ~ ~

We go inside. I have the bags packed next to the door. Pelts carries them out to the car. When he comes back in I've mixed us a drink and I pass him one. We clink our glasses together; we drink them fast because we need to get this over with.

Mum's eyes are open when we go in and I walk towards her. She's just a crease under the covers, a nothing, so skinny. Her lifeless hair is strewn around her bony face, her mouth is open and her teeth look grey against the white pillowcase. Her blank eyes stare at the veneer wardrobe, wide dead eyes bulging freakily out of her yellow face. The room smells like a dead cat.

We're going on a holiday, I say through nervous tears.

Mum doesn't move: she doesn't look like she's breathing and I panic that she's dead, I've left it too long. I rush over and push my hands down hard on her chest. She squirms slightly and I kiss her, my stomach knotting with relief, with the horrible reality of her wretchedness. *I have brought someone to see you, I say, seeing the misery afresh through Pelts' eyes. My voice is shaky and I'm crying hard. We're going on a holiday.*

Mum doesn't respond. Pelts moves up behind me. *Hi gorgeous,* he says, kissing Mum on the head. *I'm taking you girls to my place for a rest. I've been waiting for you to call me Annie, nearly twenty fucken years I've waited for you to ask me to come, and I can't wait anymore.* He pushes Mum's awful greasy hair away

from her face and kisses her head again. *It's my turn to look after you now.*

Pelts scoops Mum up in his arms, doona and all. She drops her head against his chest. I thought she would fight but seeing her in Pelts' arms makes me realise that was impossible. The fighting is over and done. I only hope we're not past the point.

~ ~ ~

Every morning, Pelts goes into Mum's room and carries her to the bath, washing her hair and her body. She lies in his arms like a dead doll. Pelts brushes her teeth and her fragile gums bleed as she spits into a glass: it's more like a dribble really, she can't even spit.

At the end of the first week he shaves her legs. I walk past the bathroom door and catch sight of him holding one of her legs up out of the water, running a razor carefully along her calf. I think I can see a smile rising in her cheek, but it may just be the morning light and the dimpled glass of the bathroom window, catching her face unevenly.

After the bath, Pelts takes Mum into the lounge and settles her on the long leather couch, putting cushions behind her head and a blanket over her legs. He gets most of the wet out of her hair with a blast from the blow dryer, and then he brushes it through carefully and ties it in a ponytail. *You used to wear it like this all the time, Annie-girl, he says, driving me crazy because you're so fucken beautiful.*

I glance at him the first few times he says those things because I think he's doing it for me. I think he's talking to her like that because I put the hard word on him, because I don't want him to think she's revolting, but he doesn't seem to worry whether I'm there or not.

He talks to her, patting and kissing her, puffing up her pillows. It is a sunny room and he turns the couch on an angle to catch all the sun, kissing her again. *Right*, he says, clapping his hands once and rubbing them together. *Breakfast.*

I am showered, up and about, and I barely know what to do with myself without Grandad stalking me. Uninterrupted showers, that's my idea of a holiday, twenty minutes, longer if the water doesn't run out and nobody needing me. I had imagined I'd be busy with Mum but Pelts has taken her on and I feel as if there's no place for me. No one needs me and I'm not sure what to do.

I make a pot of tea and Pelts cooks bacon, eggs and sausages. I'm not much for big breakfasts so I just have some toast but he cooks enough for the three of us and he manages to get some into Mum. He talks and talks until she opens her mouth and eats for him, and then he eats whatever's left, talking all the while, reading the paper and chatting about the news, about the bright orange egg yolks, about what a great local butcher he has: *Best sausages on the peninsula by a long shot.*

He doesn't mind that Mum doesn't talk back; he just keeps it rolling along, calling her Annie-girl and sweetheart and telling her how beautiful she is all the time. He says: *You going for a walk Shells?*

I nod, as if that had been my plan all along, and he passes this on to Mum, as if she can't hear because she doesn't speak. *Hear that? Shells is off for a walk down the beach, just like you used to do, Annie-girl, traipsing your tracks around these parts like a fucken sheep dog. Don't tell me you don't remember that. You had all the energy in the world. I couldn't keep up.*

That first day Pelts gives me some cash; he asks me to buy a few things for dinner on the way back. *Don't rush*, he says, *I don't need to get the lamb on until two or three. Buy yourself some*

lunch and something nice: a new top, a pair of shoes, some polka-dot bikinis, whatever you want.

And that's the routine, locked in on day one, breakfast and morning sun together, then I disappear for three or four hours and later we have dinner together and watch the sun disappear, early dinner and some red wine, maybe a fire if it's cold or just for the sake of it. Best holiday of my life.

I don't know what happens during the day because I'm not there and when I arrive back, mid-afternoon, Pelts' greeting is always the same: *Better get cracking with the dinner then ay?*

Sometimes I peel and chop the vegetables. We have a beer and chat about where I've been. Pelts yells it all out to Mum, waking her up if she starts dozing off. He tries to keep Mum awake during the day so that she can sleep at night without so many pills. It's a relentless commitment. I've watched him pick her up and carry her outside if she looks sleepy. He takes her out into the sandy sea air, talking to her all the while. He places her on the thick grass and picks up a Ti tree branch, or a flowery stem of the Chilean jasmine that grows along the fence. *See how the leaves droop down and then curl back up at the bottom, just like the sea nettles I showed you in the book. Hold it Annie. Smell it,* he says, placing it in her hand.

Sometimes he is busy getting the vegetables ready for dinner and so he calls out to her, loudly, insistently, so she doesn't doze off: *Did you hear that Annie-girl,* he says. *Shells brought a new shirt, light blue?* Then he nods at me: *Put it on - go on - show your Mum.*

Some days Pelts won't let me help with the dinner. He says: *Leave this to me; it's nice having people to cook for.* He says: *Have a bath; put your feet up and read the paper; grab yourself a beer; I've got this.*

After dinner, with full bellies and a glass of wine, we all sink a bit lower in our chairs. Pelts holds Mum's glass up to her lips

and launches the past. He sets it sailing into the room like a pretty yacht and I can't keep my eyes off. I can't remember how he starts because there's no ruckus, nothing staged. Suddenly the past is sailing in front of my eyes and I'm not sure where it came from.

Mostly he talks about Mum, about how hard she worked and about Teddy and me. At first, when he mentions Teddy, Mum cringes. She glances at me, wide-eyed, and then she cries awhile, curling herself into a ball and facing the back of the couch.

You have a good cry Annie-girl. I don't think you ever had the chance for that. He was a fucking great kid.

I love that Pelts distinguishes between *fucken* and *fucking*. *Fucken* is an everyday descriptive, but *Fucking* is special: he saves it for the big stuff.

Mum cries louder and Pelts keeps talking. *He was a man before his time, wasn't he Annie-girl, because his Dad was as useless as tits on a bull. But Teddy made up for that sack of shit ten times over. He was your right hand man, helping you out with Shells, and you've got every reason to sob your guts out about that. You gave him every bit of love you had and I've never known anyone as full of love, 'cept perhaps Shells, he says, throwing me a wink. She's a gem alright but you know that already, don't you Annie-girl?*

Pelts moves the tapestry rocking chair a bit closer to Mum's long couch. He pats her forehead and strokes her hair and she cries more quietly. *It's okay my angel. It's my fault things are so hard. I should never have let you go away by yourself, just after you lost your boy and no-one to look after you. That's my fault and I'll make it up to you for the rest of your life. I should never have let you go.*

Pelts refills our wine glasses and no one speaks, so he goes on. *It's as bad as what Dean did: me letting you go. I didn't do anything*

to stop you leaving and that's as bad as all the shit he did, or didn't do. Lazy son of a fuck.

I start asking questions, of course I do. I want to know everything, of course I want to know, and Pelts can only tell me that he drowned, Teddy drowned. Dean took me away from the beach and Teddy drowned. He says that the rest is Mum's story. *And you'll have to tell her soon Annie, he says, while she can still see and touch all the places you're talking about, before climate change ups its anti and the Mornington Peninsula disappears altogether.*

I say: *Is it true, that it'll go under?* I am panicking that I'll never know where my brother is buried.

10 feet by 2050 they reckon, says Pelts, and Mum looks at us both intently as if we're speaking a different language and her life is on the line. C'mon Annie, you gotta tell Shells. They're her stories too, after all, and the waves don't stop washing in for anyone.

Then he starts on something new, like Dean being a useless lazy fucker, or Bullser screwing the town with dope, and so it goes, night after night. During the day I walk and walk in lost time, picking up seashells and turning them over in my palm, sitting on the shore and rubbing my hands through the shell-gritty sand, waiting to see if Teddy will wash in. I cry for Grandad, lost in his own time. Two weeks come and go like the tide as I am pulled between past and present.

I have to go back to Grandad, I say as we sit around together, empty plates at our feet. I am interrupting the onset of the past but I have no choice because Grandad's absence is like the undertow, as strong as the pull of the past, and I need him back with me, back where he belongs.

He can come here too, says Pelts. I owe you at least that much, and what am I going to do in this big house without my girls? C'mon, he says. Let me do this. If things work out, you can sell the other place

and have some money for yourselves, stay on here... Please, just think about it.

I don't need to think about it. I want to stay. It's a relief, having someone else to love Mum, and I can't walk away from that. The next morning I speak to Joan on the phone, just as I have done at least twice a day, every day. When Mum is settled on the couch, Pelts and I head back to get Grandad.

We go to the house. I pack Grandad's stuff and some more things for Mum. There's nothing else I want for myself. If I had a photo of Teddy I would take that but it's only now I realise that we don't have any photos. I've never noticed before because it never mattered before.

When we arrive at the Oldies' home, Joan is at the front desk, waiting to greet us. Grandad looks healthy enough, clean and well fed, but I can tell by his eyes that he's had his fair share of blowouts and he is quieter overall. It will take some time for him to forgive me although, of course, he doesn't remember that he needs to.

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The first day Grandad is a bit disoriented, respite care and then this unfamiliar house and garden, it's all too much. He wets the bed during the night and I spend the morning getting him showered and washing his bed sheets. I stick around after the breakfast is cleaned up because Grandad is pacing from window to window, pushing his face against the glass and peering out, as if the windows were portholes.

Off you go Shells, says Pelts.

I stammer something about Grandad but he cuts me off: *I'll work it out as I go, he says. I imagine that's what you had to do. Everyone needs some time of their own and you've got some catching*

up to do. I won't be taking no for an answer. Pelts sounds slightly rough and unfamiliar but he smiles kindly when I turn to him.

I walk a long while, all the way to the back beach, and then I sit on the shore, sifting shell-gritty sand, sifting everything and nothing, everything I know but have no words or pictures for, everything, and the blank dead nothings.

I am better with Grandad here. He loves the mornings and the nights, sitting around and talking. Mostly he listens but he comes alive with the listening, like fresh wood on a fire. Sometimes he joins in. Sometimes he is on the money and sometimes he is away with the fairies. Pelts and I take turns to play cards with him while we talk.

It is mad-hatter's party. Mum doesn't join in the trips down memory lane although she eats and drinks a little and she responds to what Pelts says, crying mostly, sometimes smiling, and both together. I hang on to every word that comes out of his mouth as if he is a cult leader, a sea-god. He makes sense of everything that I know without knowing. He makes pictures of what I see, turning my thoughts into stories.

Grandad interrupts with a story from the war or a tale about the horse races. He talks as if he is in the moment, as if he can see and touch all the people from the past, as if we are all there and here together. He marches on with his ghosts, thunders home on the straight, as if forty or fifty years is nothing.

I find myself talking too. Pelts asks questions about Mum going downhill, about Grandad losing his marbles, about school and Geoff and the Gypsy. He gets me going and I remember things that I would rather forget and there is a forgetting forgiveness in the telling, something like relief.

Sometimes I lose it and laugh, at the strange stockpot of our stories, at the strange collection of us. Sometimes I smile and cry together. Mum holds her wine glass up to her mouth as we speak, taking tiny, breathless sips. I don't look at her. I look at

Pelts. She doesn't look at me. She looks at Pelts, or at her feet, flexing her toes nervously under the blanket.

Book two

Chapter one

Awry

Awry:

- '1. In a position that is turned or twisted toward one side; askew.
2. Away from the correct course; amiss.'

The American heritage dictionary of the English language, 4th edn,
Houghton Mifflin, viewed 14 September 2010,

<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/awry>

~ ~ ~

(Chelsea)

Pelts settles back in the chair and starts talking. In these moments, at night in front of the fire, Pelts talks about Mum as if she's not here. I suppose it's his way of trying to make her talk; he is pushing her, challenging her to respond.

I'm dumbstruck, awestruck, firestruck. I'm gagging for it, as Pelts says.

Mum listens. Sometimes she cries. Usually she falls asleep. Pelts puts a blanket over her and keeps talking. He talks about her as if she's not the person lying on the couch, and I suppose she's not: there's not much of her left.

~ ~ ~

(Pelts)

When Annie left it was hard to believe she'd been there at all. I felt washed out with the fucken grief.

Dean didn't talk about it.

Paddy mentioned her on one occasion. It was about four weeks after she left and we were laying the footings for the units at Bluff Road. The radio was on and everyone was working away nice and steady so I wasn't paying too much attention.

Paddy had his head down, concentrating on the work, and he asked Dean if he'd heard from her. He said it real casual. Dean took a concrete stump, nearest thing close handy, but fuck-me, have you seen one of those things?

He came at Paddy from the side, knocked him out, lucky he didn't kill him. For a minute I thought he was dead, on my work site. I went off my trolley. I told Dean: *You get off my*

building site and never come back. Piss off and don't you dare show your face, any-fucken-place where I'm in charge, ever a-fucken-gain.

I was fucken ropable.

I would have taken him back if he'd asked, because I had a soft spot for that useless bastard, but I'd told him to go and he only needed to be told once. He was a proud son of a bitch, real proud. He would never crawl back and beg forgiveness. That's why he didn't chase Annie I reckon, because he wasn't the grovelling type.

Breaks my fucken heart that things went awry. I like that word, awry. I used to say it about the dodgy bits of timber, the warped bits that the bastards would tuck away in the middle of a bundle. Now I say it about everything. Awry.

Annie loved you kids more than she loved Dean and he put himself in the way of that love: it was a deadly move. That's why things got bent out of shape between Annie and Dean, between Dean and everyone in the end, because he turned into a crooked motherfucker. Scuse the language.

~ ~ ~

I'm jumping ahead, though, that's the thing. I'll start at the beginning...

Annie came over to bring me some dope. I'd prefer to leave the dope out of the story but I said I'd tell you the whole truth and the dope is the whole fucken story, give or take.

Annie was getting the gear from *Bullser* - Steve Bullrani, young bloke, son of the property developer *Bullrani*. He was the bloke dishing out the heavy stash. It wasn't local dope; he brought it in from elsewhere.

Bullser was a real entrepreneur. He didn't smoke the shit himself but he liked to talk-the-talk with the blokes who did. I

overheard him many a time, down the Wharfie. We all hung out at the Wharfie. It was the name for the place, as well as for the people, all of us who met at the Waterfront Pub. It's real upmarket now, twenty-five bucks for a fucken hamburger. Back then it was rough as guts.

Bullrani tried too hard, but he was the bloke with the choof, so all the wharfies were on civil terms with him. He was in the thick of the social scene but he was only on the edge of it. I mean we were all a bit awry, but Bullser was a different kettle of strangeness altogether.

Things were coming to an end between Annie and Dean, so she was at my place more and more. I would never touch the smoke if Annie was around, or if I was looking after you guys. Who needs dope when there's Annie?

I liked having you kids around and I was glad Annie wanted to be with me. Dean was as useless as tits on a bull. That's sounds a bit rough, I mean, it's probably not the information you're after but it's the truth. He was a real fucken sluggard.

Now that's a word – sluggard - pure gold.

As time went on Annie told me everything. Broke my heart to see her with you and Teddy, running around, doing fucken everything, while Dean was lucky if he made it to work three days a week and dead-set useless if he did rock up. Reckons he had chronic back pain. Debatable. Chronic fucken lazy, I reckon, and a liar.

At the start he was good though, in the beginning he was all right. You should remember him like that because later on he was fucked. It was impossible to know when he'd turn but it came to be a dead-set certainty that he would lose his shit.

We'd work at a paranoid pace, with the radio turned down so that it was just humming, looking over our shoulders with half an ear out... half an ear, that's what Paddy ended up with after the incident with the stump.

Annie knew that she had to get away from Dean. I loved her too much to argue. I told her every day: *You know I love ya Annie, like nothing else.*

After she left, Bullser came to me. He started interrogating me. I thought it was a bit over the top that he was acting all fucken wounded about her leaving, I mean, clearly he was in love with her, we all were, but if Annie wanted him to know where she was going, she'd have told him herself.

I said: *I'm not at liberty to say.* I stared him down, made him look away first. I wanted the shifty little fucker to know that I knew where Annie was: I knew it all. It was old-fashioned injured pride on my part; even us old fuckers feel it from time to time. I couldn't bear the fact that she'd screwed that slime-ball.

I wasn't surprised that he was interested because everyone wanted to nail her... hang on, that makes it sound like we were all hard-asses. I loved her. To me she was more than beautiful.

At first I didn't get it. Annie wasn't the type to root around. I mean Dean could be a right-royal scary fuck, really unpredictable, and Annie was busy enough, just trying to manage the day to day. Sex couldn't have been high on her list of priorities.

Then I realised that Annie was fucking Bullser to get the gear. It was unfathomable, un-fucking-fathomable, that she would be interested in him otherwise. He was so uptight and efficient. He'd have been a jerky little fucker in the sack. Sorry.

My thing with Annie was special: it was different, our secret, and I loved her Shells. I didn't want to be jealous, it's not like I owned her and Dean would have been lucky if he could get it up, I reckon. She deserved some loving, that's for sure, and I didn't begrudge her the comfort. That's a shitty word – begrudge.

Look, Annie rooted Bullser because her hopeless fuck of a partner couldn't pay for his own dope. I know that's your Dad, sorry, but you made me promise to tell the truth and if I make a promise I'll keep it. That's why Annie told me, and me alone, where she was going. That's why she came to me for a bit of comfort, not because she had to.

Bullser was a strange fish. It was like he didn't really want to fit in, not all the way. On the one hand, he tried really hard to be a part of it, but on the other hand he pulled away. He made people feel edgy in his company. He was a dead set oddball.

Here's an example right: he'd shout a round for twenty of us, as if he really wanted in, but then he'd say: *Catch you later fellas*, like he had somewhere more pressing to be, and probably he did, entrepreneurial fuck that he was.

Bullser talked-the-talk and he'd have a beer with us sometimes but he never got out of control. In the real world (and that's where I live), everyone has an off day, when they have too much and lose it with a friend, or an on day, when they're gagging for a good time, when the beer tastes crisp and right and it's gliding down a treat. Everyone overdoes it sometime, slurring and stumbling, losing their shit with a mate or eyeing someone's wife off, but Bullrani never did – NEVER - he was always in control. He was aloof, friendless, a sober motherfucker and always in control.

Aloof – now that's a word.

We liked to let our hair down but he was a twitchy fucker, real uptight. His shoes were always shiny, long square shoes. Most of the time he wore a jacket, as if he was a businessman. I suppose he was a businessman. He stood out. He wasn't one of us, but neither was Annie, not really.

Bullser was a dog – he pimped her – that's only my opinion but that's what you want isn't it, my opinion?

Don't judge her Shells. You have to consider what she was up against. Dean put her in that position and Bullser, the slithery little fucker, he saw his chance and he went for it, hammer and tongs.

Bullser lives in Greece now. He comes back to visit once in a while. Sometimes I see his Dad at the wharfies' reunions. It's not really the wharfies anymore, just the locals that have been here longer than five minutes. There's not so many of us these days.

We all loved Annie like she was one of us but she was better than all of us put together. I'd like to think I did everything I could but I loved her like there was a time limit on it, because I was scared fuckless I would lose her. That's how it is with angels. Sorry... Give me a sec. Sorry.

We were all desperate for a piece of her and we all used-her-up in our way. Sorry but that's the bottom of the barrel of the fucken truth.

~ ~ ~

Right, I'm back. I've got it together. I'm trying to tell it straight, that's all, and it's not so easy, but here we go again.

...I'll start at the start.

Annie brought me over the little parcel of choof. I was suffering with my fucken aching joints and she said: *Watch out for that stuff, it's not like regular dope, it's laced with chemicals and other shit. It'll blow your fucken head off.*

Actually, she probably didn't say fucken – because she was a saint and beautiful - but I'm telling the story and I say fucken like hello, that's the thing, so don't mind me, but I'll try and keep it as accurate as I can, as the crow flies and all that.

The shit that Annie scored from Bullser, it knocked me for six. I was in a bad way. I needed a bit of relief, just so that I could chill out for a while, without my raging joints. I rolled it up about as fat as my lighter, give or take - fuck-me-dead - I smoked about three quarters of it, quickly, and then I was having hallucinations. I went to the toilet, vomited everywhere, and I mean fucken everywhere. I was already under the weather, see, and I didn't even remember about the vomit until I got up in the morning to take a piss.

I did my hippy stint so I'm no drug-virgin - life was a fucken festival really. I did my acid and this and that but back then it was safe. If someone had a bad trip, it was because they'd been on the turps all day and then swallowing a tab, when their mind was shot anyway. It's like being a connoisseur of fine wine, it's in the sipping, and then we had some amazing conversations - Sin and Reincarnation, Why is Man Evil? Really fucken deep.

Heroin and all that: no way for me. I mean I did me Nam and I couldn't even push the morphine needle in. It was just a puncture kit, you jab it in like a pen, like the diabetics do for their blood-sugar tests. I couldn't do it, no way. The fellas said to me: *C'mon Pelts*, and they'd just grab me and jab it in, but it was like a twelve-gauge needle from where I was sitting so I could never do heroin or the hard stuff.

These days, I wouldn't swallow a tab of ecstasy or anything. Like I said, we had our trips but it was all safe back then, all pure, not like now, not with all the chemicals and shit, no fucken way. What's an ecky anyway? You don't touch that shit do you Shells?

I only had a crack at Dean's gear because I was having a bad spell with my aching hands. Annie brought me over the gear and she said: *Sit down. I'll get you some soup*. She was good, a real sweetheart, and I wished I'd never met Dean. I wished I

was younger and I had loads of money to offer her, and I'd buy her a palace, because she was the kind of girl you'd do anything for.

Time went by, as time does, and I had to tell myself to stop dreaming and take a step back – I had to remind myself to stop lusting after a girl, young enough to be my daughter - but we had our thing, see, we understood each-other and she loved me too Shells. I was in better shape then. I'm no oil painting now, I know.

~ ~ ~

But I'll go back a bit. That's what you want me to do, isn't it, start at the beginning? So I'll just lay it out flat, from start to finish, although nothing's ever finished with this sort of thing, ay. It's not over till it's over and it goes on and fucking on...

Oh Shells, it's crazy what I remember, now that you've got me going, strange hit-and-miss stuff, like the way she sized me up with her eyes. It was like she had a black pencil-line around her bright blue eyeballs. People pay for that shit. Don't get me wrong, looks aren't everything, but she had that in her favour from the get-go. She was blow-away. Still is.

Annie deserved everything and Dean was an apathetic fuck. They were from different planets. According to Dean, Annie had a phobia about marijuana. According to Annie, Dean was choofing it up like there was no tomorrow. He'd suck down the bong as soon as he walked in the door and then he'd sprawl out on the couch like a fucken carcass. He said: *I go to work - who does she reckon pays the bills?* He said: *Jesus Fuck-a-Duck Christ, so I like a pipe after work, what's the big deal?*

He had a habit of doing that, of putting other words in between the ones you expected: Jesus-something-Christ or whatever. It was funny. He was a funny fuck, Dean, quick

with his tongue, quick witted I mean, at the start he was anyway, but he didn't realise he was clever, or he didn't give a shit.

That's the difference between an after-dinner-splif and a bucket bong (a bucket of bucket bongs in Dean's case). Dean didn't get it. He was off his face all the time. Back then, I was having a quiet joint in the evening. It was a good way to unwind after a really physical day and it helped me sleep. I thought it was better than popping pills at least.

As time went on, Dean wasn't so quick, in fact he would say the same things, whinging, negative things, again and again, and a-fucken-gain. He changed, whittled away and then there was only anger, ugly fucken anger. I kept a few of his old sayings, though, 'cause at the start he was a funny bastard.

I mean there's nothing wrong with having a bit of a lay down after work and Dean was right, Annie was always on the go (like a fucken border collie, he said), but then she worked most nights as well as her days, so she was on overdrive, like natural speed or something. She couldn't stand him loafing around, especially when she was pushing shit uphill all day and all night.

That's why I asked Annie to clean my place, so she wouldn't have to do all the other stuff. I just paid her for her time. I couldn't care if she was looking after you guys or keeping me company.

When Annie left, we could see for ourselves how bad Dean was, he was rat-shit. In the end, he pissed everyone off. We all blamed him for her leaving because everyone loved her and he drove her away.

He was depressed by then, too, but he could've been that way a long time, only Annie would know. Dean would never admit to something like that. He'd say it was poofter-talk.

I should have talked to him about the depression thing. Now it's a bygone – woulda-coulda-shmoulda. No way of knowing whether things would be different if I'd stepped in. Might've made things worse. Anyway, there was too much water under the bridge by then, stagnant water. I'd given the fucker a million chances.

When you were born, that was the beginning of the end, the last fucken straw. After that I wrote him off, couldn't abide him any more.

Abide – is that right?

Dean was having a beer down the Wharfie – he was making out like it was a joke, the way you were born. He was calling out to everyone: *Charge your glasses – To the miracle baby - Born on the kitchen floor.* You were born late at night so this would have been the next day.

He was making out like it was something to be proud of - his not even being there – NO-ONE. He was thick as a fucken plank, a dead set half-wit. That's the closest we ever came to blows.

When he mentioned the placenta, I dragged him to the men's. I held him up against the wall by his throat. He was a skinny little bastard; that's because of the mull, it keeps you trim, explains why I'm a bit of a fat fuck now, ay, 'cause I like my tucker and I wouldn't have a bong these days if you paid me.

Anyway, I held him up by the jugular. I told him if I ever heard him speaking about Annie like that again I would END him. A woman having a baby, that's a sacred thing, certainly not for a pub full of stinkin' wharfies.

I couldn't believe Annie was alone for the birth. I was shattered she didn't ring me.

...Hang on a minute, give me a second, kills me that, sorry Shells...

You were a beautiful baby. You were at my place a lot. She couldn't trust Dean to watch you because he was always off his dial, so you came along when she cleaned my place - well first Teddy and then you too. I didn't mind. I liked to help, give her a break.

I can't believe that baby is you - it's unfathomable. I love that word, unfathomable. You were a doll of a kid, Honey. Sorry, is it weird if I call you that? I loved you guys, you see, and Honey used to be a compliment but I'm told not so much now. Where was I? Focus. Focus. Annie was a gorgeous girl, I mean she was a real beaut girl and, like I was saying, I didn't think there was any harm in a bit of marijuana but then I didn't comatose myself with the stuff. I didn't get so fully bent that I couldn't follow a conversation.

Actually that's not true - I'm skipping over the bad spell. A couple of times I fucked up and after that I pulled right back on the whole mull scene. My biggest fuck up was with Henry: that's Bob Henrikson, the plasterer. He was trying to tell me about his wife, Marg. He was really nervous, talking into his pot of beer. He was uncomfortable, talking about his wife's breasts; he was a blokey kind of bloke, left the women's business to the women.

It threw me when he said breast and Marg together. He lisped and stammered over it. He was pretty pissed and not so good at explaining things anyway. I didn't register the cancer bit at first because I was magotted. Henry's wife has got massive... but that's beside the point.

The crux of the matter is that I laughed, my terms of association were all off and I laughed when he was telling me that his wife had breast cancer. Un-fucking-forgivable.

I'm only telling you about Henry because I'm not holding back. I'm not sorting it out before I lay it on the table and I don't want to make out like Dean was the only one. I'm no

martyr, and we all had a crack at the gear, but Dean couldn't own his own fuck-ups: that's the point.

Before Bullser came to town, I would have a quiet choof at night, just to help with the arthritis, only for medicinal purposes, ay. That's what I said to my naturopath, not that she necessarily approved of it, she never said: *Go and have a joint Pelts; that'll fix you up.*

When I told her I gave it up, she said: *GOOD. Don't assume that something is good for you just because it's natural.* Sounds strange coming from a naturopath, but I knew where she was going with it. She meant: everything in its place, nothing medicinal about Sky-Rockets-in-Flight.

Dope's just a smoke screen; it covers one problem with another. When Annie left, I gave it up for good. It was the least I could do. I needed a clear mind (to wonder whether I could have done better by her, by you guys). I've done my head in about it: if I hadn't turned my brain to horseshit then maybe I could have prevented the fucking awfulness with Teddy.

Sorry but that's where I always end up – it's my stopping point, my point of no return. Sorry... give me a second.

We say about bygones, let them be bygones, but some things you can't leave and you should never forget.

Before Annie left, she said: *Go to the doctor, get some proper drugs for your hands.* I knew what she meant: give the mind-fucking shit away.

Now I've got some prescription stuff for my arthritis. I went to a specialist quack, really knows his shit, haven't felt this good in years. I still see the naturopath, too, so it's the best of both worlds. I used to think natural medicine was all incense and bullshit, but now I'm right into it. I take care of myself. I eat mostly organic and I've always brewed my own beer. Annie

used to help me with the beer. It was our best time, a really fucken nice spell.

When I go down the Wharfie, I drink the naturally brewed stuff: the stubbies with the red label. Some of the blokes think it's poofter juice but it saves me a headache and I like the taste. God, we had some good times brewing the beer. Annie was super-efficient, small hands, but strong, really capable.

When I grew the dope myself, things were okay. I knew what I was getting and I didn't fuck around with it, you know, to up the potency. It was just leaf, pure, and I mixed it up with a bit of tobacco – it was just to chill out a bit, unwind. I mean people have their glass of wine and I like that too. For me, it was part and parcel of the same thing, a bit of R & R, a chance to kick back.

I always said there's no harm in a bit of dope, but that was before Bullser got us hooked on that poisonous shit. At first, I wouldn't admit that it was getting the better of me because I'd come to rely on it. He's got something to answer for, I reckon, bringing that heavy shit into town: turning us all into space cadets.

Do you smoke Shells? Sorry, none of my business, ay, I'm just curious by nature and that's why June got tired of me – my ex-wife, June. *Mind your own*, she would say, but I thought, what's mine is yours, you know, because we were married. *You ask more questions than the Gestapo*, she said, but then she was a bit of a locked box...

I don't know what the hell was in the shit that Bullser was dishing out, but it was a far cry from your home-grown variety, a far fucking cry. The plants I had were just small bushes. I had them under the lights in my walk in wardrobe. I lined the walls with some tin foil and they grew a treat. It was just leaf, just for home use, for my aching joints.

After a while the plants got a bit light on for the good stuff and I was running out, I was out of it, see, and hydroponics is not my area of expertise. My hands were aching like a motherfucker so Dean said he would get me something decent. He said Annie would drop it off at my place on the way to her cleaning job.

Annie cleaned all the new properties for Bullser's Dad: Captain Bullser we called him. She worked at night, detailing the bathrooms before they were sealed, washing down the walls after the floors had been polished, vacuuming the plaster dust. She worked fucken hard. That's why she was always in such good shape, not much of her at all, same as you, just the same. She cleaned during the day too: she took you guys along, cleaned people's beach houses.

When Annie came to my place to drop off the stash, that's when I asked her to get rid of the other jobs and work for me. It was spur of the moment. Truth is, I'm not so fussy, but I hated to see her so black under the eyes. I asked her if she wouldn't mind telling me what she was getting for the Bullrani job and then I matched it, said I needed her two nights. It suited Annie better because I paid her cash and she didn't have to declare anything.

I pretended I couldn't manage because of the arthritis. It was only me in this big old house: it wasn't a hard job, I wasn't fussy. In the end it was cleaner than I needed it to be and I overpaid her. I liked having her around, turning my house into a home and whatnot.

I was in love with her from the start, Shells.

I wonder, in the end, if Dean fought hard enough for her but then who am I to say? Look, I've got my own broken marriage, so no one's perfect. I've made my own mistakes. June reckons that she grew out of me, out of love with me or something, or I didn't grow with her, I just stayed the same, something like

that, but there are two sides to every story and that was a long time ago, a very long time, because June was well and truly gone by the time Annie came along, and I didn't marry June so that we could turn into different people.

...Dean was a spineless fucker.

When Annie left town, he didn't say a word. He came back to work, a week or so later, and I stared hard at him, real hard – made sure he knew that I didn't need him, telling me, that Annie was gone. We were thick, Annie and I, and that's why she gave me the post-box details when she left.

Dean knew that he'd done his dash. Annie would never forgive him and she was a forgiving soul. I've got my own broken relationship and my own river of silence to follow, so I'm not saying that anyone's perfect but he was twisted, right at the heart of himself, like a piece of driftwood but dead fucken ugly.

I collect the driftwood, as you know. See all of those pieces along the mantelpiece? I collected them with Annie. I love the way the wood twists in on itself. I love the knots and the holes. I could sit and marvel at that stuff all day: the way the tide has worn it away, whittling down the weak spots so that it looks awry, on the one hand, but perfect like the essence of itself, on the other.

Annie and I would walk along the back beach, collecting driftwood and shells. We went to the beach when I couldn't bear to watch her work. I said it was good for my arthritis. So many times I've rubbed my hands over that wood and thought about her. I know every curve, every dip; you've no idea.

Dean didn't know how lucky he was. In the beginning, I thought he was okay but it didn't take long for him to prove himself a useless bastard and, by then, well, Annie and I had our own sense of connect. I'd take her word over his any fucken day of the week.

After a while, Dean stopped talking to me altogether. He knew that I could see Annie with my own bare eyes. It was no use trying to convert me. He was preaching to the choir, to the already converted if you catch my drift.

It was probably my fault that June and I fell apart. I didn't fight for June, so it's probably not fair for me to say that Dean didn't fight hard enough for Annie, but he didn't, and it was lucky June left me, really; I should be grateful, because Annie is the love of my life.

We had sex a few times, well more than a few. Probably you don't need to know that but I said I'd be honest at the outset, from the onset I promised to tell you the whole truth. The first time was just after she started cleaning my place. I bought her a book for her Birthday: *Stories of the Sea*. She didn't take the book home in case Dean went off his head but she would read it when she was here. I made sure she took some time, put her feet up.

I kept the book all these years because I hoped she'd come back. I never stopped hoping. Annie said: *Only make contact if he's coming after me*. She made me promise: she made me swear that if I loved her, I would let her alone. In the end I couldn't stand not knowing if she was okay, it was eating me alive. That's why I sent the picture-plate.

The ocean was everything to Annie, life and death. Not a day went by when she didn't go to the water, but you would know that. That's where all her little sayings come from; it was always about the sea. You know what I'm talking about: *Caught between the devil and the deep sea*, that was one of her favourites, and that's why she had to go because it was true, it was absolutely fucken true. She had too much suffering and we're all to blame in our way.

She said the sea is like God, the God-like sea, it gives and it takes away and you never know when or why, because you

can't understand, and I've thought about that a lot, and I think she's absolutely fucken right.

She loved to walk along the shore when the wind was up. She loved to be near the sea when it was windy. She said you can feel your soul in your throat, and it made you want to cry with the knowing but it wasn't sad, only you suddenly understood some stuff that only God should now.

She's the smartest person I've ever known but you know that, of course you know.

I'm older than her, seventeen years older, but she made me feel young because she's a fucken princess. I never made a pass at her – I never would. I only nailed her when she came at me for it. I never came on to her. She was out of my league.

I've never been kissed like that. Sounds fucked-up I know, like I'm a sleazy old loner, like a blow-job paperback, but it was real and you never forget. When someone like that goes down on you, you relive it, again and again.

Sorry - you don't want to know that, you don't need to hear it, but it's part of the story. She trusted me - she fucked me because she wanted it. She knew that I wouldn't go pestering her for it, again and again, even though I craved her every waking second and some of my sleep time. She knew it was her call. She knew she was safe with me.

When Annie left, she made it clear that she wasn't coming back, goodbye was goodbye, and that was the sweetest fucking goodbye I've ever known, and that's when I promised her, in the heat of it, that I'd leave her alone.

Annie wanted the heads-up if Dean was on the move, and I agreed that I would only write if he was coming after her. Dean was an unpredictable fuck so she had every right to be scared but in the end she needn't have worried because that sloth would never up-and-move of his own accord, someone

or something would have to push him. She was right to run away though because no one should live in fear like that, between the devil and the deep blue.

It hurt like nothing else and everyone hated him because he fucked things for all of us. There's a lotta blokes that still nod off dreaming about her, wake up... but you don't want to know that, you don't need to hear, so I'll just keep talking, that I can do, talk the leg off a chair.

Dean didn't deserve her, that's the bottom line. He turned into a deadshit from the dope. In the end he was stoned all the time and that's no way to live and that's when things went awry. Dean was already a bit of a firecracker, and he got a-lot-fucken-worse.

When you were born, that's when Dean really hit the skids. The dope was his life support and he didn't do much else. He worked for me sometimes, when he could get his sorry ass into gear, and I did things for him that I would never have done for anyone else. I paid him for sick days when he was stoned as a maggot, and he was already at the Wharfie by the time I knocked off, my joints fucken raging, and I'm a diabetic too, not chronic, not insulin dependent, 'cause I can't fucken stand needles.

I gave Annie extra money when things were bad, because I couldn't pay Dean if he wouldn't come to work, and he never bothered to get a doctor's certificate. He let me down, again and again, and so I would think up something that needed cleaning, let Annie suggest anything at all that needed doing, just so I could slide her the cash without it looking like a handout. That's when we started brewing the beer, better for my diabetes anyway.

When Annie left, the town died. She took parts of everyone with her. Sounds like a giant cliché but I've thought it through and it's fucken true.

Dean ruined things for everyone with his skitzo-headfuck bullshit. He thought that your brother, Teddy, wasn't his son... but you know that, obviously you know that, of course you know, so I'm not sure what I'm telling you that you don't already know, but I'm just telling you how things were, cause that's what I promised, that was the agreement.

The whole thing seems even worse, now, but how could it be worse than it was? I mean, who cares if Teddy was his or not? He sure as shit didn't look like Dean but then there are plenty of kids running around that don't look like their' Dad one iota. You, you're your Mum all over and back, fuck me dead if I don't have to remind myself who I'm talking to. With you, it's like no one else deserved to stake a claim.

Dean was as ugly as a hat full of arseholes, and worse, he was an ugly operator. He threatened Annie. You probably know that. They had a massive blowout. He was a scary bastard, ruthless, no less so on the grounds of love or whatever.

He accused Annie of fucking Bullser. He would have known, all along, that Annie was doing Bullser because he was getting more than he could afford, but something snapped and suddenly he went mental about it. He freaked out, said Bullser must be Teddy's Dad. I thought Teddy was born before Bullser was big in town but the timing's a blur, even for me, and Dean fried his mind, see.

He said he knew that you were his from the get-go because you were the 'splitting' image of your Mum (go figure the reasoning), but he always had his doubts about the boy. He threatened to deliver Teddy back to his real Dad (if Annie would let him know who that might be).

Annie threw a plate at him. He dodged, but it nicked his forehead, four stitches, right there, just near his eyebrow. I thought of her every time I looked at that crooked scar. It made him look sceptical and he was a paranoid fuck, but

Annie had balls. She took him on, right in the thick of his rage. Most blokes wouldn't have dreamt of it.

She's the gutsiest woman I've ever known.

Annie told Dean that if he so much as looked at her babies the wrong fucken way, she'd make sure as shit that he would rot in hell (she probably wouldn't have sworn though, so take out the swearing). Then he left, got his eyebrow attended to.

Dean said he would never do anything to hurt Annie. He said: *I never woulda done nothin'*. Hard to believe that he was a brainy bastard, but he was. You should've seen how he used to work out the building calculations, quicker than lightning, faster than any of the guys with proper qualifications, but he pissed it against the wall, shitted it to hell, fucken tragedy really.

Everyone was wary of him in the end because he was really snakey, totally un-fucken-reliable, an absolute firecracker. I sent him back to the timberyard to collect an order. It had been packed late, allocated for the afternoon run or something. I sent him back mid-morning because it wasn't ready first thing. Three hours later he came back. I shit you not. I rang the Wharfie. When he got back he started kicking the tools around like I owed him the fucken apology...

Anyway, Annie was fed up to the eyeballs with his schizophrenic bullshit. She put up with it for a long time but when he threatened Teddy: that was it.

After Dean had his eye attended to, he landed at the Wharfie, stayed until close. Then he stumbled back to Marcus's place, pulled an all-nighter, not a wink of sleep in forty hours. The next day he took you, and your brother must've paddled out in the dinghy, scared half out of his wits I reckon.

Apparently, Dean just wanted to give Annie a bit of a fright but his mind was twisted. He was pissed and bent off his head. Awry doesn't even come close. He drove away with you and

not so much as a by-your-leave for the boy. Annie was asleep on the beach, out for the count, because she worked too fucken hard.

She fucked differently after that. I know that's not the information you're after but it's part of the story. It was like she forgot how to feel. She was an amazing root, don't get me wrong, but she was all cut up, you see, angry as all fuck. She got real skinny.

Dean thought everyone knew something he didn't know. He thought everyone was rooting Annie. And then Teddy drowned; there's no recovering from that, not for any of us, especially not for Annie. Or you...

And now there's nothing we can do, we just have to live with it Shells, because it's by-the-fucken-bygone. It's past fucken history, as you're well aware.

Book two

Chapter two

Cockleshell

'cock·le·shell (kkl-shl)

n.

1.

a. The shell of a cockle.

b. A shell similar to that of a cockle.

2. *Nautical* A small light boat [...]

The American heritage dictionary of the English language, 4th edn,
Houghton Mifflin, viewed 2 February 2010,

<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/cockleshell>

~ ~ ~

(Chelsea)

I want to know about Bullser. Of course I want to know.

Bullser is in town as it happens, visiting from Greece, and Pelts says he'll talk to him. Pelts says he doesn't want me anywhere near that slimeball but he promises to tell me everything, no holds barred.

He says: *I've laid my ugly mistakes on the table. Why would I hold out on you now? Plus I'm invested too Shells, I love her as well, and I owe you big time, I'm well aware of that.*

I don't want you anywhere near that fucken weasel, he says again.

~ ~ ~

(Bullser)

It was a head fuck of a place. The nothing killed everyone's conscience. If you drove down the streets late at night, if you opened your windows and drove slowly, there was only the smell of pancakes and the nothing.

They churned out pancakes like it was a craze, a sweeping trend, pancakes with lemon and sugar, maple syrup, jam and cream. The town could have been named after it: *Blairgowrie – home of the pancake.*

I didn't go for the pancakes - I'm a garlic and tomato man. I like Mum's pan-fried meatballs with the diced tomatoes and the fresh basil. I love the silverbeet and fetta parcels, with the buttery garlic pastry and the caramelised onion. They smell like Mum's sweat, the pastries, sweet, slightly claustrophobic.

Point is - the pancake town was not for me. It was festering in the nothing of its own nothing. They didn't seem to realise that the rest of the world had picked up pace: pancakes at home were a thing of the past.

Mum and Dad were right at home. The seaside life suited them. Wog Mums like mine, they make everything from scratch, and Dad always said: *If you want a decent tomato, grow it yourself*. I wasn't like them. I wasn't prepared to put in the hard yards.

Sometimes I kid myself that it wasn't that bad but it was – the place was brimming with nothingness, it was overwhelming. At first, all I could think about was getting the fuck out of there but then I met Annie and I probably would've stayed in that ditch forever, just to be near her, only because of her, I would have stayed, but then she left and I bailed too, within a few days of her leaving.

Okay that's bullshit, but it's what I've taught myself to remember. Truth is I hung around for two years, in limbo, waiting for her to walk back through my door. In my heart of smashed up cockleshells, I knew that if she left without saying goodbye, she wasn't coming back, but I hung around for a bit anyway, just in case.

I'm skipping over the being together and the leaving because it's over and done. I loved her. So what. Everyone thinks love is such a positive thing but it's a piece of shit, a destructive chemical mix, it fucks with your ability to reason.

Maybe I wasn't in love with her anyway. I was in love with the game and the sex. The bottom line, the long and the short of it, I liked to be in control and Annie prostituted herself to get dope for a deadshit.

When we moved to the nothing town, I was in my last year of school. My parents wanted me to get to know the locals, establish some friendships. I wanted to stay in Melbourne, see the year out there, but they would have none of it. They wanted me to learn the family business. *There is so much opportunity here*, they said, but all I could see was a maze of Ti tree, dirty sand.

The people were different. The more I got to know them, the more different they seemed: weird, slow-moving ocean people. At school, when the bell sounded, everyone lifted their heads like a cool breeze had just rolled off the water, but no one moved; no one hurried to pack up their books, even the teacher only paused and then kept on. One lesson rolled into the other because no one gave a shit. It wasn't just the dopers.

In the beginning, I spent most of my time in the bungalow. It was in the back corner of the yard, up against the fence. All the original beach places seemed to have bungalows: semi-detached living Dad called it, more like semi-detached strangeness. Suited me though, I suppose, the separateness.

Mum and Dad lived in the big, old house at the front. They were building their dream home a few doors down and when they moved into that, they were going to knock the old place down, build a dream for someone else.

It was a ghost town, full of fibro houses, old and empty, cobwebbed and depressing. It was like something left over from a boom period, except that the boom must have been a dream - the nothingness made it impossible to believe that the place was ever pumping.

Dad was under the impression that it was about to boom again, a growth suburb he called it, sure-fire money to be made by the astute property developer. *It's all timing*, he said. *You just have to know when to make your move.*

I wasn't convinced.

Everyone smoked dope. They smoked it to fill up the nothing, but it was like grass, literally, didn't have any kick, so I scored some good shit from my mate Eddie. He lived around the corner from my old house, ten minutes out of the city.

I'd never been into dope, not really. I'd have the odd toke at a party but nothing serious, no breakfast bongos or anything. I

didn't plan to start dealing the stuff but I pulled some out after a few beers and they were all foaming at the mouth. Word got around that it was good and that's how I met Annie. She collected the mull for her boyfriend: deadshit Dean. He smoked a fuckload, fried his brain.

If Dean knew about my thing with Annie, he didn't let on. If he hadn't gutted his brain, he would have known because there was no way that he could afford what he was smoking. He must have known, and cockled himself into believing that he didn't. Sometimes people do that: pretend they don't know, when they know.

When Annie told me that she was pregnant, I was so angry with Dean, I was fucking ropable actually because he was making life harder for her than it already was. She already had one kid, and no fucken money. It sounds almost magnanimous except that it wasn't. I was in it up to my eyeballs. Mum says that Dad is magnanimous. She's proud just to know the word. She says it belongs to Dad because he gives without counting the cost.

I told Annie to get an abortion. I said I'd pay for it. I said all of this with the dead-shit in mind. It was a pretty crappy environment for a kid anyway – like once, when Dean and his mates had the munchies really badly, although they would say *real bad*, they broke into one of the holiday homes down the street, raiding the pantry and the freezer, arriving back to Annie in fits of laughter, with armfuls of stuff, chips and ice-creams, biscuits and assorted jars.

M-J stole a kettle, while they were at it, because his was on the blink, and a hair-dryer and some perfume for his girlfriend. Annie wasn't happy about it, especially because the young boy was still awake and she didn't want him to get wind of it. I think she was sorry that Dean didn't think to bring anything

back for her but she never said that. He was such a brainless fuck.

Anyway, that's the life I was picturing, that shitty sort of drug-fucked life, that's what I had in my mind when she told me about the baby. The thing is, water washed in and out of that place every day, the tides turned and everything came up fresh and sparkling but nothing changed, everything was the nothing-fucking same. It was a town of random wasters.

Annie knew that I loved her. She must have. You might think that I treated her like a whore but you have to remember that she was fucking me to get the gear. That's how it was, the first time, and whatever we had later on – well, it was defined by that day.

It's not a copout. I'm not copping out. It's true. You can't turn back time and I chose a bad time to make a move. After that, I couldn't ask her what she wanted unless that's all it was, pipes for pipe dreams, ghost-ship sex and smashed up cockleshells.

She never refused me, not outright. A couple of times she pushed me away. She said that it was a bad time for her, well a fruitful time really but a bad time because she was fertile and the risk of pregnancy was really high. I was weighing the dope and bagging it up. I didn't say anything because, if you didn't interrupt her, she just kept talking, and it was like a song. She went on for a while about cycles, and peak fertility, and mucus.

She was like some sort of earth mother and she was talking to me like I was another woman. It was secret-club-talk and I was enjoying myself, even though I wasn't following the half of it. She talked about her body like she was talking about tide-times, with fascination and utter respect, and she said she had tried going on the pill but it made her sick, and it made her cry all the time, so instead, she learned to know her body like the back of her hand.

When I'd finished weighing and bagging, I put the dope packets on the end of the bed. I took off my shoes and lay on the bed, closed my eyes. I didn't say a thing, not a thing. Her body was her end of the bargain, her business. I wanted flesh on flesh.

Annie left in a hurry that day. She scratched my neck, under my chin, drawing blood as if she were in the throes of passion. I had her up against the wall. Her hair was tangled in the pins, stretched like cobwebs between the islands, on my map of dreams...

It was the stillness that fucked everyone. It was like Andy's farm. Dad and I used to work there over summer, odd jobs. Andy only had one hand. Dad called him Handy. It wasn't a joke. He added the 'H' where there wasn't one, and dropped the ones that were supposed to be there. It's a wog thing.

On Andy's farm, the generator died at ten, everything shut off without warning. There was nothing to do then but wriggle into your sleeping bag, only your dick for company. That's why the Melbourne choof knocked their' socks off, because of the stillness - NO - the nothingness. It was more than stillness, bigger than silence: it was a fucking vortex.

Word got around about the quality of the gear and they begged me for more. Supply and demand, that's all it was - they demanded, I supplied. I learned to talk the talk: purity, potency, five dollars more for the happy-birthday-mix, ten dollars more for the blowjob-variety, and that was A-grade stuff, or so they all said.

I charged them all twenty bucks more than I paid for it (per gram) and I got a discount for buying in bulk, so it was win-win. I never charged Annie, though. I figured that if I didn't charge her, she would have more money to spend on herself and her kids. She obviously thought I could have done better

than that though because, when she left, there was four grand missing from my stash.

I kept the money in a tackle box. Only Annie knew where I kept the money, and anyone else would have taken the lot, of course. She took the money and left me some coloured pins, she took them from the map that I had on the corkboard. The pins were stuck into all the places that I wanted to go.

When she came to my room, I would show her the map. She must have known that I wanted her to come with me. I thought we could visit all the islands and then she could decide which one she liked best; we could live there forever, happily ever after and all that shit.

I would take her hand and make her touch the places. I'd make her push the pins further into the cork, my chest against her warm, bare back, speckled with freckles like my map of dreams.

I don't know why she left me the pins. It didn't make sense. There was no rhyme or reason as to which ones she chose, as far as I could see. I tried to plot it out (which pins and why), the possibilities (the nothingness). She left some shells in the box too, cockleshells, cracked ones, and that broke me I have to say, even though I didn't really understand.

I thought maybe she dropped the shells in the box accidentally when she reached for the cash. Annie always had shells in her pockets so it's hard to tell whether they were a sign or not. She loved the beach. It was her best place.

I'd have given her anything, silver bells and cockleshells, but she never asked for anything, except that once, the first time, and that was my mistake: I asked for something back, nothing magnanimous about that.

She didn't tell me that she was leaving town because I didn't deserve to know. I treated her like a whore and I've suffered

for that and I deserve to suffer, no doubt about it. I loved her and I don't know if that makes what I did worse, or better. I think worse.

That's the story, in a nutshell, or a cockleshell. That is the nothingness of her absence. It's the smell of the rain on the road when she left and the smell of her skin. Some people say that rain has no smell but that's bullshit, only the rain smells like what was and what might have been. *If only, if only...*

~ ~ ~

The problem was the beginning. The start was all wrong and then it defined us.

Forever after, I was frightened that she didn't know how much I loved her and I was shit-scared to tell her. If only we'd begun differently. If only I hadn't moved in on her just then, when she was desperate for the gear, when she couldn't pay, when she had no choice.

Now I'll never know if she loved me. I'll never know if she knew how much I loved her, how much I love her, I should say, because it doesn't really go away. I wasn't prepared, I suppose, and when I saw my chance I jumped right in, without a second thought for her, without a first. I was busy counting my own costs.

It wasn't pre-meditated. It started out the same as always. I went back to Melbourne on the Friday night to pick up the dope. Everyone was at Eddie's on a Friday, having a coupla pipes, a few beers. I didn't have a drink with my old mates because I had to drive, and there were always pigs on the highway. I could have stayed in Melbourne for the night but I made out like it was pressing that I go.

It didn't bother me that I couldn't have a beer with the old crew. In fact I liked being sober and straight when everyone

else was getting messy. I had a few tokes, just to get a taste of the mood, but I kept it together, kept my mind over everyone's matter, and it made me feel invincible. Power is a drug too.

Truth is: I couldn't wait to get back and see Annie. She usually came around straight away to score a load for the deadshit. I sat around and waited for her, that's all I did, waited for Annie, and when I wasn't waiting for her, I was thinking about her – the way her fine hair fell around her face, slicing in on an angle under her pale cheekbones. Her face looked like it was chiselled from stone. Her hair and eyes softened her but even when she smiled, it cut.

She was incredibly beautiful but hard as a rock. She was protecting herself and I could understand that because I was afraid too. I was afraid she wouldn't love me back and that's why I couldn't tell her how much I loved her. But she probably never loved me at all and I never gave her any reason. I was so scared she wouldn't love me that I just made sure of it. I pretended to be a hardass like her deadshit partner, but then she would have done anything for him...

When I got back from Melbourne, there was a party on. That's what Annie told me and so I went straight there. By the time I arrived, things were in full swing and I was the guest of honour, of course, because I had my backpack, chock-a-block with the goods. I stayed a bit squared off from everyone because I was dealing the dope. I sat on the grass and they swarmed around me like seagulls.

Annie didn't go to the party: it was late, she had a child, but deadshit was there. Her absence was like the nothing, depressing as fuck, full-hollow, like deserted homes and cockleshells. You can't look at those things without imagining the life that was, what might have been.

I sat on the grass for a couple of hours, stiff-backed, keeping my eyes on the prize, making sure no-one was swindling

anything, and I understood why Eddie was one step removed from the Melbourne crowd. He needed to stay aloof. He couldn't do favours for one person and not the next. It was pay up or fuck off, pure and simple.

Eddie was the best, the bomb. I learnt from the master and I thought I knew what I was doing but I was just a scared little love-virgin. I knew I was hooked all right but I figured that love was a nothing bitch and I told myself to harden the fuck up and get on with the job, dish out the stash and smoke up the nothing. I became semi-detached, like the bungalow.

Dean smoked it up that night, as usual, but Annie was back in the morning anyway, asking for more. She wanted some dope on the house. That was our first time – it was the beginning of us – a beginning that had nowhere to go, but if only...

I didn't really consider what she was saying. I'm not sure what was going through my mind, exactly, except that she was right there, and she wanted something from me. She needed me. All I could think about was kissing her. She was desperate, it was like an invitation, and so I tried it on.

Do you know what Dean will do to you? He can be vicious, she said, brutal, she added, spitting as she spoke. She left then, closing the glass door quietly, shoulders hunched. She didn't look back.

It was a fucked-up beginning.

I switched on the telly and I rolled a big number, hoping it would blank me out for a good while. I sucked it down so hard that my eyes were watering. I'd been mooching around that seaside dive for nearly three years, wasting my life in a town of seaweed and missed opportunities. The Melbourne guys didn't give a shit about me anymore. I had become a part of the fucking nothing, for fucking nothing.

The splif I rolled was fat enough for ten men. I was off my head in no time and it took me a while to register the sound of the knock. I turned and saw Annie. She was standing at the sliding glass door. I lifted my arm and motioned for her to let herself in. How long had she been gone, five minutes or five hours? It felt like she'd always been gone.

I was living in the big, old house at the front by then. Mum and Dad were living in their dream and they were letting me live in the house awhile. If I agreed to stay, they would build me a new house, right there, but only if I was committed to stay, to learn Dad's work.

I could have offered Annie a brand new start, but I thought she wouldn't want me.

Annie stepped inside and closed the door. I tried to sit up but I was feeling a bit shell-shocked. I tried to explain (about the shell-shock) but the words became ridiculous and hysterical and I knew that I was off my face. I said it a couple of times: *shell-shocked, shell-shocked*. The words morphed around me and changed shape, just like my reflection in the funhouse mirrors at Luna Park. (We used to go to Luna Park sometimes, me and Eddie and the Melbourne crew, stoned off our tits. Those were the days.) I said it one more time: *shell-shocked* and I laughed: loud, wheezy, stoned laughter, hysterical for a second and then gut wrenchingly empty.

When I stopped laughing, Annie asked me again for some gear. She said she would fix me up at the end of the week, definitely. She was chewing her bottom lip with her big, white teeth, her blue eyes were sparkling under the tears. She was pale and her breathing was off. She'd been doing some serious crying. *Dean...* she said, but then she stopped.

I wondered whether she went home and told Dean that I kissed her. Maybe she was too scared to go home without the

choof. She was staring at me like she was waiting for something.

I said: *Sorry I tried to kiss you* (especially when you couldn't pay, like you're a prostitute or something).

She stared at me, said nothing.

Tell her you love her; tell her you love her, I said to myself. But the voice inside my head didn't sound like my voice: it was all warped, close and far away, changed-up like my picture in the funhouse mirrors. I couldn't say it. I didn't say it.

She was still staring at me. I thought she was disgusted by me – flat out on the couch and stoned off my head like her loafing sloth-bag of a boyfriend. That's what the dope does, it makes you feel like everything is about you, like you're a piece of shit and there's no way out, like everyone thinks you're a piece of shit and, quite frankly, you're inclined to agree. I don't know why people smoke the shit. I have no fucking clue.

Annie started crying then, really hard, and I said: *Hey, hey, it's okay*. I stood up to comfort her but I got really dizzy and I felt like I was going to throw, so I lay down on the couch, blowing the air out of my mouth like I was blowing out candles, one at a time. I told her that I was feeling a bit under the weather. I didn't say shell-shocked this time but I thought about it and giggled. Then I thought about the nothing and I stopped.

I started to tell her about the Greek islands but I was talking like a stoned, lonely freak. I got all tongue-twisted, trying to explain, saying that I had a few tokes of the potent stuff because I was feeling like an ass. *I'm not really a smoker*, I said, and I told her that she could have the rest of that lot because I'd already had a little go at it anyway (and it was laced with some mind-fucking shit).

She was upset and it threw me. She was so tough and so fucken beautiful. She was crying and I thought she was

unbreakable. I would have given her anything. I wanted her to want me.

Annie sat down beside me, near my stomach. I was stretched out on the couch, trying to get the air in. She wiped her tears away with one hand and felt my head with the other. *You're a bit clammy*, she said. *You might be coming down with something, or maybe the stuff just doesn't agree with you. I can't smoke it*, she said, still sniffing. *It makes me depressed. It makes everyone depressed. I'll get you some water.*

She walked to the kitchen and ran the water. Then she took a tea towel from the oven door and held it under the tap, wringing it out hard, twisting it so that her triceps twitched. She stared out of the window a moment and then she came back to me, laying the cold cloth on my forehead.

You can have the rest of that lot, I said, pointing to the gear on the coffee table. *Make sure you tell Dean to mix it well with the tobacco, just crumble it until it is fine and sprinkle a little bit in, otherwise it will blow his fucken head off, and don't tell ANYONE I gave you this without payment. This is between you and me, it's only for you Annie. If anyone finds out that I'm giving the stuff away, that will be the end of me.*

She needed the dope and it got all confused with me needing her. She kissed me on the head and I cried a little because I was coming down, way too fast, but then I was as tingly as all shit and I wondered if I was still on the way up – I was crying because she didn't kiss me back and because she was wasted on that scumbag.

I wanted her to know I loved her. I wanted her to know that it was separate and pure. I mentioned the Greek islands again: *You and me*, I said. She didn't flinch. *You can bring your boy*, I added, putting my hand on her back and rubbing it gently; I couldn't resist touching her.

Go to bed, she said. *Sleep it off.*

I went to my bedroom and she followed me. I handed her two g's of the regular stuff. *Our secret*, I said. *Don't tell anyone*. I climbed into bed, fantasising all the while that she wanted to root me senseless.

Shivering, I pulled the covers over myself. I closed my eyes, lulled by her presence, but I was dizzy and the darkness made it worse. I was dipping and rising in the still darkness as if I were stranded in a cockleshell, out in the middle of the cold wash.

She sat on the edge of the bed and felt my forehead again. She was brushing the hair away from my face and I was groaning a little, between sleep and something else, but closer to sleep. When Annie pulled back the doona and took off my shoes, I worried that it wasn't really her and I wasn't really me. My bare skin was crawling with the nothing.

She said: *What is it with these shoes you wear?* Her voice was just right and her hands were good, so good. My shoes were very long at the front end with a narrow, square tip. All of my friends in Melbourne wore the shoes and I loved the way they clicked against the bitumen when I walked the beach streets. They were quite feminine and yet utterly manly.

I always walked the beach streets after Annie left me and the shoes reminded me that I belonged somewhere else. I walked the nothing streets, taking note of all the empty houses, trying to calculate the average permanent residence, per street, per block. I got confused, walking that crazy maze of backstreets – one street ghosting into the next without warning.

If I was definitely lost, and totally desperate, I would head towards the water. Somehow it was easier to find my way home from there. I could always find my way to the water because I could hear the nothing of it, like a big empty echo. I just walked towards the silence.

I would stare out, paralysed, listening to the whisper of the foamy wash on the sand. I'd freak out that I was never going to get away from there. I was as empty as the nothing, as hollow as a cockleshell. They say if you hold a cockleshell up to your ear, you can hear the ocean and so I would stand there and put a shell to my ear, but all I could hear was the nothing, all I could see was Annie. When I think of intimacy, that's all there is: Annie and the nothing.

Annie climbed under the covers with me. I wasn't sure what to do. Maybe I was hallucinating. I didn't move and I kept my eyes closed. She rubbed my neck and my back, she rubbed herself up against me, reaching her arm around my chest and pulling me to her.

You don't owe me anything, I said and I wanted to say more. It was now or never. *(I love you; I love you. Say it; say it.)*

She unbuckled my belt, pulling at it and throwing it on the floor. *Our secret*, she whispered.

I could hear the water in her whispering. I was too weak to stop her. I lay there like a dead dog. I wasn't hard but she fixed it. She did everything because I was a mess.

Book two

Chapter three

Long gone

'Long-gone has been looked up 67 times, favorited 0 times, listed 0 times, commented on 0 times, and is not a valid Scrabble word'

worknik.com – definitions, viewed 14 September 2010,

<http://www.wordnik.com/words/long-gone>

~ ~ ~

(Chelsea)

Pelts goes back to our place to get a few things for Grandad: slippers, golf clubs, and the blue toolbox for fixing things.

When he comes back, he says: *There was a young fella lurking around the letterbox; he was looking for you.*

Pelts cracks his knuckles and draws a deep breath. He says: *It was Geoff of course.*

Pelts is quiet for a moment and I don't know what to say. *I gave him a piece of my mind, says Pelts. Sorry Shells, I couldn't help it. I wanted that useless little fuck to know that he made the biggest mistake of his life, walking away from you.*

You shouldn't have done that, I say. It's none of your business.

I should be mad at Pelts for invading my privacy, but Pelts and I are all over each other's privacy. I can't muster up the anger when someone has gone out on a limb for me for the first time in... Fuck I don't even want to know how long.

I don't really care about Geoff anymore, I say in a tired voice. He seems so long ago, all of a sudden, a seaside nothing really, in the scheme of everything else.

I wonder how I stayed afloat when no one really cared about me. Mum and Grandad needed me, that kept me going, and I always believed that they would have cared about me, if they could. I never knew what I was missing until now, so how could I be mad at Pelts?

I hope you didn't tell Geoff that I spend my time worrying about HIM, I say, and I sound angry, like I do care, but it's just the old panic, panic at the memory of someone taking some of me and shitting me out like it's nothing.

I told him you're thriving Shells. I said I made the same mistake as him, walking away, well I didn't walk away but I let Annie leave and it's the same.

GUTLESS.

I said: Lucky for me I've got another chance. I said: Cowardly cunts like you don't deserve second chances.

What did he say? I ask, reluctantly.

He agreed with me, I suppose.

~ ~ ~

(Geoff)

Chelsea and I were different. Outsiders. We stuck together. We were a bit left of centre, whatever that means.

Chelsea's Mum was a depressive or something. In the beginning, I asked Chelsea about her Mum, and she said: *She's an enigma*. Then she said: *If you ask questions, I won't walk home with you*.

After that, I just talked about random stuff and I didn't ask anything. I just wanted to be near her so I tried not to piss her off. *I wish my parents were enigmas*, I said. Chelsea looked at me like she wanted to stab me, so I said: *I'm not saying your life is easier than mine, I'm just saying my parents are so in my face, I can barely even breathe my own breath*.

My parents are old school, conservative Catholics, like from the 1920's. They live in the long gone and drinking and smoking are first class misdemeanours. If they catch me with booze or smokes on my breath, I'll be in exile at Catholic-land, so I stay pure.

I'm not a smoker anyway so that's no big deal but the grog I like. I had a few beers one night at Steve's, but the aftermath with my parents was unbearable: sin and darkness, betrayal of

trust, and blah blah blah. They went mental, as if I'd nailed Jesus to the cross myself: temptation and evil, getting caught up with the pack mentality and blah fucking blah.

Chelsea swore all the time and it sounded good when she said it so I took some of it on, but it sounded too polite when I swore, almost apologetic. Chelsea looked at me sideways, giggled at me like I was a try-hard. She was right: I was trying pretty hard.

The only thing I didn't really say was cunt. Uncle Archie's mate said it at Christmas and that spoiled things for everyone. This mate of Archie's (Ron) was over from Perth for a spell because his wife gave him the flick. Mum and Jean had just finished serving the sweaty turkey lunch and Archie was talking about summer holidays. Dad said that he couldn't get any holidays until after us kids went back to school. He said that senior management had blocked out all of January, and Ron said: *What a bunch of Cunts.*

Mum lost it: she was hysterical. She was so cut up about it that we had to leave. We were all starving. I had the turkey on my fork, but we had to go. Dad bought us McDonald's on the way home. Mum didn't argue and she hates Maccas, but not as much as she hates cunt apparently.

We ate our lunch in a park across the road. It wasn't a park actually, more like an easement, dodgy as. Mum ate her fillet-of-fish between stabs of crying and deep sighs. Dad said: *It's okay. It's okay*, but you could tell he didn't really give a shit.

The plum pudding, said Mum; we won't even get to taste it. I took a lot of time, soaking the fruit in brandy: it was V.S.O.P. It even has fresh dates in it. It'll be the best one ever. Could you...

By now Dad was as close to yelling as he ever came. He said: *Could I WHAT? It's Christmas Day, not a glass of wine in sight. We're eating ... McDonalds in a vacant park for... sake.*

He wanted to say: *Fucken McDonalds*, I could sense it, and he wanted to say: *For Christ's sake*; actually he wouldn't have said *Christ* because of the Catholic business but he was looking for something punchy. He was desperate to swear, spitting his words out, staggering over them and spraying pieces of big mac over the grass. I knew that he wasn't saying everything he wanted to say because I could hear the words he wasn't saying: I could hear them lilting in the silence between the words he spoke.

Lilting, I know about it from playing the guitar. It's a gap, a missing beat. *I'm not going back to get the ... pudding*, said Dad, *and that's that*.

'Fucken pudding.' Say it Dad. Say it.

Chelsea taught me that words aren't harmful on their own. It depends how they're said, what is meant. Chelsea took the edge off cunt. When she said it, I was thinking about why. I was thinking of the words around the word. I was thinking context and intent. In Mum's case, the word was a stopping point: she couldn't get past.

Dom and the other guys would rag on me because I didn't get pissed, and Chelsea would say: *Don't worry. Those mainstream cunts wouldn't know their ass from their elbow*. I sucked the air in through my teeth, because I still got a shock when I heard her say it, but I was totally chuffed as well because she'd put us together, in the same boat, downstream from mainstream.

I felt at home with Chelsea. The dodgy side of town didn't seem dodgy at all. I couldn't smell the smell that everyone talked about: they said that the sea was stenchy over there but I couldn't smell it. I felt like I was free with Chelsea and I was loving myself sick with the freedom.

Sometimes Chelsea would hook up with Dom at the parties. It was after I'd gone home. I tended to leave before the hooking-up part of the night. My parents picked me up at midnight:

that was my curfew. Otherwise they were too tired for mass in the morning.

If things got messy, I would wait out the front. I didn't want Mum to see everyone pissing on, passing over today and into the long gone. At the very least, I tried to be right near the door when she arrived. Mum always stepped inside if she could. She waltzed in like Jesus on water, as if it was her God given right to meddle in every corner of my life.

Mostly we went to Steve's place because his Mum was never home and his Dad was long gone. Chelsea said: *You should pop a pill or something. Your parents won't smell a pill on your breath. If anything, you'll be filled with the love of Christ and they'll be over the moon.*

She twisted her long shiny hair around her finger. *You could see what it feels like to be the messiah for a night, see what all the fuss is about. Everything's a fucken miracle. Try it.* She threw her head back and laughed; it was sickeningly seductive, she knew it was. She must have known.

I didn't laugh. I didn't think it was such a cracking idea. She wanted me to let my hair down and I wanted to loosen up but I was nervous. I love a drink, because it sets your body free from your mind, but I wanted her too much and it made me careful.

When her Mum was good, Chelsea let her hair down. *I'm making the most of it*, she said. But who can tell if you've ever really made the most of anything? Is your best the most? Sometimes my best is as weak as piss. Sometimes the most is for shit.

My Mum was strange and I worried that I was strange too, and even if I wasn't, it made me strange, worrying about it, second-guessing my every move until I'd missed all my chances and I was liltng in the long gone. When I was with

Chelsea, I could forget about Mum for a while and it made me less strange. It unstranged me.

One time, I forgot about Mum so much that I wasn't waiting near the door. The music was loud and I got sidetracked because Chelsea was everything and I was free. I was watching the toilet door for her, guarding it, making sure no one barged in. Chelsea looked pale, like she might throw. I was looking out for her and I wasn't thinking about Mum.

Then I heard Mum's voice. When I went out to the living room, Dom was standing there with his arm swung around Mum's shoulder. He had a vodka bottle full of water in his hand and he was as pissed as a maggot. He stepped back from Mum, holding the bottle out to her, slurring; he said: *How 'bout you do the water-into-wine trick?* He was wobbling all over the place, laughing. Mum was standing stiff and straight like a goal post. It was awful.

I was angry with Mum because she weaseled in and brought this on herself, but I was really shitted off with all of the others too, for taking the piss, standing around and laughing in a pack, with a pack mentality. Mum's God-loving was obsessive, even deranged, but she would never be mean to anyone, not intentionally. It's a sickening thing, having your Mum right in the thick of funny.

Dom was laughing, losing his footing with the force of his laughter. Mum stood still and said nothing. Her face was deadpan, dead as a pan. Dom leered at her, swaying. He said: *C'mon, Mrs Musgrove. Show us a bit-a the talking in tongues then?* He lobbed his tongue out, flicking it around his lips, making a noise that sounded like a yodel but wounded, cut up by his laughing. He was waving his arms around as if he was dancing, but his legs were still.

Mum stood rigid, always and ever the post, pale and wide eyed.

Enough! I said, putting my arm around Mum's shoulder and turning her towards the door. Everyone froze. Someone stopped the music and everything was quiet. I led Mum to the door, taking her by the arm as if she was blind.

And the blind shall see and the deaf shall hear, even the stuff that's long gone, over and done.

I looked back when I got to the door, remembering about Chelsea. She stared at me, confused, one hand against the wall to steady herself. As we backed out of the driveway, I could see her standing near the lounge room window; she pulled the curtain aside.

Someone came up behind her and put his arm around her shoulder, edging his breath closer to her neck. It looked like Dom: spiky hair, broad shoulders.

My Mum goes to prayer group with Dom's Mum and I figure she's got her fair share to pray about, having a cunt for a son.

~ ~ ~

Arriving at school the following Monday, I was nervous. I thought everyone would be talking about the Mum-Show, but that was old news apparently. Everyone was talking about Chelsea and Dom. Suddenly I wished they were talking about Mum. I felt sick with the visuals. Ben walked in on them and they were both starkers, up to their ears in it apparently.

I was fantasising all kinds of rampant bestial sex, her and Dom, all the positions, all the possibilities. I was angry with Mum for sticking her nose into my business and I was pissed off with Chelsea too, anyone but Dom, anyone. Then I overheard Tiff say that Chelsea's Mum was down the gurgler and that's why she wasn't at school.

I wanted to help her. I wanted to tell her I'd always be there. She could fuck anyone she wanted, including me of course.

When Chelsea's Mum was bad she stayed at home. She didn't leave the house. It was like she was hibernating and there were no in-betweens. It was all or nothing, on or off, and I tried to understand the pressure and that's why she fucked Dom and I pretended it meant nothing. I tried not to do my head in about it because they might have been doing other stuff, not the deed, and I tried not to worry if they did or they didn't because it was over and done and one day it'd be long gone.

~ ~ ~

I didn't see Chelsea for ages after that and I was beginning to feel like she was the enigma. I would turn up to the parties, just in case she made an appearance, but I never stayed long.

Tiff's party was a last ditch attempt. I'd nearly given up hope. Tiff said that Chelsea would come but I didn't believe it until I saw her with my own eyes. Tiff had a soft spot for Chelsea and Tiff was the voice of the girls. She told the rest of them to mind their own business. *Leave it alone*, she said. *Don't ask any questions* (about Chelsea's deranged Mum).

Tiff made punch, loads of pineapple juice and crushed ice, shit-loads of vodka. We sat around in her back garden breathing the jasmine-scented air, punch bowl in the middle of the table, cicadas going crazy. Chelsea scooped a ladleful into a disposable cup and I did the same, eyeballing her so that she knew I was alive. I was ready to let my hair down. It was a balmy night and everyone was looking bronze and chilled out from the summer holidays (except Chelsea, she looked strung out and skinny).

Chelsea got up from the table. I took a breath or two, that's as long as I could wait, and then I followed. I didn't want to stalk her but I was scared she'd disappear if I let her out of my sight. I checked the bathroom and toilet, no sign of her. I stepped out the front door and saw her heading down the driveway.

Wait, I said. I'll walk you home.

I'll be fine, she said.

I know you're gonna walk now so it'll be on my mind, I said. I stepped one foot behind the other like I was walking backwards along a tightrope. I lost my balance and felt ridiculous. I set my feet wide, hands on hips. I'll worry, I said. Let me walk you.

We walked fast, mostly in silence. I reached down and held her hand. She looked at me sideways but then she held on tight and we marched on. When we got to her place she walked up the concrete steps to the front door and turned around, still puffing. I stood on the ground below, looking up at her as if I was begging, praying. She lit a smoke and sucked it hard, eyeballing me. Her blue eyes turned black as she narrowed them, scrutinising me.

She looked a bit mean sometimes. Perhaps it wasn't mean, just hard. She was beautiful, don't get me wrong, she was stunning. She tried to scare people away with her swearing and her fuck-everything attitude. She smoked like an old-timer, blew it out soft and long, lips pursed, and then a couple of rings at the end, just for kicks. I hate smoking, cigarettes sicken me, but with her, like the swearing, there was something seductive about it. I could watch her swear and smoke all day long.

Thanks for walking me, she said.

It's a fair way, I said. I can't believe you walk that by yourself, at night.

I run, she said.

Chelsea lived on the other side of town, the industrial quarter. Most of the kids lived on the school side, the trendy side. Everyone says that the sea smells different on the wrong side of town. It's the same sea of course, just two kilometres south,

but on the dodgy side the sea is dirty and depressing, like bad soup, smarmy and oily, slick with working-people's filth. Or so they say.

I stood there, looking up at Chelsea, and I inhaled deeply through my nose, seeing if I could smell it. Chelsea stared at me suspiciously, smirking slightly, watching my hands. I slid them into my pockets. I slid them out again and then thumbs back in.

Who did I think I was? Who did she think I was? I was the guy who looked out for her at the parties. I minded her bottle so Seagull and A.J. didn't help themselves, just for five minutes while she nicked out to the shed for a quick bong. Sometimes it was a bit longer than five minutes, if she pashed someone. *There's nothing in it*, she said, because I was standing beside her when she got it on with Angus. *It's just nice to have someone's tongue in your mouth for the rush.*

Chelsea finished her smoke and flicked it in under the brown tree ferns. We watched the glowing butt for a second or two.

What was I doing? I was being there: Mr Rock Steady. I'd always been there, only she'd never looked at me before, not dead on, not deadpan, because I'd made myself straight and narrow, like a goal post. I'd been a nothing, afraid of everything. I'd planted myself on the cusp of the long gone.

What is the long gone anyway? It's just two words, stuck together, with a meaning all its own, and I wondered if that's what would happen in the future. I wondered if all the words would come together and mean new stuff, until there was only one thing to know, one all knowing thing. Maybe the one thing wouldn't mean shit, nothing, and that would be the end of the world, the end of everything, because nothing would make sense, nothing would mean anything.

I was being a freak. I knew it. I'd tried to pretend I wasn't left of centre but it was no use. I did my head in, instead of living

loose, and that's where I went wrong with Chelsea. I listened to Mum. *It will end in tears; it will never work*, she warned.

I believed her because I was scared. I was soft as.

Chelsea turned to me and said: *See you Monday*.

I stood there, on the edge of everything, on the verge of the long gone. I didn't say anything but I didn't look away. I wasn't embarrassed by the stillness. I could do stillness. I could do anything if it would keep her from slipping through my fingers.

It's only early, I said. *You wanna watch t.v. for a bit or do you want to go to bed?*

It was a slip of the tongue. She sucked the air in like she was going to laugh and then she coughed it out. I was going red but it was dark so she couldn't see. It sounded like I thought she was easy, but she knew I didn't mean it like that. She didn't think I had the balls to ask her to go to bed with me, but that night I had the balls. Suddenly I was all balls. I would have loved to ask her to go to bed with me, of course I would have, but I didn't think that was something you would ask, not in words. I thought the words would be long gone and it would all just happen.

I don't really have people over, she said, *because of my Mum. She's...*

I don't care, I said. *I won't tell anyone*.

Chelsea lit another cigarette. *Hmm*, she said, puffing steadily, considering.

My parents are as strange as they come, I said, *and they're roaming around like it's everyone's business*.

Chelsea laughed. She still looked reluctant to let me in so I had another crack at reassuring her: *My parents are freaks*, I said. *My life is skew too*.

She said: *Skew? What sort of a word is that?* She smiled and it was an easy smile and her eyes were in it too. Usually her eyes were still pissed off when she smiled.

Wait there, she said, heading inside and closing the door behind her. When she came back, she said: *You can come in for a bit. But if my Mum comes out of her room, you have to leave, just get up and go. Don't say a word. Nothing.*

Okay, I said.

We went inside. Her Grandad was asleep on the couch.

Grand, it's time for bed. GRAND, she said, louder this time. He opened his eyes. *It's late,* she said. *I'll take you to bed.* She helped him up, stopping at the toilet and reminding him to go. *You need to,* she said, *or you'll wet the bed.* She told him to step into his pyjamas. *I'll be back soon to check on you,* she said.

I stood in the kitchen where she left me. I didn't move an inch and I listened carefully. Chelsea returned and poured herself a glass of wine from the cask in the fridge door. *Want some?*

Okay, I said. I wasn't saying no to anything, anymore. The old me was long gone. She looked surprised but she poured without question.

When we were on the couch, she flicked through the channels on the remote. I put my hand on her leg. *You are wonderful with your grandfather,* I said.

Wonderful-Shmonderful, she said, looking at my hand. *He's an old man.*

She rested her head on my thighs and wrapped her arm around my knees. I drank the wine fast because I was thirsty. I stroked her hair and she fell asleep. I was scared to move.

After an hour or so Chelsea's Mum came out. I'd never seen her before. She was wearing baggy underpants and a loose fitting singlet. She looked like a hooker. Not that I'd know. She

looked like someone who'd had a hard life and no money to take care of herself, like a hooker at the end of the world, dead on her feet, skin slapped over her bones like white paint, old white paint, slightly yellow. Her shoulders and collarbones were sticking out of her skin like... like nothing; there is nothing I know that is as ugly as her bones poking out of her dirty yellow chicken-skin.

She stared at me like I was a mirage, here and long gone, and I held up my hand and mouthed the word: *Hi*. I swallowed noisily and I told myself I didn't care how she looked because I didn't want to care. Who cares if she was a hooker?

She stared at me for a good while and then she held her hand up and waved at me. The hair under her arm was black. The hair on her head was orange-blonde, wiry, like broken guitar strings. The darker, underarm hair ran down the midline of her scalp. She turned away from me, leaving the room as murkily as she had come, like an enigma, NO, like the smarmy wash from the smarmy sea on the wrong side of town.

When Chelsea woke up, she said: *I love Mum. I'm not ashamed of her. Don't think I am. I don't want you to see her because you'll think that I can't love her, or that she can't love me because she's so fucked up. She looks disgusting, she said, but really she's beautiful.* Chelsea sat up. She was crying. She said: *People look different when you love them.*

I saw your Mum, I said quickly. She came out before.

Chelsea gasped, white, panic stricken; she sat up and stared at me, eyes wide, but then she put her head in her hands.

I couldn't move because you were asleep, I said, floundering. I was worried that I was losing her, and I never really had her, but if you want something that much it feels like you have it.

Almost.

She eyeballed me for a second but then she put her head down again. I could hear wet-breathing, snotty-crying. She held her head in her slimy hands and she was gagging on her tears. It sounded like she was gargling, like she was trying to keep her head above water, like she was swallowing air and water in the grimy, wrongtown sea.

I can see the love: I lied. Truth is, I saw a long gone hooker but I chose my words carefully so it sounded true and believable. I could see the love when I looked at Chelsea because everything she did was authentic and true. She made me believe that you could love burnt out, long gone, druggie hookers. She made me believe that people like her Mum and her Grandad were lovable. She made me believe that cunt was a lovely thing to say.

I'm going to wash and trim her hair, said Chelsea, and dye it back to her natural colour, warm blonde with the shiny gold streaks. I'll get the orange wrongness out of it. It makes her skin look yellow. It's not yellow, only her hair makes it look like that because it's a cheap colour. She should have let me do it. I would have done a better job, and massaged her scalp with some nice conditioner.

Chelsea was talking fast, swatting the tears away as if they were flies. She eyeballed me hard and I kissed her because I had no words. It was our first kiss. It was long, like a long conversation, like she understood perfectly what I was trying not to say.

She's really beautiful, said Chelsea. If she had another life she would have been in magazines. It's the greyness that makes her look awful but if you took the sickness away, I mean the shadows and her hard life and...

She would look like you, I said. I couldn't see it, not really, but I could believe it. Believing without seeing is long and gone. I could see that life beats the shit out of people like Chelsea, smashing them around so that they look like they've had the

life fucked out of them. I suppose that's what scared me into the long gone, in the end.

~ ~ ~

Mum said: *Chelsea is different. Chelsea and her family are fringe people.* She said it like they were from the dark-side, another fucking life form, and I wondered what Jesus and the lepers would make of that. Mum said: *It will never work,* and I believed her because I let myself believe her. She brainwashed me.

When I thought about my future with Chelsea it was like seaweed around my neck: thick, flat and rubbery, and that's why the beach smells on the wrong side of town, because they have all the seaweed.

At the start I thought I could love Chelsea, even if she looked like a burnt out hooker. I thought: *how could I stop?* I thought I could protect her and we wouldn't go under. I thought I could stop her getting long and gone in her own living body.

But then I got frightened that Chelsea would end up all ratty and fucked-up like her Mum. I was scared that I'd be stuck looking after them for the rest of my life, and so I did a runner. Chelsea gave me the time of day, when no one else would, and I repaid her by pissing off into the long gone.

In the end I was weak. I was as weak as shit. I was scared of what Chelsea would become. I was afraid of the unknown, and there's nothing more long gone than being frightened of something that might never happen.

I let Chelsea go. I shook her off like a cold wind, steeling myself and telling myself that the crying was just a stage. I passed Chelsea by and I drifted into the long gone.

I'm not strange or left of centre anymore. I'm just the same as every other asshole. I didn't even tell her why. I didn't know. I

ran hard into the long gone, pretending I'd done my best by her.

I thought I would've done anything for Chelsea. Sometimes I still think I would, I imagine I could, but it's just bullshit of course, like a pretty picture with angels and halos. I walked away because I'm a weak little fuck. Mum said that Chelsea wasn't one of our kind and that's come back to haunt me because Chelsea and I had something crucial, and Mum is a cunty mystery to me.

~ ~ ~

As time went by, Chelsea hardly came to school. Sometimes I walked home via her place, just in case, but I never saw her. I wondered if I had imagined her, conjured her, long and gone. I stood in front of her house for a while and I thought I could smell her shampoo, wafting on the wind, but it was probably just the smell of clean, wet washing, blowing in the breeze on the wrong side of town.

I couldn't smell the seaweed.

Everyone said the wrongness was there but I didn't have the nose for it, I guess.

Book two

Chapter four

Starry eyed

Starry-eyed:

‘Having a naively enthusiastic, overoptimistic, or romantic view; unrealistic’

The American heritage dictionary of the English language, 4th edn,
Houghton Mifflin, viewed 20 March 2010,

<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/starry-eyed>

~ ~ ~

(Chelsea)

There's nowhere to go then but to Dean's story. Pelts is reluctant to tell it. He fiddles around with the dinner for longer than usual, overcooks the lamb. Then he makes a start on the dishes.

He knows it's time to tell and he's nervous. He knows he'll never be ready.

C'mon Pelts, I say. We'll do the dishes in the morning like we always do. Come to the fire. ...Don't leave me here waiting.

Pelts is not himself. He's all over the shop, nervous, stoking the fire and tapping his wine glass relentlessly.

~ ~ ~

(Pelts)

I'll tell you about the last day I saw your Dad because the last day tells all really. Dean spilled his guts. I should have known what was going on.

When I got to the pub, your Dad and Fuller were sitting on the stools by the window: nothing unusual about that, it was their favourite spot. They sat there and watched the world pass them by.

I called Dean and Fuller the muppet gallery. You could hear the two of them, chuckling and talking like those old fellas in the balcony box. Fuller never heckled anybody but it was the way they murmured to each other and laughed, like they had their own language. You know the muppets, Shells?

Fuller was your Dad's best mate, I suppose, although he wasn't really best mate material because he didn't need anyone. He was sorta self-sufficient, like a cat, and that probably suited Dean.

Most days, I would pop into the Wharfie on my home, have a couple of beers after work. The maggot crowd were already there and they stayed until close. It was mostly old blokes aching for a bit of yesterday, piss-stained pants and nicotine-stained fingers, but it was a family for some of them and it wasn't so different from other families, all in all. They were resolved to the losses, those blokes. They were caked in loss of one kind or another.

On that last day, Larry pulled up a pew next to me. We sat with your Dad and Fuller. *To starry eyed*, said Fuller, and we all raised our glasses and had a sip because that was his trademark line. Fuller was everyone's best mate, in a way, because he was harmless and he didn't ask for anything.

Larry started talking. We knew his stories inside out and back to front. He started to tell the one about the game of cricket that got out of hand (he hit his kid with the bat). He was describing the house in Melbourne, the clinker brick with the buffalo grass like carpet.

Dean was in one of his concrete stump moods. I could pick it a mile off: squinty eyes, snide comments, twitchy and jumpy and chain smoking. He said: *I thought you were living in Queensland when you had the kids*. He said it off the cuff, like: *Pass me the smokes*, just as if he didn't mean anything by it, but Dean was ten times smarter than those guys and they knew it. He lorded it over them with his snarly grin.

Larry smashed his pot of beer on the bench and came at Dean. I'll be fucked if he wasn't going to slit his throat. I managed to sit Larry down on a stool. I handed him a ciggie and lit him up and I talked to him in a real even voice about a tip I had on the dogs.

I could hear Dean snickering in the background and I coulda knocked his teeth out with a concrete stump. I was watching Larry and I was listening for Dean. I was wondering if Larry

was gonna go at him again. He looked like he was still thinking about it. He was inhaling the cigarette smoke deeply, swallowing a couple of times before he blew it out. He was double smoking the smoke, chewing on it, wringing every last chemical out of it.

Dean wandered off to play darts and I didn't like the idea of him with any sharp objects in his hand. I kept looking behind my back. I was all jerky and paranoid like I had tourettes or something. ... You know tourettes, where you get all twitchy and swear. I've definitely got the swearing bit.

Dean was playing darts and having a laugh with some of the maggot locals. For the moment he was all smart-ass superiority, but I knew him well enough to know that it would end in something ugly.

I made sure Larry was calm. I bought him a coupla shots because it was his kid's Birthday: that's why he was going on about the cricket bat story.

After I'd sorted Larry out, I headed for Dean. *Let's take a walk*, I said.

~ ~ ~

I drove your Dad back to his place.

Come in for a bit, he said. I didn't want him heading straight back to the Wharfie, so I obliged.

He had a chair set up with an esky beside it, right in front of the television. There was a bong on the table, beside his chair, and a bottle of bourbon. It was all ready and waiting for him when he got home, all set out like a welcome home dinner without the welcome home, or the dinner, and that clinched it I suppose, everything he'd become.

Dean pulled a chair out for me and we sat down. *Larry got so fucken worked up*, he said, knocking the top off a couple of stubbies, *all because I put a spanner in the works while he was taking his trip down memory lane. The cricket bat story was in Queensland*, said Dean. *He's thick as a fucken...*

It's his kid's Birthday today, I said.

Well there you go, said Dean. *It's my Birthday today too. You're not gonna let a bloke spend his Birthday alone, are ya?*

So I settled in and drank his beer. Dean knew what he was playing at with Larry. If the stories changed, there was always a reason. Larry was piecing the pieces together so he could sit with his story, or not sit with it y'know, because that's what they do at the Wharfie, they sift their stories.

Those blokes tell their stories by mood and the mood changes, day to day. We don't ask questions, not the interrogating kind anyway. We all knew Larry's cricket bat story like the back of our hand. Dean was being a smart ass.

The point is: if you can't read the mood, if you're not dead fucken certain that you're on the money, it's best to shut the fuck up, because down the Wharfie, mood is truth. Dean knew that. He knew it better than anyone.

~ ~ ~

Dean never joined in the wharfies' storytelling parade. He was a bit of a dark horse, they said, but that's bullshit because we all knew his memory lane, we all knew his ugly truth, or so I thought, but it turns out I didn't know the half of it.

The thing is: if your regrets aren't the cancerous kind, you can conduct your way through the memories. You can keep some things still and quiet and encourage a bit of noise from the pretty stuff, but boozers and bongers don't have much of the pretty, that's the problem, so it's all about keeping things still

and quiet. That's the starry eyed that Fuller was always on about, stillness and a bit of quietly goes.

Dean needed more dope and more grog, 'cause it wasn't touching the sides. He wasn't getting any distance. The ugly stuff was getting louder. It was gaining momentum and he couldn't get to starry eyed, no matter how hard he tried, and he gave it a red hot go. I've never seen anyone try harder.

I said: *Larry was having a bad day.*

Larry's a cunt, snarled Dean, and I shut up then.

You know what he said to me? ... I wasn't keen to talk but he insisted that I answer him: *YOU KNOW WHAT HE SAID TO ME?*

What? I said.

He said drowning is supposed to be a nice way to die. He said you go into some sort of trance when your brain is deprived of oxygen. He said Teddy wouldn't have felt a thing.

That was ten years ago, I said. *It was a decade ago Man. He was trying to cheer you up.*

I don't fucken care, said Dean. He pulled a bong, took a good long sip of his beer. He said: *Annie belted her fists into my chest. She screamed at me: 'My Boy. My Boy. My Boy.'* *Of course Teddy felt it*, he said. *You don't die without feeling it. Larry's thick as a fucken plank.*

Dean had never mentioned Annie to me before. He hadn't breathed a word of her since she left, and no one dared to ask about her, for fear they'd cop a concrete stump in the ear.

Dean said: *I held Annie's wrists tight; I pinned her to the lounge. I said: You get some fucken distance.*

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I didn't say a fucken word but I was screaming on the inside. Oh Shells, there's nothing to gain by you knowing this.

Dean said: *Aah, cheer up Pelts. Thou shalt look at the world through starry eyes.* He handed me a shot of bourbon.

I was reluctant, I mean I wasn't much of a drinker by then but he was in a mood where you didn't want to leave him alone and you didn't want to cross him. He was chatty and he was never chatty, but there was some sort of agenda. I couldn't put my finger on it.

To Fuller, he said, and he downed the bourbon, easy as pie.

Fuller had tattoos of large stars stamped around his eyes, stretching above his eyebrows and down his cheek. His eyes glistened inside the stars like the eyes of a fish, shiny and dead-wet, like a toadfish. Fuller looked scary I suppose but there wasn't a poisonous bone in his body.

Fuller knows how to keep his starry-eyed distance from the memories, said Dean. *He's got it down pat.*

Fuller was a weathered old seaman. He spent his days at the Wharfie, watching the waves roll in, breathing roughly through his nose, long and slow. His breathing sounded like the waves, washing in on the sand. Dean and Fuller watched their fair share of storms rolling across the bay. Dean liked Fuller, you see, because he didn't ask anything. He was empty of bitterness. He was empty full stop.

Fuller wore raggedy old fisherman's clothes but his shoes were always brand spanking. When he needed new shoes, he went to the big place in town. He took off his old shoes and tried a few pairs on. He walked around awhile to check the fit and then he stuffed his old ones back in the box and waltzed out in the pair of choice. He modelled them for us at the Wharfie. He said: *Who looks at your shoes?*

I think the shoes were important to him because he spent half his life in soggy, old gumboots, out on a boat. I think that's

probably why but I never asked him. Like I said: questions are out-of-bounds at the Wharfie.

Won meself a very decent trifecta today, said Dean. How's the timing? Life's a bad joke, I tell ya. I shouted a round or two for the boys, bought Fuller a meal: bangers and mash, that's all he eats 'cause he's got no fucken teeth.

He's a legend, Fuller. You gotta love him. I tell him: God I love you Fuller, and he says: What's not to love? We're a lot alike, world fucked him too. Fuller tells me: Stay starry-eyed Deano, and I'm on me way now, I reckon, on me star-studded way. If I could wake up and feel like this every day, star-studded and starry eyed, life coulda been a dream.

I said: *You alright Dean?*

He said: *He means that you need to keep a bit of distance from the old memory lane.*

DEAN, I said loudly. *You okay?*

He never talked like that and it was surreal. I shoulda twigged something big was going down.

He said: *Mostly, if you booze and smoke hard enough, you'll get your starry distance, but you fucken pay for it too. When you least expect it, the distance comes closer and by then you're too maggoted to pretend ghosts aren't real. That's what striving for distance does to a paranoid fuck like me.*

I said: *Dean, what's going on? What are you talking about?*

Oh Shells, I don't want to tell you this stuff. I know I promised but you don't want to hear it.

Dean poured us another shot and cracked us another beer. He was having a pipe at each turnover too, but I didn't smoke anymore. He blew the smoke right at my face. I was sitting directly opposite, and I might as well have pulled the bong myself, the smoke was so thick.

I said: *You don't need that shit Dean.*

He said: *I fucken need it. You better believe I need it.* He packed another bong and pulled it in one hit to prove the point. *Annie came home crying, he said, speaking through the smoke. She said that Bullser refused to give her the dope on the house. I told her: You get back there and show him what you got. You give 'im what he wants.* As she walked out the door, I called after her: *DON'T YOU BE COMIN' BACK HERE WITHOUT THE GEAR.*

Oh Shells, I was freaking out. Dean was yelling everything out like he was reliving it. I was definitely a bit stoned, just by virtue of sitting in the room with him, and we were drinking at a fast pace too. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Dean never talked before, you see, he never said boo, but that night he kept on and on.

He said: *When Annie left I started pulling threads out of that ugly fucken lounge suite.* He pointed to the armchair I was sitting on. It looked like it was covered in old schoolroom carpet, grey with a green thread. *It's a poor-person's couch, he said, and I sat there and pulled out the slimy green thread, line by line, until she came back. I laid all the threads across that shitty cane coffee table. She took her fucken time coming back, too, like she was enjoying it or something. I was on the couch, watching telly. She laid the choof near the green threads. 'Watch out for that one,' she said, pointing to the little package wrapped in tin foil. 'Bullser said it's laced, and you need to be careful.'*

I said: 'Bullser's a softcock greaseball, cunt-pimping maggot.' I said it without any momentum, like I didn't give a shit. I kept my eyes on the stash. I yawned like I'd been having a bit of a doze and I didn't look at her. She put her hand out to collect the threads.

'Leave em', I said.

'I just mended that couch,' she said softly. 'Why would you do that?' Annie shifted her weight from foot to foot and sighed. She stood there another moment or two, and then she moved to sit down...

'You reek,' I said, 'Go 'ave a shower'.

I ripped into the gear as soon as I heard the water runnin'. I went straight for the potent one and I didn't mix it with tobacco. I was concentratin' hard on the rush. I was staring hard at the green threads and kiddin' myself that I deserved something better than a poor person's couch.

I was off me tits by the time she came back out, off me fucken head. I ghosted me misdemeanours right out of the house.

Oh Shells.

It was bourbon, beer, bong. Again and again. That's all he did. I was feeling like I might vomit but he kept going, he wouldn't stop. I was starting to worry that he was going to kill me or something. I was stoned. Just by virtue of sitting in the room I was off my head and paranoid. He was out of character and he seemed to have an agenda or something.

Dean said: *While she was in the shower I got up and collected her things from outside the bathroom door. I heard her vomiting in the shower and I took her things back to the couch. When she'd finished, I was laying on the couch with her undies in my hand and a couple of the stray green threads. I held her undies up to my nose and breathed them in: her and the seaweed threads and all the poor-man's wrongness.*

She came across to me and tried to take her undies. She was wet, dripping. She had a towel wrapped around her. We both pulled and I could hear a ripping noise as the stitching came undone. I was breathing her sweaty smell but then there was the freshly washed smell of her too, so sweet. It was all mixed together, sweat and soapy clean skin.

I decided I wasn't going to let go first but then I changed my mind, simple as that, and quick as lightning I let go; it was fast and she fell back awkwardly, thumping onto the floorboards, nursing her wrist

because she landed on it hard, and then collecting her towel because she was all wet and spreadeagled.

I laughed. It was only the fall I was laughing at, the random clumsy stumbling. Of course there was nothing funny but the smoke had set in and I was getting some distance now.

She made it to her feet, crying and wiping her tears on her stretched-out undies. Then she held her undies tight, clenched in her good hand. She held them so tight that I couldn't see the pink of them anymore and the room became blank of smell with all the distance.

Her blue eyes were like ice when she was cut up like that, like jagged ice with the lightning shards through it. I turned to the telly and she left me to my laughing. It was a windy day and the aluminium venetians rattled along, echoing my tinny laughter.

Oh Shells, I was clenching my fists and crying, breathing hard out of my nose. Dean didn't care; it was like he couldn't see me. He just kept talking, on and on.

He said: *Annie yelled at me. She said: 'You're the pimping cunt.'* I never heard her say cunt, only that once, and now I wonder if I imagined it. I wonder if I made it up, re-remembered the memory.

Distance is a shifty bastard, he said. Memory is a motherfucker of a game.

I'd never seen him so wasted, Shells. There was something else going on because he was a seasoned drinker and he'd bonged half his life away. I should have worked out what was happening.

Dean said: *I never gave a fuck about anything 'cept making sure I stayed wasted. For a long while it gave me some lead-time but then the distance started to murky up and fucken change.*

I said: *That's why Larry messed up his story.*

I fucken know, he said. You think I don't know how things start to ghost up the spaces if you're not on your guard.

After that I shutup. I was frightened for my life. I was paranoid, stoned off me head, because his lounge room was like a hashish steam chamber. But I needn't have worried. He couldn't hurt me. He was struggling to light his own bong.

The distance was all close and shady for Dean. He was losing his hold and I should have known.

He said: Annie pounded her fists on my chest. She said: 'The wind will change; you wait and see. You will hear it first but you won't be listening. Watch the water if you don't believe me. The wind will change.'

I said to her: Teddy's dead. I said: Get it together. I had her wrists pinned so she couldn't do nothin'. Your boy's not comin' back, I said. You get some fucken distance.

She spat in my face.

He tried to imitate Annie's spitting but all he could muster was some frothy dribble down his chin. He downed a shot, packed another bong.

He said: Now I understand, what she tried to say to me... Caught between the devil and the deep... Stop. SSSHH. Listen... Something from the venetians? He was giggling his sickening, stoned-loser-maggot giggle.

He was off his fucken head.

Listen, he said again. ...No-no. It's just the shifting distance.

Oh Shells, he was banging down the pills every time he had a shot. He emptied the pill bottle. I should have known. I've asked myself if I did know: if I let him go ahead anyway. He said they were anti-depressants, but then he said they were anti-anxiety, and it was the same bottle of pills. Maybe it was a mixture, two bottles in one?

I knew he was lying. I was there. I'm accountable to some degree.

Larry and Boner found him after a couple of days. They headed to the Wharfie to break the news to Fuller and the rest of us. Before they could say a word, Fuller said: *Deano's done and dusted*, like he was telepathic or something. Fuller went missing himself, a couple of years later. Disappeared, literally. Drowned I reckon.

In the end, I had to open Dean's beer for him. I had to pour the last round of shots and pack his bong because he couldn't manage. *It's the last thing I'll ever ask of ya*, he said. It took him a few tries to get through that last pipe.

Dean said: *Annie asked me to come home. She came down the Wharfie and said: 'PLEASE, Dean, come home after work'. But I didn't. By the time I got home, the baby was born. She didn't have any clothes on and they were all bloodied up, the two of 'em, so at first I thought someone was dead, but the blood was only from the birth, see.*

It was like an old movie, like before hospitals and shit, and I couldn't believe it and I stood at the end of the bed and watched them sleeping. I realised about the baby because there was blood and placenta and shit all over the kitchen floor. I nearly stepped in it, that's why I twigged, otherwise I woulda flaked out on the poor man's couch, none the wiser.

I stood and watched them, listening to me own jagged breathing, frightened she'd wake up and say it was over between us, but then she opened her eyes and said: 'Come and look at her, she's beautiful'. And that should have been the moment. That should have been me epiphany, to turn me life the fuck around.

Oh Shells, I'm sorry. He lit bong after bong. I was off my rocker just sitting in the room. He sucked it down hard and the smoke poured out of his nose and mouth, real thick, like he was on fire inside his head; it looked like it was coming out of his eyes too.

He was as giddy as all fuck and he wasn't usually like that. He was real sleepy and removed from his own body, looking at his hands, holding them in front of his eyes and then further away. Then he'd look up at me and talk and talk, but he couldn't really see me. It was like he was talking to himself. He was so slurry, really hard to understand, but I wasn't asking him to repeat anything, that's for sure.

He tried to stand but his legs were puppeting all over the place.

The distance is getting louder, he said. It's all close and sweaty, like her smell in my face...

See, you don't need to hear this, Shells, I'm really fucken sorry.

He said: *I'm desperate to piss, like I could piss out a whole ocean.*

He couldn't walk so I helped him to the toilet.

He was laughing, swaying over the toilet bowl. He said: *I'm fit to burst but I can't make meself go. Me muscles aren't working. I don't feel right below me waist. Seems like you die from the waist down.*

Obviously that was more than a clue Shells and I should have taken him to the hospital, there and then. He lost his balance, banged his head against the toilet wall and landed on the floor, giggling. He was completely magotted. There was barely any expression to his laughing. It sounded a bit like crying. I helped him back to his chair.

He said: *I'm warm, like I'm in the bath. This must be dying, this warm bath feeling.* But he'd wet his pants; that was all, and that's when I left. I got up and drove home. I shouldn't have been driving.

I washed up my shot glass and put it away, like I was removing the evidence, so I must have known, deep down I must have.

Just before I closed the door, Dean said: *Everything's still now, like after the baby girl came.*

Listen... he said.

He was looking at his hands, wriggling his fingers and staring at his hands.

Everythin's sparkly, he said. This is the last thing I'll ever see, me body and me house all lit up and sparkly, and no one to give a shit about me, but that's me own starry-eyed fault of course.

I closed the door Shells.

Larry and Boner found him after a coupla days.

Book two

Chapter five

Lord of the dance

'Dance then, wherever you may be

I am the Lord of the Dance, said He!

And I'll lead you all, wherever you may be

And I'll lead you all in the Dance, said He!'

Marc Gunn's Irish Songs & Lyrics, viewed 15 September 2010,

http://www.irish-song-lyrics.com/Lord_Of_The_Dance.shtml

~ ~ ~

(Chelsea)

I say to Pelts: *Take me back to my old house, the house I lived in with Teddy.*

Pelts says: *I had a bit of a falling out with the owners.*

What sort of falling out?

He says: *Janice, the woman, she's not my greatest fan, and James, the man, well, we had a fight. ...But I'll call, he says. I'll see what I can do.*

Pelts and I go to the house together. Janice is home. She looks at Pelts and she says: *I'll take it from here.* She's bossy and direct and young looking for her age. I like her immediately, I have to say.

We sit in her lounge and the fire is going. It's a mild Autumn morning, twenty degrees, certainly not cold. I stare at the fire and Janice says: *I always have the fire going,* but it seems important today, nevertheless. Janice starts talking like she knows that that's what we do every night, talk-talk-talk in front of the fire. I watch the fire and I watch the light shift and change through the venetians.

Half way through the talking Janice says: *I'll crack a bottle of Pinot. It's Pinot weather.*

I've never tasted Pinot and it's not quite midday but she's right. I know she's right.

~ ~ ~

(Janice)

James said: *I can't sleep here anymore. I'm having all these dreams.* He was chopping the onion fast, crying fast onion tears. He said: *There's a ghost in this house.*

I laughed. I was tying my boots and I got a shock because it was ridiculous. I thought James was losing it: mid-life crisis, depression. At first that's all I could think of, but little by little I started to make sense of the haunted house business, bit by ghostly bit I worked out what was going on.

He was grinding fresh herbs with the mortar and pestle. It wasn't even breakfast time and he was organising the dinner. I kissed him on the cheek and went to work.

He was still fluffing around with the curry when I got home, chopping fresh herbs for the garnish. He said: *Hi*, just: *Hi*. I wanted to take the simmering pot off the stove and pour it onto his pillowcase. James loves crisp white sheets and I wanted to smear his pillow with a sunset of sweet potato and tomato. A whole day he'd spent on that curry, an entire day. Wasted. I mean it was tasty but for God's sake.

Pelts was sitting on the couch. He'd probably been there all day, talking, talking ...doing nothing. I hung up my bag and he nodded his head in my direction: *Janice*, he said.

Hello, I said, talking through my teeth. I was over it. He was here all the time. I thought he was a lurker, a frickin weirdo. I didn't understand. Pelts was going to renovate the kitchen and the bathroom for us. I wanted to push out, make the kitchen bigger and spill into a meals area on the sunny side, but Pelts bullied James into believing that we should keep the original shape of the house, build up later if necessary but *NOT* out. *Feng shui*, said James, like he was chanting, praying: *Feng shui*, *Feng shui*.

It's from Feng (meaning wind) and shui (meaning water) said Pelts. *It's about channelling positive and...*

I know what it is, I said angrily, although I must admit that the wind and water bit was news to me. I thought it was more about arranging furniture.

Traditionally Feng shui was used in graveyards, said Pelts, and he looked at his hands and then glanced nervously at James. They stared at each other, locked there for a moment. I was invisible apparently.

I thought we were talking about a kitchen here, I said irritably. I spoke too loudly, as if they were deaf or stupid. I don't see why we would build UP when we can see across the water with our feet on the ground. We have plenty of land, plenty of space.

That's not the point, said Pelts. The POINT...

I've got work to do, I said, cutting him off and heading to the study.

I thought Pelts was a leech. I didn't understand why he was always here. He was semi-retired and he offered to do the renovations for us because we weren't in a hurry. That's what he said but I knew there was more to it. He was too interested. He was obsessed with us, with this house.

Pelts did our gardening and maintenance because James was as slow as a wet week. They both were, like slugs. Pelts was constantly leeching around. It was weird. He knew his stuff when it came to building materials, I'll give him that, but as for the rubbish about feng shui and graveyards...

James followed Pelts around like a stupid dog, loyal enough but no brains, and when James did something productive, like cook, Pelts sat in front of the fire and drooled. They were infatuated with each other. They went on and on about this house and the people who used to live here (Annie, Annie, Annie).

I thought it was nauseating. I thought, it's just a house guys, get over it. James bought this place as an investment after his parents died. He rented it out and Pelts was in charge of repairs and maintenance. As far as I knew that's all there was

to it, but they were acting like they had the same wife or something.

I couldn't make sense of Pelts and usually I was good at working people out. Generally I was good with things that needed to be figured out intuitively. That's my job, to investigate people, to read them. Pelts was Mr Fixit and that's how he and James came to know each other, and I thought: well there's nothing earth shattering about that. They were obsessed with each other and it didn't make any sense.

It was the way Pelts had reeled James in that baffled me, like a barb with the hooks all the way around, clawing at him from all angles. He had something over James.

James got annoyed with me, he said: *You're over analysing, you're building some weirdo-character-profile and it's not a fit. He's a nice bloke.*

He's always here, I said. *When I get out of the shower, when I get out of bed. It's too much. There's something off, like he has buried treasure here or something.*

James said: *What are you talking about Janice?*

I said: *He's always here, that's the point, and if he's not here, then he's just about to walk through the door (the back door that is and I could be walking around in my undies or whatever.) Tell him to come to the front door,* I said, but James was waiting for the right moment because he didn't want to offend, which was weak-as-piss and obviously he didn't really mind but I minded. Usually I was running for cover, putting a bra on or something, so at the time I was distracted, but I was fed up and I decided to take matters into my own hands. *Why can't Pelts do the gardening and the handyman stuff during the week,* I said, *when I'm at work?*

He does, said James, but he likes to come when you're here too, so that he knows the door handles that we want or the right shade of paint.

I didn't buy it. Those were two-minute questions, no-brainer checkpoints. James was a pushover and Pelts over-talked everything, stretching things out so that he just so happened to be here when James started cutting up the vegies for the stir fry, frying off the spices to rub into the chicken. James offered him a beer; he encouraged him: he practically begged him to stay and he ignored me, like Pelts was his new girlfriend or something.

It's polite, said James, but what's the opposite of polite then? Invading your neighbour's privacy and landing on people, again and again, like a loach, a slimy little gravedigger searching for buried treasure.

Sorry Chelsea: I was jealous; I can see that now. I sensed that there was something more between them but I couldn't put my finger on it.

They were quite the happy couple, with their bellies full of curry and a glass of red, and so I made myself comfortable in the study. I thought James was wasting his life with Pelts, doing nothing: talking-talking, nothing. I thought he must have been a bit depressed if he could spend the whole day making curry. I wished he would forget about roasting and grinding the spices, and cubing the beef and sweet potato into perfect, metric cubes. I thought he should get busy getting happy, buy a jar of curry paste and look after himself.

I took my glass of wine and left them to the dishes and the fire and their dribbling conversation. *Look at that fire, said Pelts, because he built the fireplace and he was fishing for compliments, as if that gave him the right to stay, when we'd paid him twice over if you counted the food and the wine,*

probably three times, and so I excused myself because I couldn't bear it.

Pelts did most of the talking. I could hear him from my study. It was relentless: like the water, like the wind. I heard him drooling on about her (Annie, Annie, Annie) and I didn't care; quite frankly I wasn't interested and I wished he'd go home.

I was distracted and annoyed. I considered going for a run along the foreshore but I'd just eaten and I'd had a couple of glasses of wine. I'd vomit for sure.

I googled *Feng shui*. Pelts was right about the graveyard business. In the old East *Feng shui* was all about positioning graves, the flow of *Chi*, invisible energy. The only invisible energy floating around here was her (Annie, Annie, Annie) and that was Pelts' doing; that's what I thought, and I wondered why he didn't just go and find her and leave us alone.

Frankly I wasn't feeling the same energy as those homo lunatics and I didn't see what this graveyard hocus-pocus had to do with my home. Pelts was doing my head in and I could see why James was so spooked, spending the entire day with that freak when he should have been doing his masters work.

I don't think he's a freak now, Chelsea. I was just jealous, I suppose, and I couldn't work it out.

I thought: Where did Pelts get off, taking the ancient laws from the East, and sprinkling them around the Mornington Peninsula like he was the local Diviner? I thought he was delusional. I didn't understand that he had an agenda.

I thought maybe she was dead (Annie, Annie, Annie). I thought maybe that's why they were so obsessed with ghosts and graves, because of her, but James didn't say anything about a death. When he suggested that we move in, I said: *What about the tenants?*

He said: *Annie left two years ago.*

I said: *Has it been empty all that time?*

No, he said, *the man stayed on.*

So where is he now? I asked. I was polishing my black work boots, I was lost in the shiny blackness, mesmerised. I was just making conversation. I didn't really care.

James yelled at me. *Does it really matter, Janice? This is not a case for you to solve. He's gone. End of story.*

I didn't know what *gone* meant, Chelsea. James should have told me what happened.

James never yells and I wondered whether I was making the right decision, moving in with him, because he seemed so unstable all of a sudden, but then I worried that if I didn't give him a go, I was never going to give anyone a go. We'd been together for five years, give or take.

So we went ahead and moved in here. *We'll make this place our home*, he said, and I believed him, because, back then he wasn't obsessed with long gone ghosts (Annie, Annie, Annie).

~ ~ ~

Then I realised that she couldn't have been the ghost (Annie, Annie, Annie) because she wasn't dead. I knew she was alive because Pelts brought you here. He said Annie was really sick.

I was rude that day. Sorry Chelsea.

I was shocked to see you here so early in the morning, that's all, and I acted like I didn't give a shit about your Mum because I didn't. I was jealous. James was obsessed and I knew it had something to do with your Mum but I didn't really want to know and it wouldn't go away.

It was so windy, do you remember? Gnarled Ti tree branches shaking like old people's fingers, and dim daylight, night and day all mixed together. Do you remember? It was a Saturday, early, not quite seven. James and I were only up because I had to go to work for a bit, otherwise we would have been in bed for another two or three hours. Pelts knew that.

I lifted the kitchen blind and I saw the two of you standing near the clothesline. Pelts was talking to you and your head was bent. You were looking at the ground as if you'd lost something. You didn't see us straight away. It was like watching a play in my own back yard.

The sun is often late to show down here so the shadiness was nothing but the weirdness was rife, gusting in all directions at once. You know those days? Beach people know those days. Pelts saw us in the end and he waved; he cleared his throat and called out to us.

Go and see what he wants, I said to James impatiently, but he didn't move. He was white, almost grey. I walked towards the back door and James followed. Pelts was wearing the same shirt that he had on the night before. I was face to face with the barely-washed, mothball staleness of him. He had milk or toothpaste around his mouth.

He said: *Shells used to live here.*

Okay, so you know all this, you were there too, but I thought it was odd, I mean, we were strangers, you and I, and this is my home now.

Pelts' eyes were darting all over the place like he was channelling. *Would it be okay if we walk around the garden*, he said, *just for ten minutes or so? Then we'll be on our way.*

Okay, I said unsteadily, because how could I say no, when James wouldn't say anything? I was uncomfortable about you

guys wandering around. I didn't understand. I felt like we were under surveillance, like you were looking for clues.

James and I went back inside. The coffee had boiled over and I lifted the pot off the stove with the oven-mitt. James loves good coffee and he was obsessed with that stupid old pot.

James! I said angrily because he was just standing there in a daze while the coffee pissed out everywhere.

SSH, he said, grey-faced, pointing outside to you and Pelts.

Don't shush me, I said. *This is MY...*

She looks like her mother, said James, *exactly the same*.

He was talking about you, of course, and your Mum (Annie, Annie, Annie).

For God's sake, I said, because there was coffee all over the stovetop, everywhere.

Leave it, said James. *I'll fix it. Leave it. JUST GO.*

So I dropped the coffee pot on the floor there and then. I let it fall out of my hands and the handle snapped as it hit the tiles. The coffee was leaking everywhere but I didn't care because I knew James was lying. I knew that you were more than just tenants but he wouldn't tell me anything and I didn't understand and I couldn't process it.

Later that day, when I arrived home, Pelts was there, making himself at home on my couch. They kept on with their conversation when I walked in. They didn't mind me. *Dinner's nearly ready*, is all I got from James and I had to wait for that. Pelts held up his hand and raised his eyebrow because he was in the middle of one of his shit-boring stories. I wasn't interested in Pelts' stories. They weren't interesting to me at all, and talk about repetitive (Annie, Annie, Annie) and James drooling on every word as if Annie was Helen of frickin' Troy or something.

Oh Chelsea, I didn't understand. I was jealous of her power.

I didn't want to be anywhere near Pelts or James. I set to work on the computer but I was annoyed and I couldn't concentrate. It could have been a productive evening on the computer. It could have been but now it wouldn't. Or I could've read the paper in front of the fire, except the fat loach was here again.

I was angry then. I'm not angry anymore.

James brought me a bowl of dinner. He said: *Are you coming out to eat with us?*

I'll have some more wine, I said. If you can tear yourself away from the Diviner...

Don't be so rude, said James, whispering angrily. He placed the meal beside me and left.

I did a search on the computer – *Deaths, Breaking news on the Mornington Peninsula*. I trudged through the years. I would prove there was no flesh to the ghost. I worked for a little while and got nowhere. I ended up on some strange geological site about coastline soil conditions. I needed more wine.

I wandered out to the freak parade in my lounge room. James was so engrossed in the storytelling that he hadn't been back in to top up my glass or check how I was going, and they'd opened another bottle which made it even ruder. They were talking about building upstairs, adding some bedrooms and a bathroom.

James said: *There's no hurry, I'm just thinking about when we have kids*. He said it flippantly, slurring his words, and then he looked up and saw me, and he turned the same colour as the wine.

I was right beside him, standing over him, boiling. I know a lot of people assume that it's a natural progression, kids and family, but it doesn't wash with me. James knows how I feel about having babies, sick in the head, sick everywhere you can

feel sick, deep in my belly, in my bones. I was so angry that he was discussing this with Pelts.

I thought that having children would limit our ability to do everything, all the things we wanted to do. I thought: babies wreck your body, inside and out, and they're so expensive, such a waste of money, and I wasn't staying home to look after it. James was acting like I wasn't even there, like he'd forgotten everything about our plans.

Pelts looked at me. He said: *You prepared to sacrifice your gorgeous figure?* Then he glanced at James, at his trembling hands upsetting the wine in the glass. James looked at the floor.

Sorry, said Pelts. *None of my business, of course, I'm just curious by nature, I...*

I said: *CURIIOUS! You're a F...*

JANICE, said James.

WHAT?

Hey sorry, said Pelts. *I'll go*. His blue eyes sparkled when he was apologetic and for a second I thought he might have been decent looking, once upon a time, but I was mad and I wanted him to go. I thought he was a weather beaten coulda been.

I don't think that anymore.

Don't go mate, said James.

You know I don't want children, I said.

But I want them, said James, *and this house makes me want them more*.

This house; THIS HOUSE, I said. *It's not ALIVE*. I poured myself a large glass of wine. *I want to extend from all sides*, I said, sweeping my arm around theatrically. *I don't want to build UP. I want to build OUT. I want to knock it down and start again, shift left*.

NO, said Pelts. *You CAN'T.*

But I CAN. This is MY house.

I'm with Pelts, said James.

~ ~ ~

The next morning I woke up just as it was getting light and I went for a run along the beach. It was a squally morning, foam on the crests of the waves and a thin bubbling film all over, like the wind was coming up from under.

You'd only be out there if you were a freak like me and you were desperate for the adrenalin. You'd have to love the beach, just love it for what it is, messy and unpredictable and dirty looking that day, murky and mad, contradicting itself whichever way it looked to gush and splash, as if the shore were in every direction at once.

I ran so fast that my throat stung like I was breathing sand. I was gasping the air, swallowing it into my guts instead of my lungs because I was so hungry for it. I felt like I might vomit but I knew it was only the air in my belly, lurching right up at the base of my salty tongue, and that's why I felt sick, but I pushed harder anyway, and the exhale was a kind of lurching, and I pushed harder again, just to see what was beyond the pain, and my mind said: *faster, faster, YES YOU CAN*, and my legs were burning, like concrete coals, heavy and hot. I sucked the air in hard. I stuck my chest out and ran from my guts, getting all the power from my core. That's where it comes from if you're really running, deep in your guts. All the power is right there.

A man with his dog stopped to look, he stood still and lit a smoke, inhaling slowly. I picked up pace. I was crying but I liked the pain. I loved it. My arms and legs were like a wind machine; my hands were striking up and down as if I were in

charge of the whole foaming play on the bay. I was conducting the wind and the white caps danced, and I could hear the noise of my hands, flapping against the headwind, *push, push, YES YOU CAN*, and the sea-flecked wind slapped my face, and the man watched on closely, like I was training for Chariots of frickin' fire or something.

When I stopped, I hunched forward, hands on the sand, and I vomited but it was only air, a great, thunderous bellyfull of air and foaming spit. I was part of the water; I was one with the wind; we were one and the same, feng fucking shui.

When I got back to the house, I kept on with the research. I was hooked on it, obsessed. I didn't shower or anything in case I broke momentum. I could still taste the wind and the wash on my lips and I ripped straight into it.

I was determined to expose the ghost for the nothing that it was. Then James could give Pelts the flick and we could get back to being us. I had to do something because this was getting out of hand. I was starting to over-think the draughty spots in the house, where the wind would gust up from nowhere, and no sign of an open door or window. I got a cardigan and a scarf and I settled back in front of the computer. I braced my guts and got to work. I wasn't moving until I sorted this shit out.

James was making me second-guess everything and he was sucking all the peace out of this house, lording over the energy like Pelts, like a deranged Diviner. We hadn't spoken since Pelts left. James slept on the couch, in front of the fire. I locked the bedroom door so he didn't have much choice but usually he'd bang on the door and apologise if I was upset.

I was losing my hold on him.

I went over it all in my head to see if something came up fresh. I love this house, right on the water, with your own private

walkway to the sand. James loved it too, so what had changed, if the *Feng* was so *shui*?

We make our own *Feng shui*, that's what I thought. James needed to get moving, go for a run along the beach or ride a bike, but he didn't of course because he's a wallower. He was obsessed with the ghost and he always had half an ear out, half an eye, waiting for Pelts. He depended on Pelts, although for what I wasn't sure. It was cultish. He barely noticed that I was pissed off because he didn't see me. He didn't care.

James has done very well for himself. He works in tax. He's no Einstein but he's been lucky. He works hard and people like him, they trust him. Lately he's become restless. They must have noticed it at work: that's probably why they gave him some time off to finish his masters. They said they'd make him a partner before long and that was all he ever wanted, as far as I could tell, but he'd lost direction.

I thought living together in this house would help settle him but then Pelts came along, fucking Ghost Lord of the long lost dead, and now James was losing it and he wanted a child. I wasn't having a baby, simple as that. I thought it was a male ego thing, so they could take ownership of your body, like they were growing crops, marking out their turf. They think if they can grow their own people, they can build their own frickin' empire or something. It's all about power and I thought: get over it, put in a pool, buy a new car.

Then I thought that maybe Pelts wasn't the problem. I thought maybe Annie was leading the dance. Maybe she was the *feng* and the *shui*.

I didn't realise how sick she was, Chelsea. I didn't know anything then. Sorry.

I decided that James needed a project. I thought he could get fit, that'd be a start. He wasn't overweight because he ate well, nothing processed, but his muscles were slack, and he didn't

keep it up for that long anymore, not like he used to. Exercise is not just for the muscles, you see, stamina is a state of mind.

When you guys moved on and this house was empty, James said: *Let's move in and be a family. You work too hard.* I was infatuated with his decisiveness. He seemed so manly all of a sudden, as if he could keep it up all day long, and so I decided that we must be right together. I was determined not to hang on to any one man in particular but in that moment I could see us side by side, even if I wasn't hanging on.

This house is old, which is allegedly part of its charm, but it's a bit decrepit. We wanted to knock the whole lot down and start again: that was our original plan, but James changed his mind. Usually James is pretty easy-going, if I want something he's more than happy to oblige, but he got really red in the face and emotional about it. *It's got some interesting old features, he said, sash windows, high ceilings, they're worth preserving. We wouldn't want to ruin the feel of it.*

That's Pelts talking, not James, I know that now.

Pelts said, many times: *I'm so relieved you didn't demolish. This place has got so much character,* but the word relieved has stuck with me because he said it every time he talked about this place, which was often.

He was inclined to go over the same stories. He was one of those tireless re-tellers of the same stories (Annie, Annie, Annie), day after day. Relieved, surely that implied something, a secret at least. I should've worked it out a long time ago. He and James were so interested in each other, not sexually, nothing like that, although there was some sort of strange flirting or something going on. I couldn't work it out and usually I was a good judge, mostly I was right onto it.

Pelts was suffocating us. There was no air for us when he was there with his hooks in. James brushed past me as if I was a cobweb. He paid more attention to Pelts and the ghost than he

did to me and I could feel the wind gusting up between us, blowing our feng shui to the shithouse.

I left the computer and I went out to the kitchen. I could smell the cooked rice, fresh and earthy. I was starving. James handed me a glass of wine and a steaming bowl of curry. He said: *Are you going to sit out here, near the fire?*

I said: *Seems to me, Pelts knows this place like the back of his hand, seems like he's more than familiar with your ghost.*

James said: *Stop trying to back me into a corner. I haven't done anything wrong.*

It was a weird thing to say and suddenly I was frightened that this was the beginning of the end. I was missing something. I knew it. *James is there something...*

SSH. Here he comes, said James.

AGAIN? Is he back again? For God's sake...

SSH!

I went to the study. I took my bowl and my wine and I typed away, faster now. I began to worry that this house was the repository of some hideous crime and that's what was so aggravating about James' ghost. I'd fallen in love with this place and he was spoiling it. I could see the bay from my study and I loved having my own room, especially now that I was a detective. I watched the icy waves wash in while I was at my desk, ducted heating blasting, and when I couldn't bear it any more, I would go out and run and run until I vomited air.

Maybe Pelts knew about some foul play. That must be it. Perhaps he was implicated and that was why he was hanging around all the time, in case we stumbled upon his dark secret. That would explain why he was so over-interested in the renovations.

The more I tried to solve it, the more enraged I was, because Pelts was encouraging James, brainwashing him. I loved this place and those obsessive little bitches were turning it into a haunted fucking house. I was only interested in the water and the wind, feng shui literally, but they were ruining everything with their limp bullshit fantasies.

I went over the history of the region again, even the community newspapers. I wanted to satisfy myself that there was no factual, historical flesh to James' ghost. I wanted to prove that he was freaking himself out unnecessarily, imagining himself as a medium for suffering spirits, and all the while I was thinking about Pelts' modus operandi: what did he want from James, from this house?

I went right back, to the days before we had this place: way, way back. Time flew. I could hear Pelts: talking, talking, never tiring of the stories, and I heard her name (Annie, Annie, Annie). It was relentless. There was nothing I could do to stop it. It was like the wind, chasing the wash until it spilled against the shore, frothy and spent, again and again.

I did a geographical search of the region, pacing myself as I stepped back through the history, stepping carefully over all the Lords of the Land, trying not to think about her (Annie, Annie, Annie).

The earliest information I could find was that this area was in the hands of one owner, an immigrant couple: they had a farm here. Imagine walking barefoot along the beach, scrunching sand between your toes and staring at the two rugged cliff-towers at either end. How amazing it would have been for them, scrunching sand on their own private beach, under the watchful gaze of the sphinx rocks.

It's called *The Sisters*, this whole stretch of shoreline. Perhaps the Church owned the land at one point: maybe it was a nunnery. I googled *The Sisters* and there were loads of links,

most of them to an order of nuns called *The Sisters of Mercy*, so I read about them awhile.

Imagine if that was your only claim to fame, being the member of an order, like an animal, so demoralising. I wondered if the sisters lived where my house is, maybe some of them lived in my house. I wanted to know the name of one nun, just one, but it was a fairly nameless occupation.

Probably the only sanity for the nuns was walking along the water's edge and perhaps that's it... Maybe they were sent back to suburbia, to the city, where there was no water, only ordinary wind, air without the breath of the sea on it, no seaspray, no feng shui, a type of purgatory.

That would explain the ghosts. The spirits of the sisters must have returned here after they died, to the place where they were most happy. Or maybe one of the sisters drowned herself before they took her away, because she couldn't face life without the sea. She'd famished herself, sacrificing her desire for food and sex, perhaps she even wanted children and she managed the deprivation because she had the water and the wind, but now they would take her away from the sea and that was everything.

Or maybe she had sex with the grounds keeper and gave birth to a child in the scrub on the cliff-top. Perhaps it was the spirit of the child haunting James at night because he wanted children too. The child may have been left to die in the gritty, sand-flecked dirt on the hilltop, its mother's bloodstained fingertips the only human touch it ever knew.

I thought that would have made the most sense of all, if the truth had something to do with a baby or a child. That would explain why James was spooked and not me, because I couldn't give a shit about babies. My body is mine, I share it for sex but that's for me, for my pleasure.

Perhaps the baby was never born. Maybe they realised that the nun was pregnant because she washed in to shore, her thick black garb riding up her pale legs, laddered with purple stretch marks, black scratchy cloth stuck to her bursting abdomen like a drenched promise, black, a water-logged wish, steeped in shell-grit and barely recognisable, so at first they thought she was a rock or a dead seal.

More wine, said James, and I startled, sucking the air in. I was losing it. This ghost business was contagious.

He said: *What's wrong?* He filled my glass, slurring and swaying a little.

There's nothing wrong with ME, I said, taking long slow sips and draining the glass. James re-filled it. *Leave the bottle*, I said coldly, and then I was sorry because he took his hand off my shoulder and he looked like a dumb dog that someone kicked.

...As it turned out the *Sisters of Mercy*, or whoever the hell they were, they were not the reason that the land is called *The Sisters*. The sisters are the rocks, the abutting cliff-faces, standing like sphinx-heads at either end of the stretch of shoreline. The Sphinxes, or Sphinxes Cove, would have been a better name.

My head was getting twisted up with feng shui and riddles and I was haunted by her power (Annie, Annie, Annie). I don't like riddles. I like a world where things are what they are, guilty or not, evil or good, no ghosts, no riddles. I imagined the sister rocks were her and me (Annie, Annie, Annie) but I knew that was ridiculous. I was tipsy and I was angry that I was even thinking about her because I don't believe in ghosts.

I thought: it's not all that often that you hear about something coming between sisters. Perhaps that's the point. It's probably the least tampered with relationship, aside from mother and child, and somehow we see that as a given, rather than a gift, that the mother shows love to the child. We take it as an insult

to humankind, in general, when mothers fail, although we forgive children for any wrongdoing as if they have some right, which is terrifying and horribly unfair. But sisters, that seems to offer more in the way of reciprocity, and yet it seems sacred too, in the way of mothers and children.

It was eating me alive, Chelsea, I even started talking to her: *Why are you lurking around Annie? What do you want?* I was losing it.

Who named it The Sisters? That's what I needed to know. It must have been someone who knew that it would take some great natural tragedy to come between women of the same blood, someone who was protecting the secrets of this ghost beach. It couldn't have been someone like me, a sisterless woman who shunned mothering, who pushed it away with her foot as if it were a dead thing, glugging against the tideline.

~ ~ ~

I heard a ruckus by the fire, scuffling and heaving and yelling. I went out to see what was going on. The ghost-ridden freaks had changed pace, sprung up, and they were laying into each other. I was utterly captivated.

Pelts swung hard and knocked two of James' teeth out. He came at him from the side and it seemed to happen in slow motion because they were both pretty wasted. Mostly Pelts is a docile bastard and it was a bit of a shock, seeing the Diviner in a fight, but that wasn't all, something switched in James like I've never seen, which just goes to show you what happens when the wind switches, comes up from under.

They were like Sisters possessed, handfuls of each other's hair, clothes, whatever. It was blind and furious. James bashed Pelts head against the hearth. There was blood pissing down the

side of his face but James didn't care: he was ready to go again. He grabbed Pelts' head with both hands.

That's when I went for my gun. I was cool and calm as if they were strangers, criminals. *That'll do girls*, I said, smirking and lispng, swaying with the wine.

He had an affair with her, said Pelts, blood and tears running into his mouth so that his words gargled in his throat.

Affair? With who?

(Annie, Annie, Annie.)

It wasn't an affair; that's not the right word, said James. *And what about you, treating her like your own private prostitute?*

Pelts grabbed James in a headlock and the bitch fight was on again. I raised my gun and pointed it at Pelts' nose. The skin on his nose was mottled, pocked with aging freckles. It was an ugly nose. I wouldn't really have shot at him, of course, only the wall or the window, but it felt good to have that nose in my line of fire.

James said: *I was her Landlord. It wasn't premeditated.*

James was talking to Pelts, he was apologising to him.

Couldn't give a shit about me. *It just happened*, he cried out. *I fell for her. Hook, line and...*

Annie, Annie, Annie.

Pelts took a staggered breath and belted James under the ribs. I shot the window, double-hung-sash piece of ugly old shit.

You can still see the bullet mark in the sill. See?

I shot again, straight through the glass of the big bay window, because I was no ghost. You wouldn't catch me glugging against the tideline.

Pelts sat down and pulled out his wallet, crying over his pocket collectible of Annie, dripping blood down her neck. I

wrapped some ice in a tea towel and I stole a glance at the photo as I passed it to him.

That's when I remembered her. I remembered that I knew her all along. I suppose she was my ghost too. I interviewed her, you see, when you kids went missing at the beach. Told you I never forget a face.

I thought she did something to you kids. I thought she was guilty as sin. I was new to the game then, of course, I was a virgin cop, a silly young pig. It wasn't her fault. We got it wrong...

Chelsea, I think you belong to James – well not *belong*, sorry, because that's ridiculous. You don't even know him. You have the same chin. When you smile it's like a dimple in your chin, and you have the same eyebrows.

I think ghosts can only haunt you if you care about them, if you're connected somehow. So the ghosts are you and your Mum, I suppose, and your brother.

I think, deep down, James knows he's your father. He doesn't know that he knows, but he knows.

Book two

Chapter six

Beyond the shadow of a doubt

Beyond a Shadow of a Doubt:

‘in a manner or to a degree that could not be doubted’

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[http://www.beedictionary.com/meaning/beyond a shadow of a doubt](http://www.beedictionary.com/meaning/beyond_a_shadow_of_a_doubt)

~ ~ ~

(Chelsea)

I ask Janice to look up the old police files.

I want to know where Teddy is buried.

Janice can only tell me that he was taken to the morgue. She gets me the names of the people who were on duty that day: Grace Halliday and Peter Croft. I search for addresses and phone numbers. I do some detective work of my own.

I find names and addresses in the same street. Neighbours. That can't be right.

When I arrive at the address for G. Halliday there is an old woman, working in the garden. She is weeding the garden bed around the front porch. She's old, really old, and I think it couldn't be her. Even sixteen years ago, she would have been way too old.

I walk past her house slowly and I go to the next house, to the address for P. Croft. The house is derelict, it's all farm grass and bulbing rose bushes, mustard coloured bricks and woolly brown cobwebs. No one answers the door when I knock on the peeling-paint door. The old gardening woman sees me banging on the door, and she wanders over to the low part of the fence.

She says: *There's been no one there for going on two years now. She says: Who are you looking for Dearie?*

I tell her the names: P. Croft and G. Halliday and I mention the morgue. She pauses a moment or two, running her fingers along the gardening fork and showering dirt over her apron.

She says she remembers the man. She says: *I remember him alright, without a doubt, without a shadow. My name is Gene, she says. I'm Grace's mother. She was Peter Croft's next-door neighbour and she is Grace Halliday's mother. That's weird:*

that's small-town, incestuous, weirdness. It makes me feel like everyone knows what I don't know.

I tell Gene about Teddy because I don't give a fuck anymore. What have I got to lose?

Gene gives me her daughter's address, straight off the bat, and a forwarding address for Peter's family.

She has something to say about Peter before she lets me go. She says: *He was a very strange kettle of fish.* She pauses, inspecting her gardening fork again. Then she peels off her gardening gloves, lets out a deep sigh, and says: *Come inside. I'll make a cup of tea. I want to tell you something.*

I wouldn't mind a cup of tea, come to think of it and, like I said, what have I got to lose?

~ ~ ~

(Gene)

Oh dear. Where to begin...

Peter was my neighbour for many years and he and Grace worked at the morgue together for a time. That was after Grace had moved out of here, much later.

It's a small world sometimes, in the end.

Peter still works at the morgue, I think; last I heard he was still there. He is a Bad Hat my dear, a bad bad hat.

I know these days we're all about giving people the benefit of the doubt because we don't want to write anyone off, but sometimes you have to accept things for what they are and he is rotten.

I've told my girls to send me to a different morgue, when I'm done and dusted, because the Bad Hat is one strange man and he won't be getting his hands on me.

The Bad Hat lived next door with his Mum and Dad, Pat and John, and his sister Alice. They were all lovely and it's hard to believe the Bad Hat was one of them.

Maybe he was switched at birth.

I would go to the Boxing Day parties at their place and all the Birthday parties. Pat and John invited the whole family. They made me feel a part of it all and they called me Granny Gene.

I liked the potato salad with the fresh herbs. It had lemon thyme in it. Pat made the potato salad and she said she would give me the recipe, but I didn't want to make it myself, that's the thing, because I've done my fair share of cooking in my time and I'm over it, as they say.

Pat watched the kids very closely AT ALL TIMES. She couldn't relax for a second because her son is a Bad Hat. The little weasel threw the cat in the spit roast when he was twelve. We were all sitting up at the table and most of us had already served ourselves. I was the first to load up my plate, because they told me to help myself, and so I saw the whole thing. It was a horrible mess and that's why Pat was so uptight, because her boy is strange.

Eventually Pat got hold of the cat, it was flipping around like a fish out of water, making a God-awful noise. Pat took it to the vet but they had to put it down because it was in so much pain. Its paws were mashed up like jelly, like compote, because the embers got stuck in the soft pads of the paws. They said that there wasn't much hope anyway because of the likelihood of infection.

Pat took the cat over to the table and John pinned it out flat, like Jesus, so that Pat could get the coals out. John held the cat down in the middle of the table between half eaten plates of lamb and salad and Pat doused the mashed-up paws with water from the esky. Her hands were trembling and her big, bronze breasts were heaving and wobbling with the effort.

The cat was hissing and spitting: its cat eyes jumping out of its head. As the embers died, the eyes sank back and they looked dead, no shine. The body was limp but then writhing and then limp again and on it went, like a labour.

The worst bit, without a shadow of a doubt, was the noise. The cat kept up with this long squealing mew, sounding more human than cat and it didn't stop to take a breath in, only the pitch changed for a second, as it inhaled. Pat tried to wrap the paws in a wet tea towel but the cat would have none of it. Her underbelly was singed bare because she twisted away when the evil worm threw her in the fire. As she twisted, her torso smacked up against the drum of the spit and her front paws landed in the coals.

When Pat left for the vet, Alice started cleaning up the lunch. She's a good girl, Alice. The burnt cat on the table was a bit of an appetite killer and everyone scattered in different directions after that, but I sat there and ate some more potato salad, just so everyone knew that I was glad to be invited.

As I sat there I thought about the Bad Hat. When the cat was being loaded into the car, mewing as if the coals were still smouldering its paws, he was beside himself, sobbing and pulling his hair back behind his ears as if he was going to pull it out. He was the most distressed by far, much more so than Alice, and it was her cat.

It was as if the evil worm had no understanding that he would cause the animal pain, and that's the weirdest bit, and I know some people would say that he's not evil if he didn't know, that he's something else if he didn't understand, like maybe he's a mental or a slowbo or a depressive or something, but that's just the modern folks way of saying he's a Bad Hat.

They nearly forgot to serve the cake that day, because of all the who-ha with the cat, and the vanilla-slice-cake is the highlight of the parties. When I was a girl, my Mum would take me to

the milk bar every Saturday to buy a vanilla slice. Sometimes she had one too. Once, when Mum was not well, I think it was after she had John, she let me walk to the milk bar by myself.

The shop owner asked me to come around to his side of the bench so that I could show him exactly the one that I wanted but he didn't say exactly, he said *exacle*, so it sounded like sparkle. The milk-bar-man leant in beside me while I was choosing, bending over the glass cabinet, tongs in hand. He reached around my back with his spare hand, holding my breast and breathing his ashtray breath all over the vanilla slices.

He didn't charge me that day and I didn't know what to do with the money. If I gave it back to Mum I would have to explain, and if I kept it and spent it, then I was accepting the transaction: I was putting a price on my left breast, one vanilla slice, a big one, fresh custard, generous on the icing.

Usually, Pat gave me some of the vanilla-slice-cake to take home. I loitered around the kitchen until she remembered to give me some; sometimes I offered to dry the dishes. I made sure I took a thank-you-card over the next day. I usually mentioned the potato salad and the cake specifically and they gave me more, if there was some left.

There was no potato salad left after the Boxing Day party with the cat, because I ate most of it while Pat was at the vet. There were a couple of stray tabby hairs about but nothing to get your knickers in a twist about. John offered me a brandy and then he poured me a big whack of it, and a scotch for himself.

He sat down at the table with me and we picked at the food. He saw the stripey hairs too, brushing them away as he reached for the lamb.

We didn't discuss it.

~ ~ ~

The next time I saw the Bad Hat was at Alice's deb ball.

Alice came to tell me that she was having a party, to warn me about the noise and the music. She told me that the party would start at about midnight because it was an After-Party.

First they would have the deb-ball and then they would come back to Alice's house for the next party, the after-party, and that's the thing now: there are no limits, life's for the taking and there's no holding back, no shame. Enough doesn't have to be enough: first the party; then the after-party, and a day off after that for rest and recovery. You can have your cake and eat it too.

The after-party was just for the young ones so I figured they probably wouldn't have the vanilla-slice cake, probably just chips and nuts, maybe some dip and biscuits.

By the way, said Alice, we have a spare ticket to the ball. Mum said: Would you like to come?

I was sure they'd have cake at the ball, perhaps even a warm desert. These days, I eat more than I used to but I don't put on the weight. I'm not sure where the energy goes, to my memory I think, because it's very tiring, remembering, and sometimes I remember things I want to forget and I remember that I might have had a different life, not that I want one, but I remember that it's possible.

I married my deb-ball partner: Ned. He was my first and my... I don't want to say last. I won't say it. I can't believe that I may never have sex again. I keep it in the back of my mind, the possibility of it. I won't say dead either so I say I lost Ned because I did. Mostly I can find him again if I have a really good look but he'll never be dead, not to me. I know he died, I'm not senile, but he's not dead, I'm not crazy.

Ned used to say that there was only one woman in a white dress for him and then he'd tell anyone who would listen all about it, how beautiful I looked in my ball dress, which I wore again at my wedding, incidentally. It was Ned's idea. He said: *Wear something like your ball gown.* He said: *I'll never forget how you looked that night.*

My mother wasn't too keen at first but she was a practical woman and the gown was only two years old and still a perfect fit. We had the dress unpicked and Chantilly lace sewn in over the satin, flat up against the boned bodice, hanging loosely over the skirt and gathered at intervals around the base of the gown. Chantilly lace was Mum's favourite and the dress was exquisite. I still have it, wrapped in tissue paper, stored away in a box.

My girls could have worn it for their own weddings, if they wanted to, but they had other things in mind which is fine; well Grace didn't have a wedding because she's a lesbian, actually she's bi-sexual, but I think that's just because, these days, people can have a go at whatever tickles their fancy and Grace never did like to miss out. Luckily all the lesbian business came out after Ned passed because he liked things to be done by the book.

Last year I tried the dress on again and it still fits. I have reverted to my teenage size now, despite the eating. It looked ridiculous, of course, but I closed my eyes and held the lace between my fingers, floating lazily down one of the channels of my memory, with vanilla slice and Chantilly cream: my favourites. I wanted them for the wedding, but Dad thought fruitcake would be more appropriate, more traditional.

I have a vibrator in my dressing-table drawer because I've had a gutful of traditional and I've had my fair share of appropriate. I bought it when Ned passed on. That's not a bad

one, passed on, because it means that Ned is still around, only I can't touch him.

I ordered the vibrator on the Internet. I send packages to myself. You can buy anything on the Internet nowadays and there's nothing like a package arriving in the mail to brighten up your day.

The deb ball was my first real night out. That's how it was for all of us. That was the point of it, the tradition: a coming out ball; I mean coming out into society, because coming out is a homo thing now, isn't it? I mean a gay thing, because homo is not p.c., that's what I heard, and gone are the days when gay was just gay.

Anyway, nowadays they all seem to have been there and done that by the time their deb comes along, if it comes along, so it's just another party, a chance to get dressed up. I thought that debbs had died off. I thought they were too old fashioned but obviously not in Alice's neck of the woods. Sometimes things die off and come out all over again, like cupcakes, they're back in fashion apparently, and I'm partial to a good cupcake, I must say.

I suppose a lot of the traditional things have died off because now, with the Internet, you can experience everything without experiencing it. Some of it's a bit more real than virtual, if you ask me.

My daughters had the Internet put on for me at home so that they could send photos and messages from the grandchildren. They organised cable television too, to give me more viewing options, and the upshot is that I've learned more about sex, now, than I ever knew when I was in the thick of it.

I wouldn't have it any other way though. I love the memory of Ned and I, finding our way. It wasn't all about the orgasm, although there were plenty of those let me tell you, but it was more about the yearning and the fantasy.

Only one problem, I was nervous about my fantasies. That's how it was then: we lived in fear. It was all a bit careful, and everything was a sin of course. My girls think sin is a load of codswallop and that's the general consensus now, far as I can gather.

I know a few more tricks these days. I'm aware of the pleasure principle and all that and I just wish Neddy were here, just to test a few things out on, or someone else, just for fun, because there's a lot of uncharted water and I wouldn't mind having a little paddle.

I suppose it sounds sleazy if you don't know me, because I'm an old lady, I mean my body is old but that's just the outside layer, all the yearning is still there and I hope to God that goes when you die because imagine if you were stuck with all that yearning when your hands were too dead to pick up a vibrator. That would be awful.

Maybe that's purgatory, if there is such a place. Ned certainly believed that there was: heaven, hell, purgatory, and all good things must come to an end and just deserts and all that, but I'm not so sure. I've changed, I suppose. Maybe Ned and I wouldn't be such a good match anymore.

~ ~ ~

I told Alice that I would love to come to the ball. She said that I would travel in the car with her and Pat, and John would follow later with the Bad hat.

Alice didn't want her brother to know about the After Party. The plan was: John would leave the ball before us and take the Bad Hat into Town for the night. They'd go to a movie, have a Boys' Weekend.

Alice didn't want her brother to come because she didn't want the Bad Hat sleazing on to all of her friends, which was fair

enough, I thought, and I told them that my lips were sealed, of course they were, without a doubt, without a shadow.

The food at the ball was lovely. Pumpkin soup with ginger and coconut cream, thai style pumpkin soup, very exotic. The Bad Hat arrived with the soup: he needed to wash his hair.

Next I had the roast lamb. At first, they gave me the chicken but I wasn't impressed with that because it looked like public hospital food, so I swapped with Pat: she didn't mind. The dancing was all very modern, filled with fun, like I said, cakes aren't for looking at anymore.

Unfortunately the Bad Hat overheard Pat talking to some of the other parents. It was an underhanded type of overhearing, in the way of Bad Hats. He was loitering around, shifting in and out of people's shadows. He was desperate to be a part of it all, of course.

On the way home, Pat broke the news about the Bad Hat and Alice was furious. She screamed at Pat: *Just tell him NO*. She was crying and squeezing the ball gown between her fingers, she was squeezing rhythmically as if she was wanking someone. I know all about wanking. I watched the 'how to' tips on the telly. Dear, dear Ned, he'd be having the time of his life if he were still alive.

Tell him it's for the deb people only, said Alice, hysterically.

He is your brother, said Pat, braking suddenly.

He's a freak, said Alice. *He felt Anna up at my sixteenth. He didn't even talk to her or anything; he just came up behind her and started making this weird, moaning noise and put his hand up her skirt.*

Enough, said Pat, glaring at Alice and glancing at me. *Sorry Gene*, she said.

Oh, no... I said because I was enjoying myself. I was loving myself sick as they say.

She's not a baby Mum, said Alice. She would have seen it all and heard it all before.

That's enough, said Mum.

You promised, Alice sobbed.

There's nothing I can do about it now.

Yes you can, said Alice. You can watch him. I'm not watching him. Or he might throw someone in the fire.

Pat stopped the car and turned all the way around. She yelled at Alice: *ENOUGH! I'm sorry Gene, she added.*

That's alright... I began.

It's all right, said Alice. Gene understands. She was there when he fried my cat.

Everyone was quiet and I considered changing the subject, saying something complimentary about the roast lamb at the ball, telling them that it was very pleasant but not as good as their Boxing day lamb, of course, but that may have hit too close to the bone because the cat was burned by the same fire that roasted the lamb.

I said nothing. I focused on Alice, wanking her dress as she gazed out at the night sky.

~ ~ ~

For the first hour or so after midnight, I didn't hear much at all. The constant thrum of the music was there of course but not enough to drown *Prisoner* out. I watched the re-run and I hung on every word, like a groupie, a *Prisoner* junkie.

Ned would have thought *Prisoner* was trashy. He was very conservative really so maybe the sexual revolution that I fantasise about was always out of the question, but then we change in ways that we cannot imagine and I don't think Ned

would have been able to refuse a quick hand-job on the couch while we watched *Prisoner*, especially now that I really know my stuff.

As I watched the women in the prison laundry room, I thought how nice it would be to live with a big group of women, not that I want to go to prison because they wouldn't have vanilla slice there, or if they did it would probably be out of a packet, but I'd like to live like that, in a community of women. The men could pop in of course, so we could have sex with them, but then they could go again, because women make the world go round.

I know that sounds sexist but it's true of my life, of the man I knew and the men I didn't. I was accustomed to having Ned around and I miss him but now I would only have a man for the sex.

I got another *Prisoner* tape ready. I poured myself a glass of port and made a fresh pot of tea. I wanted to watch one of the episodes that I'd recorded: the one when Frankie Doyle tries to stab Bea in the tearoom, that's my favourite.

I wasn't a big fan of port in the old days but I figure we have to keep re-inventing ourselves and part of re-inventing is remembering. When I have a port it's like Ned has popped in from the passing on, I can taste him and smell him in the old show port.

I heard voices, they sounded as though they were in my driveway. I paused the tape and stood beside the window but I couldn't see anyone. They were talking loudly and I decided that I'd sneak outside for a bit of a listen because this was probably the best kind of virtual reality I was going to get.

I put on my shopping coat, it was fur lined and it had a hood and it was black, so they wouldn't see me. The fence was there so they wouldn't have been able to see me anyway but the

camouflage made me feel safe. I stood beside the pittosporum hedge and listened.

I couldn't hear anything for a while and I thought perhaps they'd gone but then he whispered something; I couldn't catch it. I heard kissing, wet-lip smacking, and some moaning. *Not here*, she said.

He said: *Where then? Out the front?*

I don't think you can get around from this side.

I'll check, he said and I gasped then, because he bumped the fence and the pittosporums shook. I saw his big square head at the top of the fence. I stayed as still as a dead cat and I was glad that I'd shifted back, near the garage. As he jumped down, the fence rattled and the pittosporums rustled back into place.

I can't really see, he said. *Let's go around.*

I headed towards my back door, thinking that they'd see me if they went out the front. I stepped up the stairs briskly but carefully and slid the glass door open. Before I closed the door, I heard the metallic rattle of the tin peg bucket. I kept it under the clothesline and it clanked as if someone had kicked it, as I had done so many times before, but I was probably just hearing the tin-bucket in the music, I was probably just deflecting my own peeping-Tommery onto someone else.

I closed and locked the sliding door behind me. It was very warm, back in the lounge, too warm. I went into the dining room at the front of the house. The heavy curtains were open but the sheer curtains were always drawn so that I could see out but people couldn't see in.

I didn't switch the light on. I took hold of the handle through the slippery veil of the curtain and opened the window a little further. I went to the bedroom and did the same, and then I sat on the edge of my bed and waited.

It was only a moment before I saw the boy with the big square head. He stood near my letterbox. He looked down the driveway and across the front lawn. The girl joined him and they linked hands, walking across the lawn and stopping when they got to the bottlebrush tree. They were right outside my bedroom window. The bottlebrush was quite a decent size now so the conditions must have been just right, afternoon sun, well-drained soil. When it came into its own, Ned planted some red roses and red geraniums along the front as a surprise.

The young couple kissed awhile and they whispered but I couldn't catch anything they said because it got caught in the wind and the curtains. She took off her coat and spread it over the grass. She whispered in his ear and he knelt down and then spread himself out on the coat. She unzipped him and I was surprised at this, thinking he was the one, but I am old fashioned and she hoisted his jeans down and took his penis in her mouth.

They were only a couple of metres in front of me, concealed from the street by the bottlebrush. She ran her hands up under his shirt and rubbed her weight against his thighs and every now and again she stopped and made him beg her. It was a joy to watch.

When she stopped for a third time, she slid off her flat shoes and her own underwear; she lifted her short skirt up and out of the way. I could barely believe what I was seeing and, if I couldn't have a go at these things myself, this was the next best thing, more real than virtual, and she was calling the shots and I was so very proud of her.

I thought it must be nearly over. I didn't know how they could hold on another second but then she knelt upright, unbuttoning her shirt, a final gift, and her bra opened from the front, ingenious. She took his hands, one at a time, and put

them on her breasts and she kept her hands on his. He couldn't stand it and he tried to pull her back to him but she wouldn't be rushed.

When she'd had her fill, she pushed his hands away, gently. He lifted his head to kiss her but she covered his mouth with her hand and made him wait.

I felt like clapping. My hands were held together, under my chin, ready to clap. I noticed that my hands were there because a tear ran over my finger, down to my wrist. For a moment I thought it was blood because I bleed easily these days, any little bump can set me off, and I'm not usually one for crying.

I wanted to applaud her because she knew what she wanted and she wasn't afraid to demand it. She wasn't prepared to settle for anything short of the icing on the vanilla slice.

As they walked back towards Pat's place, she whispered something in his ear. He kissed her on the head and then vanished. She sat on the top of my red brick letterbox, the Queen of the Castle, and she crossed her legs and ran her hands through her straight, shoulder length hair, getting a bit of air in it, giving it a bit of body.

Alice appeared then, walking towards her with a smile on her face and a little bottle of champagne in her hand. The Queen of the Castle put one of her hands up in the air, like a stop sign or a salute. Alice ran the last few steps and they smacked their palms together. They laughed and then hugged like the women who live in the land of my dreams. They sipped champagne from the small bottle, one straw each.

Out of the corner of my eye I caught a shadow. It was as if I was sitting in the front room in the afternoon and a cloud rolled in, shifting the light, except that it was night and there was no sun, only the smouldering light from the streetlamp.

It was the Bad Hat. He crept out from the blind side of my house. He, too, had been watching and it was an underhanded watching and I convinced myself that my motives were better than his. I reassured myself that I did not have it in me to hurt an animal.

I rushed clumsily toward the front door, banging my knuckle against the architrave. I flicked the switch, flashing the front light on and then off - once, twice - so that Alice and the Queen could see the Bad Hat as he shifted between the house and the bottlebrush.

My knuckle was bleeding profusely and the blood mixed with the tears like much of a muchness.

~ ~ ~

...So talk to Grace, Dearie, if there's something you want to know about the morgue. Steer clear of the Bad Hat though. If you know what's good for you, you will stay away from him Dear.

I wish Grace had stayed away from him. I think she had more to do with him than she let on, if you know what I mean.

Book two

Chapter seven

Coming and going

'not know whether *you* are coming or going [...] Definition[:]
to be in a very confused state'

Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary & Thesaurus © Cambridge
University Press 2011, viewed 13 September 2012,

<http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/british/not-know-whether-you-are-coming-or-going>

~ ~ ~

(Chelsea)

I was going to ring Grace before I landed on her doorstep but I was frightened she wouldn't want to see me. I didn't want to give her a chance to think about it. I wanted to hear what she had to say fresh.

When I arrived, she was just out of the shower. Her hair and body were wrapped in towels.

I started crying as soon as she opened the wire door. It was partly nerves and partly fear. I told her about Teddy and I told her about Mum. I didn't pretty it up.

Grace pulled me inside. She threw her pyjamas back on and she started talking, as if she'd always expected me to come. She was getting ready for work and I followed her around the house.

I'm sorry, said Grace, as she moved to the bathroom to do her eyeliner, to the kitchen to make a salad sandwich for her lunch, and then back to the bathroom to blow the dryer through her hair. I'd take the day off, she said, but I'm a midwife and the ward is overflowing with labouring women. They want me there early if possible.

I liked the moving about. It took the edge off. Grace moved fast and she talked fast; she didn't qualifying anything she said. It made it easier to listen to. She threw her pyjamas off and put her nursing uniform on. She didn't mind me.

At the end, for the last bit of the story, she wrapped her arms around me and held me really tight. It was good because we didn't have to look at each other.

~ ~ ~

(Grace)

I remember your Mum, of course I remember her. Annie changed my life. I've always felt as though I should have looked her up and said thank you. She made me wake up and smell the grass. She made me look at my life differently. All of a sudden I was very clear and I knew what I wanted.

I left the morgue that day and I never went back. I trained to be a midwife instead. I started seeing people in rather than out, coming rather than going, so to speak.

I'd had enough of Peter. He was in charge at the morgue and he was a major creep. He was the last person on earth I wanted to be left in a confined space with, and yet that was my job, to work alongside him. It was only the two of us and the dead people, just us, and the sea of the dead.

So much about that time is shifty and blurred but Annie is stamped in my memory for good. Some things get to you and stick and I'll never wash it away, the drowned dead boy and you, so chubby and pink and alive, and poor Annie, swimming in the grief.

The next day I woke up with my period, awful cramping, and so I called in sick, and that was it in the end – job done – I never went back. I thought a few days and I'd get my shit back together, but it was bigger than that: a few days didn't cut it. I needed to get away from the deadness. I was in mourning for death itself, for the absence of life everywhere. My life was bland and dead and nothing.

I grabbed my wrinkled clothes off the floor and headed straight for the shops. All I could think about was fresh coffee and the paper, maybe a chicken and vegie pie or a custard tart. There was no need for a shower because I intended to climb straight back into bed, have a long bath later and throw some oils in: patchouli, a few drops of sandalwood. I was thick with the mourning and I needed to take heed, pay homage to it: acknowledge that my life was empty and nothing.

Annie had this beautiful family and then her boy died. She held him in his deadness and it was the most horrible pull, so strong: you could feel it in the room, as tough and ropey as any umbilical cord. She was labouring like it was a birth but there was no promise, and as horrible as it was, it made me want a child more than ever. It seemed like the height of loving, even in death. It was the epitome of all the unfulfilled yearning I had inside me.

I headed towards the deli but I stopped in front of the two-dollar shop and read the *In Sympathy* cards. I thought: maybe I should send one to Annie? I chose one at random. A white crucifix rose out of the calm water; the crucifix tilted forward into the moonlit ripples, shining its white light, as if death were something glistening and wonderful. On the front of the card it said - A Bereavement. I opened the card. It said: *May the Solace of our Lord Jesus Christ Carry You.*

I laughed loud and hard but there was no happiness in it. I was thinking that there's no solace for Annie, none at all. The lady beside me took fright at my dark laughing. She sucked the air in and then frowned at me. I hadn't noticed her, immersed as I was in the lack of solace. She had her hands in the selection of two-dollar mittens. She looked at the card and scowled at me, as if I were googling porn in her bible group, sucking away all the solace.

I put the card back. I scowled back at her.

Her scowl softened as she glanced uncomfortably at the tomato stain on my crumpled shirt, at my dishevelled hair; she tucked her own hair behind her ear and cleared her throat. She looked at me in the way that we look at the special people when they're out on their excursions in the community. She stared at me like a bereavement card, pulsing with the comfort of the ever after. I stared back at her, eyes wide, until she wiped that warped smile off her face and turned away.

She probably thought I was a mental and I spent my day roaming two-dollar shops, hanging around in my dirty clothes. But then I worried that she was the mental. Perhaps I snubbed her when all she wanted was a chat, and that's the problem: we can never be sure that we're on the money. We might be reading people inside out, or back to front, all wrong.

We become so immersed in our own stuff that we only ever see other people through that, the kaleidoscope of our own empty mess. It plagued me. I thought we might as well be rodents, emotionless, eating our own babies. What's the point of feeling anything? Only grief can come of it if no one really understands anyone else.

I went next door to the newsagent to buy the paper. She was there again, the solace warden, but this time I smiled at her, a nice broad easy smile. I tried not to over-play it because I didn't want to seem condescending. I just wanted her to know that she could spark up a chat if she liked. I was just letting her know that I was approachable. I wasn't deranged enough to shut someone like her down.

She stepped backwards, away from me, tripping over her clunky boat shoes, stumbling over a pile of newspapers; she landed with a thump on the floor. I realised that I was right the first time: she thought I was a mental and she was worried about being too close to the strangeness.

I'm a lesbian, I said, looking down at her.

Oh, she said.

A dyke, I said to seal the deal, give her something to share with the folk at prayer group.

The girl behind the newsagency counter giggled and then covered her mouth. She came around to our side, extending her hand to the woman. *Are you okay?*

Yes, said the woman, pushing up off the floor and steadying herself. She walked out onto the footpath, glancing back at me, making sure I wasn't following her.

I should have skipped the two-dollar shop. I should have bought tampons and the paper and gone home to bed, read the obituaries and wallowed there, but I couldn't pass that rack of cards without reading a few. I was wallowing in miserable grief and empty yearning. I was hungry for some solace. I was even going to buy pads instead of tampons because with tampons you can pretend there's nothing going on, and I was done pretending, but pads are so last century and I couldn't do it to myself.

I had spent the last two days on a lemon-detox diet. It was an easy way to lose five to eight kilos, or so they said. I wasn't fat but I thought if I lost five I'd be lithe and there's energy in that a-touch-too-skinny look. It was the wrong time for me to start a deprivation diet. I've got will-power, don't get me wrong, but at that point in my cycle I needed salt and then sweet, in that order, salt-salt-salt-sweet, and no amount of mind-over-matter would get in the way of my desire for it.

So I lemon-detoxed until late afternoon and then I drove to *Maccas* for a fillet-of-fish meal-deal. I also got a big mac meal to take away. When I got to the paying counter I asked the guy to throw in an apple pie, now that almost mixes the whole notion of savoury and sweet. Delicious.

I know the over-eating makes it sound like I was a fat-ass, but I was the same size as I am now, small to medium. I'm a binge eater so I only eat like that in short bursts and then sometimes I starve myself, and I exercise, in an all or nothing kind of way. It's feast or famine in everything and I'm okay with it.

I went through this holistic, self-healing phase - Why do I deny myself and then lay it all on like Christmas? What is the emotional root of this chaos? Then I realised that this is how I

am. I've always preferred to have no biscuits or the whole packet. I'm okay with it now, for better, for worse.

I may be all or nothing but I'm not flippant. I'm steady about my job, my clean house, that doesn't fluctuate. I'm a nurse by trade but I got the job at the morgue because the money was steady and I was prepared to do some shitty hours. I had no life anyway and I wanted a proper holiday, Greek islands or something. I didn't feel like being around living people much anyway.

Then Annie made me realise that I wanted a baby. I was desperate for a baby actually, only I didn't want a man. I don't mind men: don't get me wrong; I quite like them. Sometimes I like to have sex with them, in fact there's nothing quite like it, the festering heat, but it's the waking up. It's the next day and the days after.

Sorry, I hope this is not too much. I'm just trying to explain how things were. You're about the same age as my daughter, only a couple of years older, but I can tell that you are old for your years, just like my Mercia. I've never understood why people treat teenagers like infantile freaks who need to be protected from everything.

I'm bi-sexual, as you've probably gathered, but I knew I couldn't live with a man. For the company and for the easy I'm-going-to-sleep-now sex, for that I like women, but I wanted a baby and I didn't want the man hanging around for the ride. I'd seen the strings-and-ties with my friends and their x's. I didn't want a bar of it.

I knew I could do it on my own.

I wasn't naïve. I'd seen my sister, Linda, with her three. I knew what was involved and I knew I could do it. I just wanted one. I wasn't greedy. One would do.

~ ~ ~

I offered to mind Linda's kids because I was temporarily jobless anyway. It would be a good time for me, right in the middle of my cycle, my up-beat time: positive, fertile thoughts. Men have it easy, don't you think? They're not governed by cycles, for them the shifts are all external. I'm not talking about *p.m.t.* clichés. I'm talking about real-life, internal tides.

I figured that minding Linda's kids would prove that I was ready to have a child, prove it beyond a reasonable doubt because we're talking about a human being here, not a cat. I hate cats: they freak me out, like they can read my mind or something.

When my neighbour, Julie, went overseas I looked after her cat. Stinking vermin filth, shitting in my bath and clawing my lounge suite, prancing around like it was a Queen or something, as if it were living in Egypt when cats were revered, but I wasn't living in the dark ages and I don't give a fuck about cats. I locked it in the laundry when I went to work. I gave it no-name cat food, the really cheap, dried-out stuff, just to put it back in its place.

I knew that if I could look after Linda's kids for five days then I could look after one of my own for a lifetime. I loved them, my nephews and my niece, and John would be there at night to help. Linda was having a hysterectomy: she'd had serious issues with her pelvic floor, and if that hadn't turned me off carrying and delivering a child, nothing would.

All of Linda's kids were at school by then and Linda had gone back to work, four days a week. I would be there all the time and I figured that I'd be able to clean her house, top to bottom, and then she could come home and relax. She was supposed to take it easy for six weeks but that was ridiculous because there's no way she'd be able to do that.

The first day was easy. I cleaned out the linen cupboard and washed the laundry walls and floor. Then I made a start on the kitchen and I got the top cupboards done. I was determined to get through the whole house, one room at a time, to surprise Linda.

I was a novelty so the children didn't argue if I asked them to do something. I made a lasagne before I went over and I put that in the oven after I picked them up from school. By the time John arrived home everything was done: homework, dinner, bathing.

John and I watched some telly after the kids went to bed and I plugged away at the washing and the ironing. I washed throughout the day so it was really just folding and ironing. It was actually kind of nice: it felt very even and homely, the comfort of domesticity. I suppose it was a bit weird for John, having me in all the intimate spaces, but he didn't seem to mind. Men are stupid when it comes to intimacy.

By Thursday, I'd detailed all of the communal living areas and I just wanted to change the beds and tidy the bedroom cupboards. I wouldn't change Linda's bed until the next day because I wanted her to come home to it all fresh and crisp. I made spaghetti Bolognese because the kids asked me to make that again and I made a double load of it and left some sauce in the fridge for when Linda got home.

I'd steered clear of the bedroom because it was John's space but I asked him if it was okay if I changed the bed and put some clothes away while he was at work. He said yes but he looked confused and I wasn't sure whether he was uncomfortable about it, or whether he didn't give a shit and he wasn't sure why I was asking.

I'm a lesbian, I said, and John laughed because he already knew that, of course, and because it was awkward: there was no reason for me to say that except that his look reminded me of

the lady outside the two-dollar shop. I said it without thinking because he looked at me like I was mental.

John's face went red. There was some sort of warped sexual innuendo in the air and I began to explain about the lady and the sympathy cards and the mittens. I was talking fast, trying to explain the weirdness away. I was trying to say that John's bed linen was his business, like my lesbianism was mine, but because we're family, we always end up knowing what we don't want to know...

I didn't want John to think that I was trying to crack on to him and then I wondered why in the world he would think that anyway and then, thank God, Ben got up, ripping through the strangeness, crying, holding his stomach and then vomiting, projectile vomit, blasting it out on to the family room floor, smashing the weirdness to smithereens.

I cleaned everything up in no time. John helped me and he was beautiful to Ben, running a bath and washing his hair and his body as if he was a helpless baby. When everything was spic and span I jumped into the shower but I had to call out to John because I forgot to get myself a towel. My red silky undies were lying on the floor when he brought the towel, and it was all too much really, knowing each other's undies. I've got a thing for nice undies.

John had a shower after me and then he cracked a bottle of wine, offering me one as I stood over the ironing board, pressing his collar. I had planned a bit of an alcohol free spell, in the spirit of my feast or famine lifestyle, but what the hell: it was the last night and quite frankly it was all getting a bit weird.

We drank two bottles of wine quickly, and then a nightcap. The strangeness came back when the vomit was gone and no amount of wine or cleaning could wash it away. Actually, it wasn't so much the wine as the intimacy, seeing John with

Ben, so tender, and me poking into all the homely spaces; that's what made me unravel. Four days was okay, five tipped me out of famine and into feast, and excess, and desire.

I can't believe I'm telling you this... I've never told anyone, not even my daughter, and we tell each other everything, well I tell her everything but I'm sure she has a few secrets, as she should. I told her that I don't know who her father is. I said it was a one-night stand and I don't know who he is, and that's true, to an extent, because her father was someone else that night and I've never seen him again.

Truth is like sand, don't you think?

Oh God, seeing you has made me remember that horrible empty yearning, as if it were yesterday. Annie symbolises everything about that time for me. She was my epiphany and I decided I would have a child one way or another. It wasn't premeditated though. I certainly didn't plan it.

I told John I was desperate for a child of my own but of course I over-explained it, saying that I really wanted a woman for the long haul but that I liked to fuck men. I'd always looked at John as my sister's husband, no more, no less and so he became a nothing, a token gesture of a person. He actually cried when I told him that I was desperate for a baby. It was very endearing.

~ ~ ~

I told Mum that I was pregnant first because I needed to get it off my chest and I had to tell someone. I blurted it out over the phone: *It was a one-night thing, a mistake, NO, an accident*, I said.

She said: *Oh*. Just: *Oh*.

I don't know what I expected her to say but it was more than *Oh*.

I'm a lesbian, I said, for no good reason, just as I said it to the two-dollar-lady and then to John. It was becoming a weird habit. I blasted it out when I was uncomfortable. I didn't even know I was going to say it.

Mum said: *Well you're a confused lesbian if you're rooting men.*

Rooting, I said, surprised that she would know such a word, let alone use it, but I suppose there's a lot I don't understand about her. I thought I knew her well but I only knew her as a mother and I don't require mothering anymore so she's become a conundrum.

I was disappointed that she gave me *Oh*. I told her that I wished Dad were here, even though he'd been dead for ten years and despite the fact that I would never have discussed the lesbian business with him. *What do you think he would have said?* I asked.

Hard to say, she said. I could hear her munching on something. *He probably would have suggested that you sort out your sexuality or go to confession. ...Who's the father?* She spoke quickly, absently, and then started the crunching again.

It's a secret, I said.

A tale-bearer revealeth secrets, said Mum, *but he that is of a faithful spirit concealeth the matter*. She sounded animated: *That's what your father would have said*, she announced, smacking her lips together and swallowing noisily.

Neither of us said anything for a time. Then Mum said: *Problem is, you'd spend your time wondering whether you were concealing the thing to save yourself or someone else.*

It was a one-night stand, I said. *I don't know him*. The chewing, the masticating, the swallowing, the whole lot of it was amplified by the phone line. I felt as if I were breathing her biscuity breath. My stomach churned and flipped because morning sickness was all about smells for me: I could smell

images, even sounds, I could see and hear smells, everywhere.

Are you eating biscuits? I asked.

She paused. There was more chewing and then a sigh. *Caramel crowns*, she said, moaning quietly. *Actually I'm in the middle of watching Prisoner. Do you want me to pause it?*

Never mind, I said, swallowing, trying not to vomit. *But can you stop chewing those for a minute?*

WHY? Mum kept on with the chewing. *Why would you say it was a one-night-stand? It just makes people want to know more. Now I feel like I have to conceal the matter too and I don't even know what I'm concealing, so you're making me feel guilty without cause.*

What are you talking about? I said.

The Bad Hat better not be the father, she said.

What made you remember that concealing thing now? I said angrily. *Did Dad say that to you?*

More crunching. Open-mouth crunching. No response.

Did you have an affair? I asked. I knew she didn't but I was deflecting. I was paying her back for the chewing noises and the annoying quote.

Is it out of the bible? I said.

Still nothing. Defiant crunching.

I want a baby, I said. *I'm a lesbian.*

Well lesbians are as good as the next man these days, far as I can see. She finished chewing the biscuits and swallowed noisily. *I'll pause it*, she said.

No, I said. *I'll go.*

~ ~ ~

Linda said: *Who's the father? Do you know him? If it wasn't in-vitro then obviously you fucked him.*

Yes, I said. But I promised never to tell.

So he knows he's the father, that's what I'm asking, because he's got a right to know. You wouldn't keep that from someone would you? It wouldn't be fair to the child?

He knows, I said. The child was conceived right after I told him how desperate I was for a baby. He knows I'm a lesbian.

So you haven't told him directly that the child is his?

No. But he knows.

I didn't know you were so desperate for a baby, said Linda sadly. You never told me. I don't think you really are a lesbian, not a classic lesbian, not a pure bred, because you've had more male sexual partners than I have. If that's what it means to be a lesbian, that you're happy to fuck men but you want to live with women, then I think there are a few more fanny bangers around than we think.

Linda winked at me. Maybe I'm one.

You're not a lesbian, I said.

How can you be sure?

Well have you ever been with a woman?

No, she said, picking her nails in silence.

I could be a secret lesbian, she suggested, like a cross dresser, a closet-lesbian. Maybe I just haven't come out yet. It could be a genetic thing.

Don't be ridiculous.

It could be. How would we know? She switched on the kettle. They'll probably find out in years to come that there's some sort of lesbian gene, the L gene. She had her back to me. You have to tell him, she said.

I told you, he knows.

If you haven't told him, how can you be sure?

Leave it alone, I said. Everything is not so clear-cut and homely and wholesome for me, okay. There will be no Dad to come home and bath the kid, read her a story and put her to bed, pour me a glass of wine.

Is that how you think it is, all so easy? She was crying by then and that's what she does: turns on the water works so that it always ends up being about her, one way or another. I tell you everything, she said, the ins and outs of my pelvic floor. Everything.

I said: Don't come to the birth then, if you're going to put conditions on everything. I can do it by myself. I can do the whole thing by myself.

But you can't, she said. No-one can.

Annie can, I said.

Who the hell is Annie? ...GRACE? What are you talking about?

~ ~ ~

I held the top of my distended belly, laughing uncontrollably, burping, wincing, pushing the palm of my hand firmly between the top of my ribs. Heartburn is so disgusting, I said. Does it go as soon as the baby is born?

Usually, said Linda, but by the time I had Ben it lingered a bit. The doctor said the muscles were weakened by the other pregnancies, something like that.

I reached for a bottle of antacid and drank some straight from the bottle. This stuff tastes revolting, I said, screwing the lid back onto the bottle, like cold sperm.

GRACE! ...Have you swallowed? Linda rubbed my feet harder and harder until I pulled away. We were laughing like children, spluttering, as if we were smoking one of Dad's cigarettes in the apple tree.

Stop, I said. I can't breathe. It was only once. I was staying in the guest room at Jim's parents' house. Remember Jim? I didn't want his

Mum to find it when she changed the bed. She would have thought I was denying him sexually if he had to, you know, blow his load on the sheets.

Jim was lovely.

Yeh ...and no actually, he liked to be attended to. He was very needy.

What do you mean? Linda poured some more oil into her hand and dug her thumbs into the tops of my feet.

Ow, I said, pulling my foot away. EASY.

No pain, no gain, said Linda. I'm trying to find some of those shiatsu pressure points; they're supposed to bring on the contractions.

Do you think it really works?

Linda shrugged. Castor oil, she said. That's supposed to be the best. It's an old wives' tale. Makes you vomit, gives you diarrhoea, starts labour.

Hideous, I said: Anything that doesn't involve sickness or pain?

Sex. The prostaglandins in the sperm as well as orgasm gets things going.

Sounds better than vomiting, I said, but as we all know I don't have anyone to have sex with, certainly not someone who produces sperm.

We were silent a few moments and then I started sobbing.

Linda looked surprised and I was just as surprised, probably more. It was an out of body experience. I no longer had any idea how my body would behave from one minute to the next.

Don't worry, said Linda. The end is horrible. You don't know whether you're coming or going.

Coming and going. It reminded me of Annie, of love in the face of death, of empty yearning and love with nowhere to go.

I'm falling apart, I said, sobbing.

Are you sure you don't want the father there, she said. Just for some support? Surely he owes you that.

It was a last ditch attempt to get the truth out of me, belt it out of me when I least expected it, prize it out of the blubbering whale.

My feet are swollen, I said, trying unsuccessfully to reach one of my feet. I can't eat or drink anything that doesn't give me heartburn. I can't sleep. I need to go to the toilet every thirty seconds. And I've been having these stabbing pains...

That's a good sign, said Linda. Means your cervix is softening up.

Well I could do without it, the whole lot of it, I said. Yesterday, at the supermarket, I flung myself into the lady in front of me. I whacked her with my shopping basket. It sent me through the roof, like a broom handle up your...

It'll be worth it, Linda interrupted. When I was overdue with Ben, Mum said... Linda stopped herself there.

You don't have to feel like you can't mention her, just because she's cut me off, as though I never was. I giggled and then I started crying uncontrollably.

She'll come around, said Linda gently, patting my back. She's probably starting to lose it. The beginnings of dementia can make you really cranky, someone told me, and she is acting mental, very secretive. She said to call ahead and check if I want to see her. She said: This is not your home anymore and I don't like surprises.

Linda's impersonation was on the money and we both laughed. We were talking at each other and over each other; it was like ping-pong, reactive, faster than thought, barely measured. Linda had me where she wanted me, defenses down.

Linda said: *Mum thinks the Morgue Man is the father.*

I stopped laughing. I could smell the morgue room. The smelling sickness took over, suffocating morgue antiseptic, coming and going, Peter's mothball putridness...

I ran to the bathroom and vomited in the bath, and it was a relief, the vomiting and the clean up, because I didn't have to look at Linda. She knew I needed to measure everything, now and forever more.

~ ~ ~

Well that's the best-kept secret in the history of womankind, I said as they wheeled me onto the ward. I was sitting up in the bed. Linda was waiting. *I couldn't believe you didn't tell me what it would be like,* I said.

I told you, said Linda, stroking my forehead. *It's not something you can really put into words.*

Unbearable pain. They're words.

Grace!

What? I said, flinging my arm in the direction of my baby in the clear-sided hospital bassinet. *I've had her for two hours,* I said, *and I know that I could never abandon her. When she grows up, I'll tell her that, when her baby's head is being born, she will feel like she's going to vomit and die but she won't, she'll survive, because delirium will set in just before that happens.*

You'll feel better tomorrow, said Linda. *Look at her. She's an angel.* She loosened the bed covers and got the oil out to rub my feet.

I shook my foot irritably in her hands. *Don't,* I said.

Linda took a step back from the bed. *Can I get you anything?*

My baby, I said. *I'll have my baby.*

As Linda handed her to me, I lifted the bed covers and tucked her in, right up against my chest. I pulled the blankets over us so that all I could see was her dear little head.

One of the midwives came in to take my pulse and check on things. *It's best to keep the babe in the bassinet, she said, in case you fall asleep Honey,* she added softly.

Sleep is for lesbians, I said. The midwife looked at me and then at Linda, shrugging her shoulders, the twinkle of a smile. She poured me some water, pressed my abdomen, commented on the shrinking uterus; she asked if I had any pain.

Pain is for dykes, I said dreamily, rubbing my fingers over my baby's eyelids, nose; lips.

The midwife laughed this time, along with Linda, and I smiled too, but there was sadness, breathing it's beaten breath everywhere, coming and going, festering all the while beneath the laughter and the lesbianism, and the miracle of this tiny person, like a bereavement.

~ ~ ~

Annie is the reason I have my daughter, her love for you and your brother, and her tenderness for him, even in death. She had everything wrenched away from her because she fell asleep and, my God, she looked so tired, I've never seen anyone so tired.

She taught me that all you can do is love your children; that's all you can do because the rest is out of your hands. She said: *I can only love them; I can only love them.* It was everything and nothing; she was coming and going and it was the epitome of love but it was useless and not-good-enough in the face of a drowned dead boy.

I'll never forget her. I called my daughter Mercia: it means mercy, same as your Mum's name means. I named her after Annie.

I'm a midwife now. I did my middy because it's all about coming and going, that's all there is, coming and going, going and coming, and all you get to do is love your people, that's the only solace, that's all there is.

You tell Annie I said thanks. I owe her everything.

Book two

Chapter eight

Getting away with murder

Get away with murder:

- '1. *Lit.* to commit murder and not get punished for it [...]
2. *Fig.* to do something very bad and not get punished for it'

McGraw-Hill Dictionary of American Idioms and Phrasal Verbs 2002, The McGraw-Hill Companies Inc., viewed 18 March 2011,

<http://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/get+away+with+blue+murder>

~ ~ ~

(Chelsea)

I tell Janice about Gene and I tell her about Peter. *He's supposed to be a Bad Hat*, I say, quoting Gene, and then I think that 'Bad Hat' sounds harmless, and so I say: *He's supposed to be a real creep*. I tell Janice everything, more or less, because I like her. I like her a lot.

Janice says: *Let me talk to Peter. I'm used to creeps. I'll go in uniform, catch him off guard, so he thinks it's a formal investigation.*

I agree because I don't want to waste any more time and I think the cop uniform is a great idea.

The plan is: Janice will visit the creepshow and find out where Teddy is buried. Janice has to tell me EVERYTHING. I make her promise. I make her shake on it.

She says: *Have I held out on you before? I told you I freaked out about the ghost; I told you about my jealous obsession with your Mum; I told you I think James is your Dad. My cards are on the table Honey!*

~ ~ ~

(Peter)

Of course I remember. It is my job to remember.

The mother wanted to take her boy away in a bag. She talked to Grace about it, after hours. Grace was a push over. She let people get away with murder.

I reminded the mother that these things must be checked with me. Grace did not have the say-so at the morgue.

I was in charge, at the end of the day I was responsible. I thought someone might ask questions one day, just as you are doing now Constable... I mean Detective.

I wanted my opinion to be there in black and white – I do not approve – I wanted the mother to know that she wasn't pulling the wool over my eyes.

Tell me Detective: Why the interest in this now, after all these years?

...Okay, okay, none of my business, you're asking the questions, but I'll tell you this: there was something fishy about that mother, that's for sure.

She said that the boy was to be buried on the family farm. She claimed that her father was carving the coffin specially. Her story was coherent, I'll give her that, the farm and the woodcarving were a fit, but that didn't mean she was telling the truth. Coherence is not truth. It has never been, now and never shall be.

The mother laid it all out so that it seemed logical, and her story made it look as if she was doing her best, but how could I really be sure of that? There was something off, something askew. I'm not just talking about the drowning; I'm talking about guilt, murky guilt.

I didn't trust that mother as far as I could throw her. She was hiding something. Who takes their dead boy away in a bag? That's what I wanted to know.

Grace told me that the mother didn't have much money. It was cheaper, you see, if she transported the body herself, and then she'd skip the cost of the coffin to boot. Grace believed the mother simply because she looked like a good person – clear blue eyes, luminous skin, sunny blonde hair. The mother was beautiful, I'll give her that, but some of us have cause to know that beauty is a lying bitch...

Pardon me, Detective. It's only that I see the worst sort of people in my line of work, as I'm sure you do Detective, so you know where I'm coming from.

I have learned to be wary of people. You will understand what I mean because you've seen it too: human weakness is no surprise to you. I've done my share of detective work too, so I understand: we may not want to think the worst about people but the worst is sometimes true. It certainly seems to have been true in the case of this mother, Detective, if I may be so bold.

~ ~ ~

I was disappointed with Grace because she said: *Yes, Honey, you can take your child away in the dead bag.* That's exactly how she would have said it too, in her pathetic, beautiful people's voice. Grace had the wrong personality for the job: she trusted people too much; she was beautiful herself and she thought the best of people.

The mother was obviously poor but poor is no excuse, it's merely a circumstance, it's circumstantial, like beauty. I mean, come on, there's poor and there's just plain bad. People come in here, crying over their dead like they're martyrs or something, flagellating themselves with their useless tears, but when you've heard as many dead people's stories as I have, you know the truth: half the dead wouldn't be dead if someone had taken better care of them when they were alive.

It sounds callous but it's not, it's dead true. I'm on the side of the deceased, don't forget, and what do they care about crying?

I take photos of the dead faces before they're made up for the viewing. It's part of my job, it's not for fun, but I don't need to tell you Detective because you will appreciate some of the more gruesome aspects of the work.

The family provides the 'alive' photo. I put the dead photo and the alive photo side by side, and it gives me a sense of what

needs to be achieved, so that we know what we're aiming towards, aesthetically, for the final viewing.

Taking photos of dead faces may sound sick and sad but it's a question of methodology and that's what I'm trying to explain, methodology is a beautiful people's word, it turns sick into philosophy and sad into art. In the case of my work it's just a way of managing death, and death is not something we understand well, Detective, try as we might and such.

I look at the dead face and the alive face, side by side, and I try to understand. My eyes have adjusted to the shadowy side of things, you see, so that I can see beyond the dead faces.

I know people think my job is strange but my eyes have adjusted and there's nothing strange. You know what I mean, Detective: we've seen some things we'd prefer not to have seen and we have to focus. It's important not to lose sight of what's right and wrong. We can't get blasé, just because we've been called to do work that most people can't manage: we've been called for a reason, Detective.

I can see that you appreciate what I'm saying... It's all about perspective and so on. Shifty and underhanded is not okay. That's why I told Grace that I would need a written report to verify the alleged burial plan. Grace had made her bed and now she would have to lie in it. She was the one who gave this underhanded burial the nod. She was the one who said it was okay for the mother to drive on through and collect her boy as if he was a cold roast chicken. There's only one thing worse than that, as far as I can see, and that's the uncollected: the uncollected dead.

I will not be one of the uncollected. That will not be me. I've set things in place. At the end of the day I will be laid to rest beside my actions and I want to make sure they get the story straight. That's why I have written my own funeral plan. I

don't want to be squirming or leaving other people to squirm on my behalf.

My funeral booklet lays it all out, the order of service and so on and so forth: it's all ready to go when the time comes, it's all prepaid. I had to do it myself, to do myself justice if I may, because this is my line of work, my area of expertise and there's no one else. I'm not sure who will direct the service; I'm not sure who is the right man for the job, or woman of course but, when I hear it, I hear it in a man's voice. Nothing against the fairer sex, Detective.

When I decide who will direct my requiem, I'll pay handsomely, because I want it done right, to the letter. There may not be anyone much there to witness it but never mind – funerals are not a popularity contest and many a brave soul was no crowd pleaser in his day.

It is my job to look out for the dead, remember, so needless to say, no thanks expected there and the beautiful are dead in their own way, sometimes, and thankless. The beautiful are the walking dead. I'm speaking of beauty metaphorically, Detective, but you understand, of course you do.

~ ~ ~

It wasn't unreasonable for me to ask Grace for a written report. It was a fair enough request. If we are to resort to wartime, plague-like, codes of conduct, where bodies are disposed of willy nilly, then we must at least say why.

If someone were to ask questions, I didn't want my name on it. The beautiful people are full of questions and always at liberty to ask them, of course, given their beauty.

You know what I mean detective because you understand accountability. It is part of your job as it is part of mine and so I'll tell you what I know because we're kindred...

I thought that if people started taking their dead away in bags, the beautiful people would come with their questions, I knew they would, and everyone would be desperate to give them their answers, clambering to endorse their truths, because we must keep the beautiful people's world beautiful, even if they never stop to say thank you, even if they just expect people like you and me to do it all for them.

I wanted to make sure that my attitudes were clear if this ever came to light, and the past has a strange way of simmering back to the surface when you least expect it, so that light becomes shade and shade light, if you catch my drift, and of course you do...

So I told Grace that I would require a written report and I documented my lack of support vis a vis the burial plan, just to cover my bases, just in case this ever came out of the shadows, as it is now, out of the closet ...NO, out of the shadows, because closet is a faggot thing, isn't it? Or so the beautiful people say.

Sorry, it's only that I can speak candidly to you because we are one and the same...

I didn't want someone to flick on the lights and make it look like I was trying to get away with anything, that's the long and short of it, so I made Grace sign off and say that she agreed to this. I made the mother read what Grace had written and I made her sign too. She had dirt under her trembling fingernails; she had dry knuckles and blistered palms. It merely confirmed my suspicions: she had dug a hole for her boy somewhere.

The country burial plan was a sham; the happy family story was probably a hoax too. I could have pitied the mother but I did not. She made her decision and now she must be accountable in the same way that everyone else must be accountable, beautiful or not, and whatnot.

People must be prepared to put their names beside their actions, to stand up and say: I did it. The beautiful people think they can get away with murder. I am sure you can relate to what I'm saying, Detective, because instinct is paramount in your line of work too.

I work in a university library now. I don't have any family to speak of so I have time for a second job and it gives me access to all the latest learning and such. I'm not passionate about the library but I am passionate about aspects of the job.

The students put their feet up on the furniture, they neck each other in the cushioned corners and have sex in the disabled toilets (they think I don't know); they probably call it making love, bloody hedonists. Excuse me Detective, but I am passionate about teaching those little slugs what's right and wrong. The university is a place of learning, not a stopping place for free sex. I check the disabled toilets regularly. I can unlock the door from the outside if necessary. I only got it wrong once. We all make mistakes, especially when we're working tirelessly for the greater good. You...

~ ~ ~

It's fair to say that I expect a lot of myself and I have high expectations of others. That's why I hid in the Ti tree all night long, watching out for the mother and the boy in the dead bag. That's why I stepped out in the shadowy light of dawn, in my tinted glasses and my khaki army-pants with the thermal over-jacket. That's when the mother knew that I had been there for the whole night, for the long haul, watching. I needed to make it clear to her that she could not run away from herself, or her actions. What goes on in private is not stricken from the record.

I am not blind, I said to her, and then I ran towards her, stopping a few steps short of the grave, taking my glasses off and yelling: *You think you can get away with murder. NOT ON MY WATCH.*

~ ~ ~

(Chelsea)

Janice has the fire going. She peels the foil wrapping from the champagne bottle. She says: *And so it seems that Teddy is buried here, in the garden. So he's the...*

At that moment, the cork pops, hitting the roof.

...ghost, she says, and we giggle because we're not sure how to behave.

He is a revolting man, says Janice. *A disgusting fucking weasel, but I bit my tongue and let him talk until he told me about Teddy. I would have liked to stun-gun him into oblivion. I could have used a whole party pack on him.*

I'm glad you didn't go and see him, Chelsea. He's the scum of the earth. Putrid breath. You're too good for the likes of that shitbag.

I sip the champagne: it's smooth and peachy. Janice said it's a really good one, and I swish it around in my mouth and soak in the news awhile. I think: Why not champagne? At least I know where Teddy is now. At least I know he has a resting place, but it's not so much to celebrate either, thinking of Mum, all alone, burying my brother.

The beach wind rattles the venetians and we stare outside. The wind flutters in the Ti tree, sprinkling tiny leaves around like sunburnt confetti.

Book two

Chapter nine

A wake

'Definitions of Wake and Their Implications

Broadly speaking, wakes are parties or social gatherings held in connection with funerals. These sometimes involve keeping watch beside the corpse and behaving in a demonstrative way, either by lamenting or merry-making. This implication of unruliness is widespread. According to *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* (1978), the wake is "a vigil celebrated with junketing and dancing." The word primarily means, of course, to prevent someone from sleeping, to wake the person up, to disturb the person's slumber and make it impossible for him or her to slip back into it. The "junketing and dancing" take place in order to wake the person up again. That is why, compared with ordinary social behavior, wakes stand out as wild and unrestrained: They have to be "fit to wake the dead."

Encyclopedia of Death and Dying 2012, viewed 30 March 2011,

<http://www.deathreference.com/Vi-Z/Wake.html>

~ ~ ~

(Chelsea)

James wants us to come over for a proper celebration. He wants to formally acknowledge that he's my father.

Janice says he likes a bit of formality, a bit of ceremony. *He's a bit of a wanker*, she says and we laugh.

I'm happy to go because I've got my own agenda.

I'm not sure if they'll like what I have to say.

I'm not sure what I have to say.

~ ~ ~

(James)

They arrive at midday, right on time, and I'm ready. I've been cooking for a few days. I want everything to be perfect.

I pour everyone a drink. I have French Champagne and some really cracking wine: Chardonnay and Pinot Gris from the best spots on the peninsula. I have various varieties of red wine, beer and cider, imported and local. I leave nothing to chance. I've invested all my energy in this celebration and I'm wired. I haven't slept much these past few days but I'm not tired, in fact I've never felt so awake in my life.

We sit outside, overlooking the water. It's a mild day, twenty-three degrees, a light southerly wind, but nothing to speak of, only a ripple or two on the bay, like a postcard.

I make a toast. It's more like a speech. I say: *I'm very proud to be your birth father, Chelsea, and I hope I can be a real father to you in some ways, belated as it is.*

I want to thank you, Annie, for the incredible job you have done, on your own. Thank you Pelts for bringing us all together. And thank you Janice, for your generous spirit, for welcoming Chelsea as family.

I am indebted to you all.

I break down then. The emotion of my new found fatherhood is all pent up, and speaking it means that I am overflowing; it is cascading out of me and I feel grateful to everyone, to the universe. I feel incredibly awake and purposeful.

I look at Chelsea directly now: *If there is anything I can do for you, Chelsea, please ask me. I know we have a lot of catching up to do. I realise that is an understatement, but please tell me what I can do for you. I don't care what it is...*

Chelsea says: *I want to know where my brother is buried.*

No one speaks. No one moves.

Annie says: *I will show you.* She stands up from the deck chair unsteadily, brushing past the huge terracotta pots, overflowing with seaside daisies. She walks slowly, like an old lady. She takes Chelsea's hand and we follow. I feel like the postcard afternoon is about to fall through my fingers.

As we walk around to the west side of the house, a fast-moving, low-lying cloud passes overhead and the afternoon flickers grey and shadowy as if a light has short circuited. I'm not superstitious but the postcard is becoming dimmer, it's fading like an old photo, turning the day into something else, black and white and washed out and dead.

The cloud passes momentarily and the sun is out again by the time we get to the laundry. Annie stands near the door and she steps out ten regular paces, heading towards the old pine tree and counting them aloud. When she gets to ten, she slips off her shoe, and leaves it there on the grass, to mark the spot.

Then she walks over to the trunk of the enormous pine, stepping the paces out again from that side, heading back towards us, counting aloud. She arrives back at the same spot and slips her foot back into the shoe. *Here, she says. Teddy is buried here.* Annie crouches down and takes some grass and

topsoil in her hand.

Chelsea says: *I want to dig down. I need to know that he is definitely there.* Her voice is shaky. She is pent up too. There's some cascading in store for her as well. I want to help because I'm a part of it. I'm her father and she's asking for help.

I want to dig now, says Chelsea.

Annie nods her head slowly. Chelsea looks at me.

OF COURSE, YES, I say, like a desperate father with a desperate child. I turn to Janice.

Don't let me stand in your way, says Janice.

Pelts fetches some spades from the shed. He knows where everything is around here and he gets the bocce set out for the Grandad. I get a chair for Annie because she looks pale. Pelts and Chelsea start digging. Janice and I fetch the table and some more chairs and we bring everything around to the digging side of the house. I bring the ice tub filled with beer, champagne and white wine, and I open a bottle of red and decanter it, placing the glass jug on the table. I bring some food: salmon and dill focaccia, miniature toasts with caramelised onion and marinated fetta, a platter with olives and cheese.

It's all quite civilised except that we're digging up someone's grave. I feel at home with these people. Chelsea's my daughter and Annie's her mother and Janice is warm and good: she loves me like this, now that I've stepped out of my careful shape and shadow. All in all, the mood is very warm, except that we're about to unearth a grave.

I bring a tub with hot water, and a face washer and soap, so we can wash our hands after digging, so we have clean hands to eat. Janice is wonderful. She takes over all the hosting duties while I'm digging: she hands out food and takes her turn at the bocce game with Grandad; she gets him laughing and talking

like they've known each other for years, talking about things that I didn't know were in her repertoire, horse races and famous jockeys, the perfect lasagne. She is out of her shape and shadow too; she has come alive again and she sees me.

Chelsea says: *Mum, are you okay? Are you sure this is okay with you, if we dig? MUM?*

Yes Shells.

Mum, you look pale, how do you feel?

Annie takes a deep breath. She rubs her palms up and down her face. She says: *Awake, Shells, I feel awake.*

Well it is a 'wake', says Pelts. I'm not being facetious – facetious, is that the right word? I don't mean to be... but it is Teddy's wake isn't it; I mean it probably is...

We all glance at each other nervously and then Chelsea explodes with laughter. I laugh too because we're full of nervous energy and we need to let it out. Chelsea moves to a different level of laughing. She is laughing so much that she is crying and she wipes the tears away with her clay hands, painting streaky clay-stripes across her cheeks.

I'm addicted to the sound of her laughing because she's my daughter and I never knew but I always knew, in a way. We're laughing together and I take some soft clay and dunk it in the water tub. I paint my cheeks like Chelsea's because I want her to know I'm in; I'm in all the way. Chelsea looks at me a moment. She stops laughing for a moment, which is a bit scary, but then she takes a piece of the soft clay and she wanders over to Annie. She wipes the clay across her cheeks.

Pelts and Janice and Grandad won't be left out of the fun so we take care of them too. Grandad wants it everywhere, a full mask. We look like we're preparing for some kind of tribal ritual. We look ridiculous. As the clay dries, it stiffens against our skin like plaster, and every smile feels like more than it is,

every frown.

Perhaps I should turn the music up, says Janice and we all agree. *You're a mad bunch*, she says warmly and she smiles at me, just for me. She sets the stereo on the washing machine and puts the speakers through the laundry window. She chooses celtic jigs and reels and she pumps it up. It's a good choice, fast and dizzy, no words: we don't need too many words today.

Digging is thirsty work and nobody is interested in water or anything soft today because soft drinks are unsuitable for waking the dead. I refill the plastic tub with beer and ice because it feels like thirty-three degrees, rather than twenty-three, digging in the sun. We knock back cold stubbies to quench our thirst: fast, seamless sips to wash away the morbidity. We sip champagne and wine in between the beer, drinking fast and digging fast, in time with the music.

Chelsea mixes a shandy for her Grandad. She pours the lemonade into the beer and she tells me that he's lost half his mind already and beer won't help the other half. We laugh together and our laughs are similar, fast and gurgly. I'm glad to recognise a tangible link, something that connects me to her physically. Janice says that Chelsea and I have the same chin and the same eyebrows, but all I see is Annie: the old Annie.

Chelsea doesn't feel like a stranger. She's like a forgotten memory, familiar but forgotten. I'm treading carefully because I don't know if she feels the same way and I don't want to push. The best thing I can do for her is dig and I only stop digging to drink. I have never been able to do anything for Chelsea and this is something she wants and I can help. I can't think about the dead reality of a boy buried under the earth, only that there's something I can do for my daughter, because I'm her father, and I go at it, hammer and tong.

The music matches our momentum. Chelsea takes on the rhythm of the reel, pounding the spade into the earth. My

fingers dance against the green glass of the stubbie as I take a good long sip. Janice is swinging her hips as she bends down to roll the bocce ball. Even Annie is moving her knees, very slowly, up and down.

Chelsea stops suddenly. *Go easy*, she says, putting her hand on my spade to still it. *We don't want to... break him up.*

He is in a fridge, says Annie.

I can't hear you, says Chelsea.

I put him in a fridge, says Annie.

Chelsea stops digging and rests her weight on the spade, puffing steadily. Sweat dribbles from her forehead down her clay cheeks, like tears. She pauses, draws breath. There is nothing to say about the fridge but we all stop because it's another dead moment.

I can't believe you dug this, all alone, says Chelsea, finally. She speaks loudly, so that her voice will carry over the music, so that Annie can hear her loud and clear over the steadily growing mound of clay. Chelsea says: *I can't believe there is so much clay. Now that we're digging it up it looks like more than it was in the ground; it seems to have multiplied now that we've interfered with it. How did you do it Mum?*

Annie shrugs her shoulders: *It was all I could do. The best I could do.* Her voice breaks on best and the air becomes thick. I can't breathe and Chelsea looks like she's struggling for air too.

Janice strolls over from the bocce game: *Shall I turn on the barbeque?*

I wonder if it's okay to cook a barbeque when you're digging up a grave. It seems cannibalistic or something. I turn to the others. I say: *I have Greek lamb, butterfly lamb, and marinated chicken strips.* I offer the details of the food to make it clear that these are animals we're cooking here, nothing unusual about that. Everyone looks at me blankly.

I turn back to Janice. I say: *Yes please, fire up the barbeque.* I wash my hands and get ready to cook because that's my thing. Janice is a dud in the kitchen. While the barbie is heating up, I check on everyone's drinks. I get rid of some of the empty stubbies and wine bottles. I top up the tubs again as if we're starting fresh. I'm light on my feet, dancing a reel in my own back yard. The world's my oyster because I'm a father, and I don't really think about the fact that we're digging up a grave, but I make a mental note of it, to remind myself, because I don't want to be insensitive.

Janice brings everything to the table while I'm cooking: Greek salad and bread, roasted potato and sweet potato. We polish off our stubbies. I take the meat off the heat and pour some wine to have with lunch. Janice turns the music down a little, just while we eat.

It's after three before we are seated at the table. My shoes are slick with thick clay. I'm dirty and exhausted from the digging. I look around the table and I feel good, like the father of a family who works together, plays together. Chelsea and Pelts have the shock of the wind in their hair and the hazy glaze of hard work in their eyes. Annie looks pale and sleepy, but serene, and there's a bit of pink in her cheeks.

I don't really know Annie anymore and I suppose I never did. She looks a little bit like she used to, but so skinny. I may not have known Annie, not really, but I loved her, for a time. It was impossible not to love her. She had this clear, burning energy. I couldn't resist.

Janice looks at me like she's seeing me for the first time, like when we were first together and she couldn't resist me. Her hair is out and I love it out, long and warm and chestnut shiny. Grandad is tucking into the lamb, his lips are glossy with the juices and his eyes sparkle with the pleasure of it.

Bon appétit, I say, holding up my glass. *Thank you for coming.*

Bon appétit, says Pelts, and we all clink our glasses together.

Chelsea says: *If the ground was up to Mum's shoulders when she was standing in the hole; I mean, if the grave was as deep as she is tall, and now there is a fridge in there too, then we must be getting close. ...Unless we've got the wrong spot.*

Chelsea doesn't beat around the bush. She brings us all back to the slick, thick reality that we are unearthing a grave. We are digging up the pent up, waking dead things.

You are very close, says Annie. *There is no mistake about the place.*

I serve everyone some more lamb and Pelts talks about the old days when Teddy and Chelsea were children, playing under the old pine tree. He says: *I remember Teddy playing out here...*

Grandad interrupts: *Me?*

No Grand, says Chelsea. *Remember I had a brother. He had the same name as you; he was named after you. He died. He is buried in that hole. I'm making sure he is still there.*

Oh, says Grandad. *Where else can he be?*

Nothing -I mean- nowhere, says Chelsea, shaking her head. *I'm just making sure.*

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We get stuck into the digging again after lunch. I turn the music back on: the same cd, more reels and jigs, because the Irish know what they're on about, they know that happy and sad are not so different, they know that when things get tough, you need to party harder than ever. The music is not really civilised for gravedigging but it's highly appropriate too, the tempo, the wordless firecracking love-sweaty energy.

We've had a skin full of wine and beer but we keep on with the drinking and the digging. By the time Pelts' spade hits the fridge, metal on metal, a hard empty twang, there's not much

sun left on the west side and the wind has picked up and swung around. It's colder now and the postcard is changing again. Chelsea's spade clangs against the fridge a split second later, like a cymbal. Chelsea grabs hold of Pelts' arm and that's the end of the digging.

Chelsea starts weeping. I always thought crying and weeping were the same but the noise distinguishes them, the mourning noise: it sounds a little bit like a donkey braying. Chelsea gets down on her hands and knees in the hole and scoops the clay from the fridge by hand. Pelts follows her lead. It is warmer in the hole, because they're protected from the wind, but Annie and Grandad are feeling the cold and Janice and I go inside to get some jumpers and coats.

The daylight is getting dingy now and it makes our clay faces look whiter. Our plaster mask faces stand out like we're in a play. The spotlight from the laundry lights us up.

To be honest, I'm having the best day of my life. I feel like the star of the show, but I try not to act too excited because we're digging up the dead and I'm not the point.

I'm going to light a fire, I say, handing around the coats. I ask Pelts to help me carry the fire drum that I have near the shed. I need help to carry the drum but I also feel that Chelsea doesn't need anyone in the hole anymore. Annie has come over to the edge, and Pelts lowers her in, and it's time for us to step back.

The fire drum is made from the old, electric hot water system that used to be the roof. The old drum looks like an enormous tin can. When Pelts renovated the bathroom, he put in a new gas system and he took the old drum out of the roof, splitting it lengthways and welding the rounded outer sides together. It makes a perfect portable fire drum.

I fill the drum with paper and pinecones and loads of kindling and then, when I've got it firing, I add the Ti tree logs, the smaller pieces first. It smells like beach incense. The earthy

smoke of Ti tree timber mixes with the perfume of the pinecones and the salty breath of the sea. I throw in the bushy branches, covered in Ti tree leaves, and when they hit the flames they spark, like tiny white lights, like fireflies.

I nick inside and get the really cracking bottle of red that I bought because it was bottled the same year that Chelsea was born. I march outside and I'm ready to tell the others why I bought it but I decide against it because they're in the hole with the dead boy.

I ask Annie and Chelsea if I can pass them a glass, down in the hole, and Annie says: *Yes that would be lovely*. Chelsea doesn't answer. She is busy shifting the clay off the fridge door. She does it tenderly; she's kneeling down on the door and she has the soap and water down there, cleaning the rusty old fridge door as if it were a tombstone, as if she's trying to decipher the inscription: making sure she's on the right grave.

It's very instinctive and we just watch on; we don't go too close. We wait and see what Chelsea will do because she's calling the shots. She asks for the spade and she lifts the old aluminium label off the front of the fridge. It says *Kelvinator* and it has a picture of an old sword, like a celtic sword. She washes it carefully and puts it in her pocket.

After a time, the old fridge is as clean as a whistle in its bed of clay. It looks like a coffin except that it is wider. The reality of the gravedigging is so very real, now that we can see the fridge, and everyone is quiet. We will soon run out of daylight so Janice gets the portable spotlight, and we shine it towards the hole. I get the big battery lantern.

It's Annie and Chelsea's time in the hole together and there's no rushing it so we get on with other things in up-here time. I clear the empty bottles and Janice puts the cakes on the table. I get more wine and put some logs on the fire. Janice gets some mozzie coils and candles in glass holders and she puts them

around the hole.

Pelts helps Grandad into some long pants. He steps in clumsily because he has a piece of cake in each hand and he can't balance. Pelts agrees to one last game of bocce. I fill the glasses and Janice and I sit in front of the fire. We settle in and wait.

Annie and Chelsea stay in the hole together for close to an hour, then Chelsea calls Pelts over.

She says: *I have to know he is in there. I know it sounds whack, morbid and weird, but I need to know for sure. GET MUM OUT,* she says.

Pelts pulls Annie up.

Janice gives Annie a chair near the fire and I bring a blanket for her legs. Janice and I stand behind Annie, like guards, funeral guards.

Pelts takes Grandad's hand: *Sit in the chair and I'll get you some more cake mate,* he says.

I'll get the cake, I say, because God knows I want to help.

Keep him occupied, says Pelts. *Tell him a story: he loves stories; tell him about your life, tell him how you met Janice or something.*

Pelts heads to the shed to get a crow bar. I feel like we're doing something wrong but it doesn't matter how I feel, and I get busy with my story. Janice takes over in the end because I'm not much of a storyteller.

Pelts goes to the hole and drops himself in. Chelsea hitches a lift out because there's only room for one person, if the door is to be opened. Chelsea crouches next to the hole, on her hands and knees, torso long, arms outstretched. I don't know why she's reaching out like that; it doesn't make sense but it makes sense and I don't ask questions. I shiver but I'm not cold. I feel like a criminal or something.

Pelts heaves the crowbar back and forth. We can all hear him

groaning and it goes on a long time, too long, and I want the noise to stop but it doesn't matter what I want. Grandad gets a bit distracted by the noise and Janet talks louder and then she sings a bit, like it's part of the story. She's not the best singer and it's a little bit funny but I don't laugh because there's nothing funny.

Pelts stops with the crowbar so I presume he's 'in'. He holds the crowbar in place and hands the end of it to Chelsea. Then he heaves himself out of the hole. He takes hold of the crowbar, with one hand, and he helps Chelsea into the hole, with the other.

Chelsea is in and out quickly. It's fast, after all that. I shift left, to shield Grandad from the view. I think I see a skull but I'm not sure and it doesn't matter what I see.

Pelts helps Chelsea out of the hole. He says: *Will I shut it now, Shells?*

Chelsea nods her head.

Pelts looks to Annie. She nods too, well sort of: her head drops to her chest.

After a time they come to the fire. We're only a step or two from the hole. I fill everyone's drinks because I'm not sure what else to do. I open heaps of drinks. I give them loads of options because I have nothing else to offer them.

Chelsea stands with the warmth of the fire against her back, facing the hole, and we follow suit.

It's like we're camping. Actually, it's more than that: it's like a corroboree. I don't know anything about corroborees, but I saw a show on the ABC and it's the fire and the music and the feeling that something momentous is going on between the living and the dead.

I can hear the faroff waves and the closeup music. We stand around the hole and we're still now. We don't move and no

one's talking and time stands still, but we know it's still moving because of the waves and the music.

Grandad stands. He starts jigging to the music. Pelts moves the chairs back a bit and Annie stands too and Pelts shifts near her because she looks a bit unsteady. I worry that I've given her too much to drink, she's so skinny, but we're all unsteady and I didn't know what else to do.

Everyone's eyes are glowing like firefly sparks. We all pick up pace with the music, we're all possessed with the wordless dance. We skip around the hole and the fire. We wave our arms until we're sweaty and spent and we only stop because Grandad loses his footing and he nearly goes in the hole, and that brings us back to the cold deadness of things: it puts a bit of a mozza on the dancing.

We top up the drinks and the fire and we settle back to standing around the hole. Chelsea talks. She's calling the shots. *We're not taking him out of the hole, she says. That's his resting place, it's part of his story, but I want to put something here on the earth, to mark the spot, so that people can't just walk over him without even knowing.*

Pelts says: *Like a tombstone?*

No, says Chelsea.

Annie says: *Teddy used to pick the fluffy topped beach grass for me, bunches of it. I had it everywhere around the house. He always brought me things, mostly the fluffy topped beach grass but shells and driftwood and sea grasses too, and all the little Ti tree leaves, he'd pick them up, one by one, patiently, all those tiny, papery, browngreen leaves. He'd bring them to me, cupped in his dear little hands, and I'd put them in little bowls around the house. We made wishes as if the leaves were magic and our luck would change.*

I say: *The Ti tree leaves spark when they burn, like wishes.* Then I say to myself: *Be quiet.* I'm pretty pissed so I accidentally say it

out loud.

Pelts says: *What about a Ti tree, then, to mark the spot?*

No, says Chelsea.

Annie says: Ti trees need to be planted in groups because they are a shallow-rooted tree. They only survive because they stand in groups. They are safe in their numbers, like a family, safe in their crooked togetherness, protecting each other from the wind. They are top-heavy and without each other the wind is too much, it unearths them, uproots them.

They drop their dead leaves quietly – just a breath of wind is enough to shake the deadness away and then they stand, still again, and green. The wind quiets and they go on greenly as if the dead leaving were nothing but a breath of wind.

Their limbs are twisted and their trunks are a network of barky veins, as if their roots are plaited together above the ground. They sprout out at the top, top-heavy and unbalanced. They are silly trees, shallow rooted and top heavy, but they are sea trees. They are part of this place.

I had no one to stand beside me except you Shells and you were too small to have planted your roots firmly. Life here is planted on a sand belt and things give way and come up from under when you least expect it, no matter how strong you are.

Teddy was strong like a good, good man and I was stronger with him and I thought I was strong enough without him. I went on greenly, for your Shells.

My roots were clawing at the sand. I was trying to keep hold but I was unsteady, like feet running down the dunes. I was running down, out of control, away from the dead things, losing my hold and nothing to hold me together. I was coming undone, unprung, unplaiting myself as I ran wildly with the wind, in all directions, and there was no one to keep me upright and we're on a sandy sand belt

here Shells and things fall through your fingers and things come up from under when you least expect it.

I did my best Shells but it wasn't good enough for Teddy and it wasn't good enough for you. It's hard to stand beside yourself when your best is not good enough. My best wasn't good enough to see me stand beside my children, not good enough to see us stand together and keep hold...

If you're not together with your people, like a family, the sand life wins and the wind takes hold and you untwist. Then there's nothing to hold you together because you're in the sand, and that's a shaky start if you're not linked together at the roots. Then the sand wins, not that the sand cares for winning, but the sand starts to shift between your roots if you haven't got your people. If the wind is at you and you're top heavy with no family and shallow roots, you keep shifting until you can't stand up anymore.

And if you can't stand up you're not a tree, just firewood, or perhaps a home for the lizards and the spiders, or driftwood if you end up in the water. If you're lucky you end up near the water.

In a way I wish they'd never found Teddy and he'd stayed with the sea, but then I wouldn't have been able to do the mother love touches and the last kisses...

And it's good that Chelsea knows where he is.

You're not a mother if you can't stand up with your roots. You're just dead wood.

We stand together around the hole, listening to Annie. She's talking to Chelsea and to the fire and we just listen. We move to the music because the moving is like words, and we hold hands and move and speak to each other in that way.

Chelsea says: *It has to be a wind vane, then, doesn't it Mum? There's nothing else that would be right.*

I say: *There used to be a wind vane here, on the other side of the house. I'm glad that I have something to say but I feel like an*

intruder too, writing myself into the moment. Chelsea looks at me so I keep talking. *There was a wind vane near the kitchen window but the North and South were broken so we took it down. Could I buy you another one Chelsea? You can pick it out, anything you want. Can I buy it for you?*

A wind vane, says Chelsea, whining and calling out the movements of the wind. It's the right thing to put here. When you think of everything together, Mum, it's the only thing to put here. I want it in the shape of the celtic sword, like the one on the fridge. I know that's morbid but it is part of the story too.

Chelsea pulls the aluminium kelvinator plaque from her pocket. *It will have to be two swords, one across the other, to make the cross for North, South, East and West, like a double sword, a double-edged...* She crosses her forearms, one over the other, to show us. *We will plant the fluffy topped beach flowers all the way around the base at the bottom: a big circular concrete base for shells and driftwood and the Ti tree leaves.*

Annie says: *I would love that.*

We sway together in the wordless dance.

I feel him in the wind near the water, says Chelsea.

He was a man for your Mum, says Pelts, a man before his time; he put the rest of us to shame.

Janice is crying. She can barely get the words out: *James is awake because of Teddy, she says. The mystery of Teddy is central to James waking up and coming back to me.*

I say: *Thank you everyone.* It is a stupid thing to say but I can't say anything else.

Chelsea says: *Grandad. Do you want to say something?*

Grandad looks around at the trees that shiver like shadows in the darkness. I throw another bushy head of Ti tree on the fire and watch the sparks. We turn to Grandad and wait.

Chelsea takes his hands in both of hers. She says: *GRAND? Is there something you want to say?*

Can I take the bocce balls home, he says, and some cake?

Course you can mate, I say.

Book three

Chapter one

The earth does not get fat

'Nguni saying: "The earth does not get fat" (i.e however many dead it receives the earth is never satiated)' (Finnegan 1981, p.12).

Finnegan, R 1981, 'Proverbs in Africa' in *The Wisdom of Many. Essays on the Proverb*, eds W Mieder and A Dundas, New York: Garland Publishing Inc.

~ ~ ~

(Chelsea)

The graveside was the first time in years that Mum had spoken more than a few sentences together.

After that, when we sit by the fire after dinner, Mum is the one who talks. Usually Pelts has to get her started. He gives her a bit of a nudge. It's more like a push really but she talks.

She's been listening for months, regretting for half a lifetime. Her voice is rough and dry because she hasn't used it in a long time, but her voice is like a song too, like a drug, dead to me for so long.

She speaks in the present tense like she's living the memory. She's looking at Pelts but she's explaining something to me. She can't look at me, of course, because that would bring the remembering back to time and that would be too much. Her voice is everything and if I close my eyes I can see out of hers.

I know that Pelts makes it possible for her to talk; he enables it somehow. I know that, without him, there would be silence and sweat and grey. Grandad gets out of his chair as Mum speaks. He walks over to her, standing behind her with his hands on her shoulders. Then he kneels on the floor beside her, rubbing her arm and holding her hands in his.

Just when I think that there is something predictable about Mum's sickness and Grandad's dementia, I wonder all over again about the triggers and the channels, the torment of the remembering. I marvel at the pull of the present, the fleshy human undertow of the now.

The love doesn't change, you see, even when your mind is fucked. The love is there but it gets hidden under confused memories and unwashed grief. I wonder where Grandad has gone and I wonder if Mum will ever come back and then, suddenly, they're both here. The love takes over, forcing itself

to the top of everything, and they wash in for a time like a sweet secret.

~ ~ ~

(Annie)

When I arrive at the hospital, the midwives do all the usual stuff, blood pressure and temperature. They ask me how it happened, they say: *Why didn't you get to the hospital in time?*

They say that Chelsea will need to go into a humidicrib to warm up a bit. They say she is cold. They ask me: *Why didn't you come to the hospital? What happened?*

Then the doctor comes. Her name is Dr. S. Sesay, that's what her nametag says, but I know who she really is. Her name is Simbovala. I know her hands, I know her eyes like black glass mirrors, I know the shape of her hairline, smooth around her forehead like a half moon and then little peaks at each side, like a cat's ears.

Hello Annie, she says to the chart and then her black glass eyes startle open, black as black, and latch onto me.

Hello, I say crying quietly.

All will be well now, she says. She is talking about my baby girl of course, but it's her voice that gets me. *You will stay and rest a few days*, she says.

Gently, using the soft of her thumb, she pulls the skin down beneath my eyes and she looks in.

I think you are a bit anaemic, she says and she turns to the nurse and orders blood work and a private room, if it is available, so I can sleep.

The nurse says: *So black under the eyes.*

It is true I am very tired, even more so now, because I feel as if I am in a dream and time is water.

A man with the deepest eyes can't see the moon until it is fifteen days old. Does Simbovala Sesay remember about that, I wonder? I stare into the black mirrors and for a moment I see myself as she might see me, but then she smiles and I am cast back. I am under the weeping willow tree and I am in love.

~ ~ ~

My best friend's name is Simbovala. I love her with all of my heart. Only I can say her name properly – *Sim-bo-va-la*. Everyone else just calls her Simba. I only call her Simbovala when we are alone. I whisper it to her when we lie down under the Weeping Willow tree in my back yard. It sounds like a secret. It makes her laugh. She laughs like the birds. Only I can make her laugh.

Today we stare up at the sky through the branches of the Weeping Willow. The branches are bendable. They dance like hair. Simbovala doesn't have the dancing type of hair: hers is like sea sponge, springy and spiky. Mostly Simbovala wears her hair in tiny plaits: they look as though they are stuck to her head. We break branches from the Willow and wrap them around our heads like a wreath. We pretend that we are in Africa. Simbovala calls Africa her homeland.

When I tell Simbovala that the tree's name is *Weeping Willow*, she stops still and stares at the sky, she stares up through the bendy branches and she has tears in her eyes. Now I call it the crying tree.

Simbovala teaches me how to do the cross-clapping hands that she does with her friends at the homeland. We chant *homeland, homeland* as we walk around the trunk of the Willow.

Simbovala says she will walk backwards because I'm not very

good at doing the cross-clapping hands and walking at the same time. We fall down in the end, sprawled and laughing. We are still there when my older brother, Cam, walks through the back gate. He says that we are queer.

That night, Cam says that I am infatuated with Simbovala. Mum says don't be so ridiculous. I look *infatuated* up in the dictionary. It says: *foolishly in love, obsessed*. I am infatuated with Simbovala's laugh; I am infatuated with her hair, with the chalky-smoothness of her cross-clapping hands, with the milky half-moons on her nails.

I am the best girl speller in grade six. James is nearly as good as me but he's a boy and he got rhythm wrong last time. James has trouble with Simbovala's name. The first time he says it, he stumbles. I laugh, so does Simbovala. James doesn't usually stumble and he goes red. Then he calls Simbovala: *The Lion Hunter*. I hate James. Mum says you shouldn't hate people but I definitely hate James. I can't help it. I hate him with all of my heart.

Cam says that Simbovala and I are freaks. I can't really hate Cam because he is my brother. I do hate him sometimes but then it goes away. Cam is six years older than me. When Mum is on the phone to my aunty, she says that Cam is difficult, a trying child. Dad tells Cam to stop being an asshole.

Simbovala tells me stories. We swap stories, like I give her *Cinderella* or *Snow White* for one about the homeland. I rush through my stories because they're just fairytales. Simbovala's stories are about real life, like her name means: *While you mark out a field, Death marks you out in life*. She says it reminds us that, as we live, we are in the midst of death.

It's a bit spooky, like a curse, but I want to keep hearing it. I make her tell me it all the time; I pretend I can't remember it; I'm infatuated with that one. She knows that I already know it but I need to hear it out of her homeland voice.

My name is Annie. It means mercy, grace. I am named after my Grandmother. She is dead. Whenever I say dead Simbovala says: *The earth does not get fat*. She says it in a voice that's like quiet men singing. It means: however many people are buried in the earth, the earth is never satisfied. Creepy hey, like the earth is after us.

I try to think up new reasons to say dead. I tell her stories from the news just so that I can say dead, died, dying. I tie the stringy branches of the Weeping Willow around my neck and I say it like Simbovala says it: *The earth does not get fat - The earth does not get fat*, but she doesn't get creeped out. Then I say it in the voice from Cam's scary movies. Simbovala laughs hard, she sounds like a magpie, their laugh turns sad at the end, as if they're missing someone.

One day, Cam calls Simbovala a dark witch. I hate him so much that I think I could probably kill him. He calls her a witch because we took the radio out of his room and put it under the Willow tree. I call Cam an asshole. He is trying to hurt me because he knows that I love Simbovala with all of my heart.

Simbovala says: *Don't worry about Cam*. She says: *No polecat ever smelt its own stink*. It means Cam thinks he knows everything but he is blind because he can't see himself. She is exactly right. Cam yells at me, and at Mum and Dad, and that is the reason: he can't see that he's causing it all. That's him being difficult; that's him being trying. I'm glad he's a polecat. He hates cats.

I smile, looking up at the shapes that the bendy, willow branches mark out in the sky. Simbovala says: *Tell me one*, so I say, *Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me*.

Sometimes Simbovala gets very serious and her eyes look like black glass. She says that the songs at the homeland have

matching stories and matching songs. I think of the words and the stories and the songs, all fitting together like the wooden dolls on my bookshelf, one hiding inside the other.

The proverbs are the short ones, says Simbovala and I nod, looking straight at her eyes, just like I do to Mrs Mistle: so she knows I'm paying attention. *They are for teaching a lesson*, she says, *like the polecat*, she adds and we both laugh.

I say: *Tell me another one.*

The baboons laughed at one another's overhanging eyebrows, says Simbovala.

I don't get it, I say.

She says: *One-another's, you see, because they all have the same eyebrows but they don't know, because baboons don't look in the mirror.*

Like - You can't see past the end of your own nose.

Ooh, I like that one, she says. *Imagine how big your nose would be if you couldn't see past*, she laughs. *Tell me another one.*

That's the pot calling the kettle black, I say. I blurt it out as quickly as I can just to satisfy her, even though I know that mine are not as mysterious as hers. I tell her the first one that I can think of because she's begging me.

Sometimes I think that she only asks me to tell her some so that it's even, so that I feel like I'm giving her something back. Simbovala is quiet, like she doesn't understand, but she doesn't ask me to explain. *It's because they're both black*, I say.

Like Cam said to Mum: You're so selfish, because she won't buy him a car, and Mum said: Now that's the pot calling the kettle black.

Simbovala is still quiet. *It's not racist*, I say, remembering that Cam is an asshole.

I stand up and take hold of the strong, ropey branches of the Willow. I pretend to swing at Simbovala. *I'm a polecat*, I say. I

have come to return you to the earth. Simbovala laughs so hard that she has to hold her belly and curl herself into a ball on the ground. *What's so funny?* I ask, lying next to her so that I can feel the rumble of her laugh.

She turns over to face me. *Polecats are small,* she says, puffing to get her breath. *They don't swing,* she laughs. *They're like your homeland cat, but they live in the wild and they smell.*

Like a skunk? I ask, thinking how generous it is that she gives me a homeland of my own, like I'm a Queen or something.

A what? She laughs hard and gurgly. She can't get a breath in. I can't answer because I'm laughing too.

At night Simbovala's stories wake me up. They are not funny. Her laugh is taken back to the earth and it echoes like voices in a cave, but the voices are dead and screaming, because the earth is swallowing them, eating them alive. Simbovala is laughing hard and baby polecat-skunks climb out of her dead mouth and squirt their stink everywhere. I squeal and cry and Mum comes.

In the morning, Mum says that she thinks I am spending too much time with Simbovala. She says that I need to extend my friendship circle. Cam takes his earphones out of his ears. He sits opposite me at the table, chewing and listening hard. Mum doesn't even tell him to close his mouth. He crunches his cereal, eating it as revoltingly as he can, because he knows he is annoying me. He gawks at me like a stunned polecat.

I don't want to play with anyone else, I say hysterically, crying nearly as hard as I did in the middle of the night.

Mum says: *Settle down right now please; people are different, simple as that.*

Cam says: *Simbovala must have put a curse on you and that's why you're acting so fruity.*

Mum says: *Don't be so ridiculous and put your lunch in your bag.* Then she says: *What about if we invite Casey over to play on the weekend? You could sleep out in the tent under the Willow tree.*

Casey's a polecat, I say. Mum sips her tea, she looks into the mug and then sniffs it, pours it down the sink. She puts her hand on my forehead, looks at her watch.

The nightmares go on and on. Always the earth is trying to eat Simbovala alive. Then the baboons chase Cam to get him to the place where the earth eats people. I hide behind the Willow tree. I don't help him because I'm too scared and I don't want to die. In the dream Cam's not my brother. In the dream it doesn't matter if I don't love him or I do.

The next afternoon we take Cam's radio again. I thought he wouldn't know; I thought he had basketball training. Cam throws a pinecone at Simbovala. He says he was going for me because I called him a polecat. That's what he says but he's a pretty good aim and he's a pretty good liar. The pinecone scratches Simbovala's eye, the actual eyeball, and her eye won't stop crying.

We take Simbovala home before Mum and Dad go for their walk. Dad is trying to get skinnier. Mum hides the potato chips in the laundry cupboard and she says that Dad can come with her on the walks, even though it's her thinking time.

Simbovala's Mum and Dad come out onto the verandah to meet us. Her Dad puts his hand out to my Dad and then to Mum. His name is Mansa. He says: *Call me Rex*. Both names mean King, that's what Simbovala told me. He has a beautiful voice. A little bit scary if you were in the dark but beautiful anyway.

Mum does the talking. She says it was an accident. She says we're very sorry indeed. She says Cam is having a troubled time at present, he thinks he knows everything, won't be told.

Aah, says Rex, showing his massive white teeth as if he is opening his mouth at the dentist. *The won't-be-told man sees by the bloodstain.*

Steady on; steady on, says Dad, scruffing up his forehead like he's getting a headache. My stomach grumbles. Cam caused this whole thing and he's probably just relaxing, watching the telly with his feet up on the couch, eating everyone's dinner.

We're very sorry, says Mum, looking at Dad like he better SHUTUP or he won't be coming on the walk.

Simbovala's brother comes out of the front door. He stands on the verandah too; they are all in a row. Simbovala's brother is about the same age as Cam but he is bigger than any man I know. His name is Neo. They didn't change his name or Simbovala's.

Mum starts up again. She is doing that thing where she is in a conversation with someone but she starts talking to herself, it's very annoying. *Cam...* she starts, but then she stops and starts again. *Our boy did the wrong thing. We're very sorry. If only he would listen...*

Aah, and a goat may beget an ox and a white man sew on a native head ring, says Rex, putting an arm around Neo, throwing his big head back and laughing hard. He sounds like Simbovala but his laugh is deeper, more spread out. He opens his mouth really wide when he laughs and it reminds me of the baby polecats.

Just remember who you're talking to, says Dad, shifting his weight from one leg to the other. *Just remember where you are, in the street with the old white-man.* He chuckles when he says it so it sounds friendly but he looks a bit nervous, like when he's watching the horse races on Saturday afternoon.

It's like Pigs might fly Dad, I say quietly. I look at Simbovala and she winks at me, just like Mrs Mistle when I got *rhythm* right.

Simbovala's Mum's name is Amadika. She says: *Call me Amy*. She stretches out her hand in the direction of the front door; she stretches it slow and long like a lady dancing. She says: *Will you come?* But Dad already took a step back when he said the thing about the white man so I know we're not going in.

Thank you Amy but we will go, says Mum, pausing thoughtfully. *Amy - that means Beloved*. Mum looks pleased with herself. She looks at me as if she wants me to say: *Yes, that's the way Mum*, but Amy isn't her real name and Beloved is not a story.

I look at Simbovala. She has tears in her good eye. She scrunches the layers of her skirt in her hands so that the floral ruffles ride up her skinny, black thigh. I can't take my eyes off her because I love her with all of my heart.

Amy taps Simbovala's hand away from her skirt. Then she takes Simbovala's hand in her own but Simbovala wriggles her fingers to get free.

I want to say: *Waah! I'm a polecat!* I want to say it loud and close to Simbovala's face so that she will laugh. I hate Cam. I hate Dad. I especially hate Mum.

We turn around to leave. Rex keeps talking as we head out of the cracked, concrete driveway. He talks in a loud voice, behind our backs, but it's not a secret from us. He's talking to all of us and to nobody at all, sort of like Mum does except that he knows we're listening; he just doesn't need us to answer. He says: *The man with the deepest eyes can't see the moon until it is fifteen days old*.

Dad turns back to Mum. He says: *Do you think he's having a crack at me?*

Leave it alone. We're all different. We've made our peace.

He's a few sheep short, I reckon, says Dad, and Mum shushes him. *Can't see the wood for the trees*.

The next day Simbovala does her oral presentation on 'Someone I Really Admire'. She talks about her dead Grandmother but she doesn't say *dead*, she says *passed over*, and because she skips out on *dead*, she doesn't say: *The earth does not get fat*. She looks at me. She knows I want it.

I say it in my head because I'm addicted: *The earth does not get fat - The earth does not get fat*. I can't get her voice right in my mind and that scares me even more than the earth, eating people.

Simbovala finishes off her presentation with a saying from her Mum; she says: *The dying of the heart is a thing unshared*. Mrs Mistle asks her to repeat it and then she writes it up on the board. Everyone claps. James sniggers.

That saying is an asshole, a baboon's overhanging asshole. I don't know why Mrs Mistle is so over the moon about it. Simbovala has never said that one before and I hate it when the parents do the homework for their kids.

It wasn't me who threw the pinecone. Sticks and stones and bones.

I didn't know you were supposed to do the talk about someone you knew. I thought it had to be, like, someone famous so I did mine about Mother Theresa. Some people say she was more like an angel than a person but angels aren't really real and she's dead now.

The earth does not get fat - The earth does not get fat.

~ ~ ~

Dr Simbovala Sesay asks the nurse to get hold of some toiletries; she says she will run the shower. The nurse says that she can take over from here but Simbovala Sesay gives her the black glass look and off she goes.

I grab hold of Simbovala's hands, I say: *Please don't tell my parents that I am here. You can't tell them, can you, because of patient privacy and... Doctors can't tell.*

I will say nothing, she says. She sighs in a way that I have only heard African people sigh: it is deeper and it has other sounds in it, like their laughing.

I am crying, grabbing at both of her hands with both of my mine. I say: *Do you still live there?*

No, she says. *I am going to get the nurse to help you shower and then you must sleep.*

I can manage, I say.

Nevertheless I will help you, she says, and when she says nevertheless it sounds like a song; there are tones in it that we don't have.

She sits me on a chair in the hospital shower. The nurse comes in. Again she offers to take over but Simbovala Sesay says: *Could you please check on Mrs Morris.*

Simbovala rubs soap against the washer; she rubs the warm cloth across my neck; my arms; my hands. She takes the showerhead and rinses me with warm water. Simbovala Sesay smothers warm water and soap onto the face washer again; she wipes the blood away from my inner thighs. I close my eyes and it is like sleeping in warm black glass. It is the most intimate moment I have ever known. It is all kindness and knowing.

Your mother died, says Simbovala quietly. She says it in the nevertheless tones, like quiet men singing.

I keep my eyes closed.

Annie. Your mother is...

The earth does not get fat. The earth does not get fat.

Book three

Chapter two

Bygones

'bygone - past events to be put aside; "let bygones be bygones"
water under the bridge'

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<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/lets+bygones+be+bygones>

~ ~ ~

(Chelsea)

The listening is hard. I try not to look at Mum because I don't want her to stop. I want it too much, even the awful stuff. Everything makes sense when she talks and nothing makes sense at all. Like the truth.

~ ~ ~

(Annie)

Gen says: *Charge your glasses Ladies. It's time for The Sex Quiz.* She says it like a glitzy compère from the telly and I start panicking. I don't want to play. These girls are my oldest friends; they're the fountain of my youth but they're bygone, like my dreams.

I excuse myself and nick off to the toilet. I feel like my old mates are analysing every move I make. *Relax*, I tell myself. *Just play the game; it's only one weekend.* I am freaking that I'll unravel and they'll find out all the shabby details of my life. *Stay calm*, I tell myself. *They don't know shit.*

We are away for a Hen's weekend. Another one found the perfect man. Seems you need to be perfect to get a perfect one. I didn't have to come but I wanted to see them. I thought I missed them. I thought that my history with them was the real deal, the authentic me. What a load of crap: the old me had dreams, a fountain of dreams. I was missing the dreams. It was a weak moment.

I thought the dreams would be here with the friends, barnacled to them, but I was wrong and I have barnacles of my own, leeching on to me like love. Love's no picnic, don't kid yourself, love's no dream.

I am edgy about the sex quiz. What will I say?

For me, sex is a routine: it's like brushing my teeth. I fuck shitheads and then wish they weren't shitheads, but I fuck them because I know they're shitheads and shitheads are what I know. I hope that, at least, they'll be a good hard root, and console myself that, at least, with these assholes, I don't have to pretend life's pretty.

I fuck them like there's no tomorrow, like they were all I've ever wanted and then some, so they'll remember me like I'm their first and only. They'll remember me all right because, for a spell, I'm too good to be true. Putting out like there's no tomorrow, I'm a dream come true.

~ ~ ~

Gen says: *Stand up if you've taken it up the ass.*

There's mixed laughter around the table. Gen sits with her glasses poised on the end of her nose, holding the page of questions in one hand and a pen in the other. I ash my ciggie, I wait and see who's going to stand. Half of the girls around the table rise out of their chairs, five out of ten women, so I stand too.

We're not girls anymore. You can tell who's looked after themselves and who hasn't. The wear and tear is beginning to show, especially around the eyes and the forehead. You can tell who has time and money for a bit of pampering.

Interesting odds, says Debbie, scanning the table. I thought it would be higher than fifty per cent, with all you young ones.

I don't know Debbie: husky-voice, big boobs. I imagine I might have been a bit like her if my life had been happier. Her wrinkles are all smiles lines, ingrained. I'm glad these other women are here too, Kel's friends from her new life, otherwise it would be too up-close-and-personal. I wouldn't be able to breathe.

I tell myself to relax. It's just a game, all for a laugh. It's surface stuff, doesn't mean I have to tell them how things really are.

Someone has to tell the tale; that's the rule. If no one offers to tell, we vote. Gen scans the table, peering at us over the top of her mauve, metallic glasses.

There's no need to vote: Kel starts telling. *That's all he wanted to do, she said. It was all he could talk about at dinner, checking if I'd balk at it. I nodded along like he was talking about the wine, like I'd done it a million times, she laughed. He was hot – buffed. Makes you wonder though; I might have been a fella for the interest he showed in anything else.* She sips her champagne slowly; she has our attention. *He had really bad breath, she laughs, so it was a relief not to be face to face.*

Everyone laughs along. Mine is a ring-in.

My memory shifts to the asshole of my life, to the repeated struggle to start each day fresh, knowing all the while that there's nothing fresh about it, knowing as sure as shit that it's the same old, same old.

I am a cleaner. It's hard, physical labour: floors and bathrooms, bending and sweating, making things look new and good and fresh, kidding myself that there's something lasting, something good.

My body is in pretty good shape. I'm slim and strong, skinny and tanned. I love a bit of sun. My exercise is my work because my life is non-recreational. I love a fag but I'm young so I'm not weathered by it. I look healthy enough on the outside.

I have a few fine lines around my eyes, like smile lines, except they're from the disappointment. Forget the weather and the smokes; it's disappointment that gives you the lines.

Kel starts talking about the good old days, jumping from story to story, but tying it all together somehow. I have no idea how

she remembers all that shit. Where I come from the past is a bygone, you don't dredge it up.

Kel is openly emotional and that's because her secrets are clean. She wears her clean secrets on her sleeve, lets it all hang out, and everyone loves her. Who else would have got us all back together for the sake of a wedding?

I haven't seen these girls for ten years. Jill is in my face straight away. She asks about my life, she wants to know if I'm happy, *centred*. She can't even wait until I have a couple of beers in. I give her short answers; make things sound better than they are. *I'm keeping busy, I say. That's life. What can you do?*

She sighs at me, doesn't even try to hide her annoyance. She doesn't suffer the bullshit. She was my best friend in the bygone days, when the world was awash with sparkly dreams. She could document all of my formative experiences, she knows just about everything. It would be a crap read but she knows it, that's the point.

Mind you, it didn't take her long to stop wondering why I left and forget about me. I don't know what was I thinking, coming back here. As if I'm going to tell Miss-Perfect-Life that I get fucked up the ass every day, from every direction, that I fuck myself up the ass most days. I don't owe her anything. She's as bygone as my dried up dreams.

I stand hunched over the balcony, staring at the still water, only a few ripples and I think about my home, my stretch of beach. I imagine these old school friends with my new crowd - my beach people are rough around the edges but they don't miss a trick, they know that good mothering is nothing but a luxury.

~ ~ ~

Gen says: *Stand up if you've had intimate sexual relations with another woman, even a kiss?*

I laugh on cue, stay busy with my ciggie. A few of the girls stand. Renee asks Kel if she's standing because of the time she pashed Emily; that was a scandal when we were fifteen. Emily is a full-blown lezzo now, a dead set carpet-muncher, as the beach crew would say.

She was a great kisser, says Kel, shrugging it off and laughing, so happy in her own skin that nothing can touch her and everyone wants to. She's like the coins for the wishes, twinkling under the fountain, sparkling with promise as if hopes and dreams were something. But the sparkling is a fucked-up fantasy; the water is recycled, putrid at the heart of itself, freshened up with a bit of chlorine bleach. The dreams are destined to the bygone.

The girls get talking about Emily, long bronze legs, blonde hair, sickeningly straight and shiny, all the guys were dying for her. We wonder about it a minute or so, laugh about what's become of us all. I put out a laugh but it comes back to haunt me, like an echo. We top up the drinks.

I'm glad I moved away from these people. There's no interrogation where I'm from, only anonymity. My beach people are different. The tide washes in and we forget about yesterday. It's the land of no regrets. If you're not having a holiday and you're not settled into some sort of polished family life, then you're running away from something.

I moved to the beach because my family fucked me over (Big Time). That was the beginning of the bygone. I up and left. I was sixteen. It was summertime, tourist time, plenty of work around.

After five years, I had Teddy. When he was born, I ditched the shift-work. I put a sign in the window of the grocery store: *House Cleaning. Reasonable Rates*. I figured I was cleaning up

my life. There are degrees of cleanliness, of course, depends how you look at it, but don't worry if things seem putrid, the tide will wash in tomorrow and clean the slate. That is the paradise of the seaside: bygones are bygones.

When I clean the beach houses, I take Teddy along. I watch him jump on their trampolines and ride their bikes. I sip imported tea and watch him through the kitchen window. It's like being on a holiday, because it's new, but there's no fun, it's a fun-less holiday.

When you're in someone else's empty house, the bygones come haunting. It's all dust and bygone bitterness, bathroom scum and bygone possibilities. I work double time, sweating and puffing, harder, faster, until I'm too fucked to think, lightheaded from the bleach.

On the way home, I lean down and kiss Teddy on the head. I pretend the beach is just a phase and soon I'll go back to the city, back to the world of fountains and dreams, where I really belong. But I belong here, of course, because dreams are just maybes and belonging is just making do.

My beach people don't give a flying fuck about your problems or if they do, they have too much on their own plate to worry about it (but don't kid yourself they don't know – they know alright).

My beach people lack the shifts of emotion that wash across normal people's faces: their expressions disappear before you can read them, coming and going like the ripples on the water. It makes it hard to see what lies beneath, but you don't want to see anyway because it's not sparkly, there's fuck all promise.

At the beach, you can bury your regrets and be done with it – dig them in under the sand or throw them to the gulls – the tide will wash in and out, no one will ever know. At the beach, everyone just wants to move on, they don't have time for

bygones and dreams. I love it because it's safe. Intimacy is overrated.

C'mon Doll, give us a smile, eh. Put on some lippy and a nice pair a' shoes. Good as new; there y'are Doll. I've got some powder will cover that. Take a couple of these anti-inflammatory numbers, wash 'em down with your wine, a good long sip. There y'are. See? Now have a fag, it'll help with the breathing, nice and slow, in and out. Men are cunts, Doll.

If the tide takes too long to wash in, we turn to the grog. Alcohol is the root of all evil and all that, Cheers! That's our seaside sense of humour. We laugh whenever we can and nothing lasts until tomorrow, nothing is all that funny but we laugh a lot and tomorrow has no memory.

I don't get to the pub much these days because I have Teddy, so I don't really see anyone. I miss the laughs because empty laughing is better than none at all. Teddy and I just potter around at home or go cleaning. I think about all the things I want to give him. If I didn't love him and I didn't know him and I didn't need him, I should have got rid of him, but abortions are stubborn, they're hard to wash away, they keep coming back, because there's nothing by the by about a bygone abortion.

Jill passes her wallet around, bursting with snaps of her shiny, happy family, yanking me back into the moment. I have a quick look and murmur approvingly. Jill doesn't look as though she's had one baby, let alone two. That's what you get when you can spend your day going to gym, having a facial and then a low-carb lunch, maybe a skinny soy latte. She probably has someone (like me) cleaning her house and then someone else (with a better education and more reputable qualifications) to look after the kids. It makes my guts churn. I excuse myself, head back to the toilet.

I sit there awhile, resting my head against the wall. I shouldn't have come. *Suck it in*, I tell myself, *no use crying over spilt friends*. I'll make an excuse about Teddy: a fall, a sudden illness. I'll go home in the morning.

I grab another stubbie on my way out to the table, hoping the sexual quiz is over soon. Actually I hope it goes on all night because it blanks out the opportunity for any real conversation.

I down half the beer, accept a glass of wine. Line em up girls, that's the way, so I can numb the fuck up.

I shouldn't have come. Where I come from, no one needs to know too much and I have my aloneness. No one minds me and that's the way I like it.

~ ~ ~

Gen says: *Stand up if you've done quirky sex, bondage, cross-dressing, anything quirky?*

I watch Jill. Her sister, Gabby, was right into it. Jill wouldn't realise that I know; maybe she doesn't know. I met Gabby in a different crowd, a friend of a friend, at the beginning of my time down the beach. I wonder what she was running away from.

Jill stares back at me. I don't stand up. She knows I'm lying; she can always tell when I'm lying, probably doesn't have anything to do with Gabby. Maybe I should have told the truth. I've done bondage, whoop-de-do, tie me up, hurt me, get off on your own power, grip my wind-pipe so you can make me come harder - whoop-de-fucken-do-da-day - it's skin level.

They don't want the real truth.

The real truth: I'm a slave to every ugly mistake I've ever made and I make them again and again, every day. Sometimes a mistake is the fucking best I can fucking do: that's bondage, shackles are nothing.

At least I choose (who I screw, when I come). I'm a fabulous pretender. You'll think I've come like a steam train. Truth is I can hold off for hours. Coming is a state of mind and I avoid the intimacy. I prefer to come alone.

Gen says: *C'mon girls*, surprising me and standing. *You can't tell me that no-one else...*

Sarah stands. *One very weird night*, she laughs, *that's all I'm saying*.

Jill is staring at me. Everyone is looking at me. I stand because I can't bear it. I'm a great liar, a professional, but I feel like I'm tripping myself up, tying myself in knots. I can barely move and I can't speak. They can see through me, under my skin.

They're all staring at me. Everyone. Are they staring at me because I'm going red, or am I going red because they're staring at me? I stand. *Just role-play stuff for me*, I say, the words limping out.

I suck the smoke down hard, like relief. I look up at the sky and exhale, blowing the smoke up and away at the bygone stars. I don't look at anyone. It's a clear night, clear as a bell, clear as a fucking wedding bell. I wander over to the edge of the verandah and watch the moon on the water. I wonder if the view would look the same if my life were different.

Someone has to tell, says Gen. *I choose Annie*.

Why me for this one? Why fucking me? I don't say anything but then the vote comes in and I'm on. *I'm busting*, I say, shifting my weight from foot to foot like I really need to go.

C'mon Annie, I told my secrets, says Kel.

Yeh, c'mon, says Renee.

I squirm. *There's not much to tell, I say. Like I said, it was a role-play thing. Predictable hey?* I laugh but it's empty. *It was really just sex in a costume, I say.*

I should've told about the bondage. I have a million bondage stories. It's mind over matter, mostly, and I couldn't give a fuck if the whole world knows. Tie me up with my legs wide, film it if you want, I couldn't care less.

The girls are all staring at me: waiting, waiting. My voice becomes a whisper. *I was thinking of something else, I stutter, somewhere else.*

The point is: I didn't role-play anything. I stood up because my face went red when Gen mentioned dressing up, because that's what he said to me: *You've dressed up for me, I see.* I was wearing my old pyjamas, my slippers, and my worst undies (in case I splashed the bleach).

I glance at Jill, she is staring me down and I need a way out. I take a punt that she knows about her sister. *Ask Jill about Gabby, I say, desperate to deflect, to accuse, desperate to get everyone off me.* All my old school friends knew Gabby: she was three years older than us; she used to buy our booze. Everyone is quiet, staring at Jill and back at me. I run to the toilet.

Jill's sister Gabby, she's DEAD. She overdosed when she came back to Melbourne. They don't know whether it was an accident or on purpose, hard to tell. My best bet: the fountain of dreams killed her. I didn't know that she was dead, of course. Gen told me later.

I sit on the closed lid of the toilet, my head in my hands, breathing too quickly. Why did I stand for that one? Because I thought they could see that I was lying. How could they have

seen? They couldn't have: they're drowning in the reality of their own dreams.

The paranoia is making me act out of my own skin and nothing seems real. I sit on the toilet, off my head with the panic, dreading exposure. I know that when I go out, they'll want more. You can't rewind time with these people. They hang on to everything with their clear heads and their untangled consciences, leeching on to other people's scandals. Fucking vultures, they don't know bygones.

Point is: I didn't role-play anything. I was wearing my shitty old pyjamas and my saggy, bleach-blotched undies. He said: *You've dressed up for me, I see.* The bathroom and the toilet were my responsibility when I lived at home. I always cleaned them on Saturday mornings.

He was my biggest secret. I kept him at the front of my bygone mind so I remembered that I could never tell anyone about him, but with these old friends I felt like I was wearing my secrets on my sleeve, except that I was sleeveless so they were crawling on my skin.

I didn't hear him come in. I was cleaning the shower, the water was trickling and I was scrubbing. *I'm nearly done,* I said nervously, catching sight of him perched in the doorway, all arms and legs and a small head, like a spider. *I have a boyfriend,* I said desperately as he was unzipping.

She doesn't have a boyfriend, said my brother. He was in the hallway. I was reeling in bleach and shock, coughing and spluttering, because he set this up, he okay'ed it. He was the lookout, while his friend raped me.

He was rough – brutal – there's your S and M. He left without saying a word, they both did. I heard them laughing. I used my old undies to clean myself up and then the floor. Bleach, bleach, burning-bleach.

I couldn't believe it. Neither could Mum. She said it never happened.

A year later, I moved out. I up and left in the middle of the day. Didn't say a word. It might seem like a sideways move, heading to the bygone beach, but it was more of a diagonal. I choose – ME - I choose who I fuck, I choose when I come, my rules, nothing sideways about that.

I flush the toilet I and take a few deep breaths, in through the nose, out through the mouth, preparing myself to face the girls. Jill is in the far corner of the verandah, stooped over the railing, talking quietly to Fran. They've stayed thick, those two, with their perfect jobs and their perfect fucking everything. Fran didn't really hang out with us at school. I thought she was boring. We all thought she was boring.

I sit down and light a ciggie. I shake the packet, only two left. That'll be my excuse for a walk. I'll need a break soon. I'll go on a ciggie run, over to the corner pub. I'll have a beer with the locals, maybe a game of pool. There'll be beach-people in the public bar so it'll be safe and anonymous. It'll be like home, this is only the other side of the bay after all.

The conversation has become stilted. Everyone is pretty pissed now (except Debbie because she's pregnant). It's quiet. The group has broken into groups; the fun has splintered into grief. They've been talking about me (and the Gabby business). The stillness is fully loaded. It's about to come all over itself like the fountain of dreams.

Spill the beans Annie, slurs Kel.

It was nothing, I say, wracking my mind full of ugly truths, trying to sift something believable and normal out of the wrongness, knowing all the while that I'm too distracted to lie well. It was when I f-first moved down there, I say.

I'm stuttering, speaking too fast. I'm red in the face and I don't know what I'm going to say next but I know that I have to keep talking. Everyone is quiet, listening, waiting. Kel is giggling all the while but she's pretty much off her face. She polished off half a dozen stubbies before most of us had even arrived, and that was hours ago now.

He was dressed in women's underwear, I say.

What am I doing? I should have made it all lies. Now I've snookered myself, putting lies next to the truth, and I feel like a dodgy drama student. I'm not pulling it off and everyone is watching me. I laugh nervously but it sounds like I'm going to cry.

I remember the shower tiles against my cheek, cold and smooth, and the bleach, making me wheeze. I couldn't breathe.

I slipped over... I say.

Fran says: *Slipped where?* At school she was boring, a nervous Nelly. She would never have asked me a direct question. Now she's a nosy, pompous, lawyer, fuck.

I could give her the heads up about sex and everything that goes with it. We think we're all so different but I'm telling you, once you take off the suit and the watch, and wriggle out of the expensive undies, it's all a muchness.

I could tell them the truth. That would shut them up. I'm a cleaner, sometimes there's sex as well. It's easy money and honest enough, from my end anyway. It's not hard. Triple the money for a quick screw, same for a blow.

If there's going to be sex, the wife and kids are back in town and the man is waiting around when I come to clean the beach house. That's generally the way of it, I've found, give or take. It's an underground bygone of a business. I had no idea. The man loiters around and the expectation lurks in the air like his wife's perfume, not long gone but bygone and suffocating.

It's easy enough if you know how to read people and, like I said, I know how to fuck like there's no tomorrow, like there's only tomorrow. If I don't like them, I don't go back. Let them explain to their silky-skinned wives why there's been a fall-out with the cleaning lady.

Sex has nothing to do with class, you see. Once you're in the thick of it, you can be anyone. The power is in the act: the expensive aftershave gets riddled with good hard-working sweat and there's nowhere to hide, except in your mind. No one gives a shit about your limp six-figure package: it's a slimy bygone in a fountain of pond scum.

SLIPPED WHERE? Fran speaks like I'm in the courtroom, under oath, her fucken witness.

Oh... over the scales, I say. I banged my head, lost consciousness for a second.

You poor darling, says Deb. That's an awful story. What happened when you came to? Did you need stitches?

No-no. It was nothing. Just a big egg.

Jill narrows her eyes at me: *How long ago was this?* She likes to know everything, all the petty detail, she has a memory like an elephant, big and fat and grey. I'm not in the mood. That's why I moved away from these people.

It was... a long time ago, I say, pushing my ciggie hard into the ashtray, savouring the burn, blowing smoke out the side of my mouth like a lie. I dust the soot from my fingertips. I sip my wine and then I down it, help myself to another.

Jill says: *Was this before you had Teddy?*

If only I'd waited, just a second or two. If only I'd realised that she had moved on from me. She didn't believe my story, and she was pulling the rug out from under, but she didn't really expect me to answer, she was just putting it out there.

I say: *Why do you always cross-fucking-examine me?*

Always shmalways, says Jill, stunned to sobriety. I haven't seen you for ten years. I haven't talked to you for five. You don't return my calls, anyone's calls. You just make up lies that don't make sense.

What do you want Jill? You think you're so fucking superior, with your perfect husband, and your perfect house, and your perfect fucking family.

Stop it Annie. Don't say another word, says Fran.

I start spluttering: *Why did you ask me to come, so you can interrogate me, ridicule me? You can all FUCK OFF.*

Kel is crying. She stands, staggers, placing one hand on my shoulder, and the other on the back of my chair. *I wanted us all here. I wanted all the Rockets, back together again. She laughs, swaying from side to side like she's on a boat. Remember us, smoking it up behind the trees?*

I don't remember, I say and I mean it. I've bleached it to the bygone.

Gen says: *WHAT?*

I can't remember, I say.

~ ~ ~

(1) Maybe I should tell the girls the truth about the rape. Then they won't think I'm a bitch, as well as a loser, but misperception is part of life, ay, just got to wear it, and maybes are like bygones, they're just fucking nothing.

(2) Maybe I shouldn't throw a stubbie at Jill. Someone will call an ambulance and Fran will ring the cops. Jill will need four stitches, and they'll have to shave off her eyebrow to repair the cut properly (being such a jagged wound and all).

(3) Maybe Mum was right on the abortion front. No one wants to grow up knowing they are the product of a rape and so I'll sleep on it, again and again, until I didn't know if it's real, until I'm not sure if it ever really happened, until it's a baby in a bucket bygone.

(4) They call the wedding off, so perhaps he's not Mr Perfect after all. Maybe he's not all he's cracked up to be, but not many of them are when you get down to the flesh. Erections are a temporary matter.

(5) Or maybe the wedding does go ahead. Possibly they thought it would be best not to invite me... because of the fiasco with the stubbie. Jill has a nasty scar and I don't really fit in anymore, so paranoid, a bit rough really. No offence but things change, different neck of the woods and all that.

(6) Things change and they don't. They're the same and they're not. But not to worry, it all comes out in the fountainous wash. Except bleach and bad memories, they fuck you for life.

Book three

Chapter three

Sowing the wind

'As you sow, so you shall reap'

Proverbs and sayings, 2012, viewed 11 September 2012,
<http://www.doingfine.org/proverbs-300/>

~ ~ ~

(Chelsea)

I know you can't share grief with anyone, not really, because some things are not sharable, but I know that you shouldn't be alone either.

Mum was alone, altogether alone.

I think about coming and going and the dying of heart. I think of unshared things and unsharable things. I can't believe Mum was alone and I'm glad we're together.

~ ~ ~

(Annie)

It is so windy. Squally. The wind is coming from all directions at once and I'm begging for mercy.

The cramping in my swollen belly won't let up. There is no rest from it now. The tide has turned and I hate Dean more than I love him, not because he isn't here because I'm not frightened of being alone, but because he's empty and unknowable.

Through the window, I see the clothes flying around the line in a tangle. It is nearly dark and the clothes look like ghosts, dancing with the strange wind, but familiar ghosts somehow, dancing in our clothes. I go outside to bring the clothes in. The wind gusts up and the salt spray smacks my skin. The ghosts dance like wayward spirits, flapping madly around the clothesline, whirling, as if they're chasing each other.

It is much gustier than I expect, setting me off-balance. I wrestle the clothes off the line quickly, dropping the last piece of clothing into the washing basket, throwing the last peg towards the bucket. It falls short, landing on the path. I am

frightened to bend down and get it and that's when I know: it's time to stop pretending.

As I bend down to pick up the peg, the pain corkscrews in and down, and my knuckles turn white against the grey concrete path. The pain works from the inside out; it is as relentless as the tide, gaining momentum and hurling me towards the shore. The pain is as steady and sure of itself as the waves at the back beach when there's a good northerly, crystal clear, teal green peaks. I can only ride it. I'm not in charge.

I close my eyes and wait. As the pain peaks, I doubt that I will be able get up at all. The contractions seem to be ferocious for early labour pain, but I must have forgotten, that's all. I must have buried that pain in the wind tangle of my teal-green memory.

I stand when I can, carrying the basket of washing inside to the kitchen table. The screen door slams in my wake and the wrought iron rattles like an ugly laugh, like Dean's nasty, off-his-face laughter.

As I pull the door tight and fasten the lock, I hear the metallic screech of the wind vane, turning North, North-Westerly, Southerly for a moment, and then back the way the way it came, Northerly again. Usually I love the wind vane but today it sounds like a witch's laugh. It is all spook and ghostly omen, turning madly, every which way.

I turn on the kettle and the iron and the television; I try to drown out the eery screech of the wind vane, hoping against hope that this day will end right now, before everything changes and something goes wrong.

I am frightened for myself. I am frightened about what will become of Teddy if something happens to me, and I am frightened for my baby. I tried to carry on as if today was any day, taking Teddy to the beach, watching him run and swim and wear himself out, knowing all the while that the baby was

coming. I asked Dean to come home. I have never asked him that before. Not once.

In the time that it takes me to make a cup of tea, the pain is different again, fiercer. I put down the iron and walk to the table, glancing from my whitening knuckles on the tabletop, back to the ominous clock. The wind wheezes in the old roof, whirling and tumbling as if it is caught there, as if it might lift the roof off at any moment.

I should ring Pelts: I know he'll come, but Dean is already angry about what I have with Pelts and he doesn't know the half of it. I don't want to push it, because if Dean decides to end something, that will be the ugly end of it.

What I have with Pelts runs in all directions, like the wind, and you never know what's going to happen when the wind is running around like that. Dean has been more patient than usual because he doesn't want to compromise his job. He thinks that if he loses his temper, that'll be the last straw and Pelts will give him the sack.

I take a deep breath and walk the few steps to the iron, collapsing onto one knee as I bend toward the power switch, groaning, knocking my cup of tea off the ironing board as I steady myself on the way up. I shuffle back to the table and place my hands on the surface, pressing against it, walking my feet into the floor.

The next time I look at the clock, five minutes and three long pains have passed and I have trouble getting to the floor without falling. I lay my cheek against the cool floorboards. I am giving in, not giving up.

I vomit but it's clear, only water. I can't even lift my head. The vomit runs along the groove in the floorboard, a miserable stream, and time moves forward in waves.

I pull a towel from the washing basket and rest my head on it. I close my eyes. My cheeks are burning and my feet are freezing. I am so thirsty. The cold, outside smell of the towel is overwhelming and I open one eye, just to see if I made it in from the clothesline after all.

I turn onto my side because my thighs ache and cramp, but my movements are jerky and I accidentally move the towel that is under my head and that makes me cry. The crying turns to sobbing as I push my underwear over my ankles. I use my feet to get rid of the undies and I push up onto my hands and knees. I make a noise that frightens me. I can't be sure that it is me who made the noise but there is no one else.

The height of my body from the floor makes me dizzy and I lurch as if I will vomit. Lowering onto one elbow, I try to reach inside myself, but my nightie is in the way. Sobbing, I lift one leg, and then the other, pulling at the nightie.

I close my eyes. I grasp at my own hands as if they are someone else's, someone who loves me, someone who'll help me.

I push furiously, against common sense. I push because my body demands that I must, because the pain begs pain and I know I must fight; it is the way forward, the only way out. I know this because my body tells me so.

I lift my nightie out of the way and I glance through the tunnel of my legs. The floor is covered in blood; water; shit. I retch again as if I will vomit. Crying aloud, like an injured child, I moan, long and guttural. I recognise the noise but I can't remember it. I am frightened by the noise that has no words, the wind howls around my ears as if I am caught in it and there is no one to help me.

I reach between my legs and feel my baby's head and something soft. Lips? Weeping more urgently and with a half conceived desire to check for a cord around my baby's neck, I

reach toward myself, thrusting my hand towards the lips, but they are gone. I catch a torso as limbs land on floorboards.

I turn onto my back and hold the small, wrinkled face to my own. I can barely believe that she is real. Her nose is congested with mucus and I put my mouth over her nose and suck hard and then spit. I do the same to her mouth. She makes a noise, like air escaping from a balloon, and I don't know if she's okay. I make the wordless noise again and then she scrunches up her face as if she's going to cry. I hear the beginning of a cry but then she sneezes.

Everything is still for a time. The wind vane stops screeching and my baby girl blinks at me, suspiciously and contentedly.

It's okay. It's okay, I say, and I know there is nothing I won't do for her, given half a chance, but that's where the mercy comes in because the chances are scarce and that doesn't leave much room for choice. I'm in a mercy drought and my best is barely good enough and when your best is not good enough, things turn ugly.

I call her Chelsea because I like the sound of the word. I can hear the water in it: shells and sea, shells, sea. The origin of her name is Old English. It means: river landing place, port for chalk or limestone. Not as pretty as shells and sea. I name her after the ocean.

My name means mercy, grace. Some people believe that grace is bestowed on you, like magic, but I think grace is how you live your life, I think you earn it. Grace is why you deserve mercy, and mercy is like forgiveness, it's a second chance.

But don't assume that you get mercy just because you deserve it because sometimes the mercy is all used up on the lucky people. Sometimes there's no mercy left over for the people whose grace is a bit shabby, a bit underworld. For them, the mercy doesn't always come.

From the moment I laid eyes on her, I hoped the mercy would come, and mostly I believed that it would.

~ ~ ~

I walk down the concrete steps to the bay, carrying a basket in one hand and Chelsea on my hip. Teddy walks behind me, dragging a blow up dinghy.

Not too close to the steps Teddy, I say, or Shells will be up and down all day.

We move along the beach and step down over the wall of timber sleepers. Teddy takes the dinghy to the water's edge; he fills a bucket with sand to weigh it down. I place Chelsea on the sand and shake out the towels. *Divine day, I say, looking up at the sky.*

When we are settled on the towels, I pass Chelsea some grapes. Teddy peels the lid from a container of dip and reaches into the basket for some biscuits.

You're a grape-guts Miss Shells, I say, pretending to eat her chubby thigh, making chomping noises as I huddle over her, kissing her and nibbling her leg. Grape juice drizzles down her chin, and she belly-chuckles.

I don't want to spoil the moment but I need to talk to Teddy about last night. *That was so much fun, I say, warming up to it. Buying everything that looked delicious, ignoring everything else we should be doing today.*

Mum?

Sorry about last night, I say, I shouldn't have thrown the plate.

Doesn't matter.

Dad needs to...

I hate him.

Hate is exhausting Teddy.

Does Dad know it's your Birthday? Teddy helps himself to an olive, offers me one.

I shrug.

Teddy spits the olive onto the sand. *That's disgusting*, he says.

I LOVE those.

He rubs his nose, says: *What's inside the olives?*

Pimento.

Pi-what?

It's a pepper, I say laughing.

~ ~ ~

The incoming tide laps my fingertips and the sand whips my face. I wake up, coughing sandy grit. The dinghy skips on the water like a smooth, flat stone. Chelsea's bottle and the leftover picnic lunch are strewn around the basket. I stand, suddenly and clumsily, looking back toward the road and then out to the water.

Teddy, I call, my voice croaky. *Teddy?* Yelling now: *TEDDY?* I run along the beach to the next sleeper-wall.

TEDDY! CHELSEA!

I turn and sprint back along the beach, puffing and yelling, I leap up the concrete steps to the roadside, looking left and then right along the highway, yelling your names. Nothing.

Descending the steps in pairs, I bump into a woman. She is on the way up the stairs with her dog and I knock her hard against the bluestone wall. Spying the dinghy, further out now, I run to the water, splashing through the shallows and crying hysterically, screaming my children's names.

When I am thigh-deep in water, I look back to the shore. The woman is brushing sand from her pants in abrupt, smacking strokes; she is muttering to her dog on a leash and watching me.

I plunge in. The water is freezing. The dinghy is now only a flash of yellow, hopscotching over the white-capped waves. I swim in the direction of the dinghy but I can barely see it anymore. The wind lifts the dinghy off the water, catching in the belly of it like a sail.

I realise that my children couldn't be in the dinghy if it is flying around like that. I swim back towards the shore, back to where I can wade and then run. My children's names are distorted by my wailing. My words are barely recognisable. The breath has been sucked out of me. I am winded.

The woman approaches the water's edge as I get close to shore. I charge past her to the picnic, holding the stitch in my side.

She says: *What's wrong?*

I vomit violently, gasping breath between explosions. The black labrador sniffs and licks at the vomit, *Get out of it Pony,* says the woman. She turns to me: *What's wrong?*

My children, I say, straightening up, wiping my nose and gasping for air. *I can't find them.*

~ ~ ~

I sit in the interview room, looking around, taking the place in.

There is a sign on the wall: *Sow the Wind; Reap the Storm.*

The words are carved in wood. It looks like it was made to hang on someone's verandah. It looks out of place in this sterile police room.

Does it mean: you get what you deserve? Because that's bullshit: wind or no wind. Next to the sign is the *Police Code of*

Ethics – strive to serve with integrity and blah. The two signs sit side by side, like a strange couple.

The man is suspicious of me. He says that my story does not add up, but not all stories do, even when they're true. The man is suspicious and the woman is following his lead. They're trying to prove that I'm a wind-sower.

Coles is the female officer, she says: *May I call you Annie?*

Okay, I say. I'm thinking she can call me whatever she wants, as long as she finds the children. Coles is by the book, green as.

Annie, we will tape this interview today, says Coles.

I should be at the beach, I say, moving my hands from the table to my lap, and then back again. *How long will this take?*

Well that depends, says Mills.

I stand up, clenching my fists over the back of the chair.

We'll be as brief as possible, says Mills, *SIT DOWN PLEASE*.

He is treating me like a criminal. He thinks I've been sowing the wind for years.

Tell me about the last time you saw your children, says Mills, sipping his cup of coffee noisily.

I say: *We had a picnic. Chelsea went to sleep. Did they get her little lamb from the beach?*

What happened after the young one went to sleep?

She needs her lamby, I say. *I have a spare one at the house.*

Mills shifts his chair, scraping it noisily along the floorboards and bringing himself as close to the table as possible.

Teddy and I caught crabs near the sleeper-wall, I say. *He doesn't like to keep them out of the water long, so...*

The sleeping-wall?

Sleeper, I say. *Wood*, I add, recalling the weather-beaten post against my back, the splintery brightness of the stars...

Groyne, says Mills, correcting me. *The correct word is groyne*. I pay no attention to him because I'm thinking about that first night with Dean. I'm wondering why, even then, I knew to hold on to the post, rather than to him. *Groyne* sounds like a made-up word anyway. Mills just wants to prove he's smarter than Coles and quite frankly I think they're both a bit behind the eight ball. I don't know why he feels the need to prove himself to a wind-sower anyway.

Mills gets in my face, he says: *What time did the child go to sleep?* He speaks slowly, calculating the impact of each word.

What? Oh, it must have been two, nearly two. She....

Coles narrows her eyes at me, brushing her silky hair away from her face: *Does the baby often sleep at the beach?*

I put my hand to my own hair, thick with sandy grit, waxy from the salt wind. I fix on Coles for just a moment and then I shift my gaze to the window, to the wind in the trees. *In summer Chelsea sleeps under the umbrella so that Teddy can swim.*

Coles refers to her notes. *Teddy was not at school.*

I already told you that.

Yes. Was he unwell?

No.

Why was Teddy home from school?

I said he could have the day off because he didn't sleep very well. We had a fight...

What did you fight with Teddy about?

Not Teddy. (You moron). Dean. My...

Your husband?

We are not married, I say.

Coles says: *What did you and Dean fight about?*

Nothing. He is paranoid, I say. Coles looks over at Mills.

Mills says: *What is he paranoid about? Remember that anything you tell us will help us find the children.*

Dean always worries that I have been with someone else or that I will be with someone else. He is very possessive...

I stop there and turn to the window. The view has altered. I can only see the tops of the trees but it's clear that the wind has switched, changed direction, like the truth. Everything looks different.

Then Coles gets in my face; she says: *Is Dean the children's father?*

Y-yes, I say.

You don't sound so sure, she adds, leaning in over the table.

I say: *Sorry, is this a paternity hearing?* Fuck her.

Coles looks at Mills.

We are trying to find the children, says Mills. *Is Dean the children's father?*

YES, I say. Fuck him too.

I am engrossed by the wind now and I walk over to the window. Within the hour, Port Phillip Bay has become an Ocean Beach. Where would the dinghy be now? Point Lonsdale? Queenscliff? Tasmania?

A whole hour: GONE. I don't know where the children are. I need to know where they are. I don't give a fuck what the police think about me. I just want my children.

The interview room is on the first floor of the building, two hundred metres from the beach. I can see right out to the horizon and then, below me, I can see into a hundred back yards. The wind belts the towels on a nearby clothesline,

whipping them up and over, twisting them in knots. Beach wind is different, it's not just the smell of the sea, remember, it's the mercy.

Mills speaks loudly: *What did you do when the child went to sleep?* He stands in front of me, blocking the view from the window.

I stand tall, trying to see over his shoulder.

He says it again, loud and angry: *What did you do when the child went to sleep?*

Red Sky at Night, Sailor's Delight, I say. It's all I can think of.

Mills says: *What do you mean? This is no time for...*

Did you put those words on the wall? I say, standing on my tiptoes, looking over his shoulder and out to the Bay.

What?

You know... about the wind.

Coles says: *Focus. PLEASE! Time is of the essence here.*

TIME? I say, turning to her for a moment and then back to Mills. I move to the left so I can see out. *Red Sky in the Morning, Sailor's Warning*, I say sleepily, resuming my vigil at the window.

What are you talking about?

It's supposed to be about the colour of the sky, I say, *but it's always about the wind.*

Mills re-caps loudly, his breath bitter: *CHELSEA WAS ASLEEP. WHERE WERE YOU?* He stands steadfast, wiping the foamy saliva from the corners of his mouth. *WHAT DID YOU DO?*

Teddy took the boat out. He was walking around there... I point out to the water, bumping my knuckles against the windowsill. I shake my head: *In the shallows, near the yacht.*

Did you see anyone, talk to anyone?

A man walked past with his dog.

What time was that?

But he seemed normal.

Mills scratches behind his ear. *Can you tell us anything defining about the man: hair, clothes, age?*

Coles speaks before I can get a word in: *What type of dog was it?*

WHAT? Mills speaks sharply, glaring at Coles.

I laugh. They both stare at me because I'm laughing, because I'm behaving like the wind. I don't care what they think. I only care about my children. They tricked me into coming and now they won't let me go; they think I'm culpable. I want to be out there looking for my children and I can't concentrate on anything they say. My mind is at the beach.

Mills says: *How old was the man?*

I eyeball him. His eyes are slightly different colours, or maybe it's the glint from the window that makes the left one look more grey than blue. His hair is silver-grey and it makes his eye...

HOW OLD?

He had a limp, I say. God, what's the time now? I take a step closer to the window, my face almost against it, rubbing my hand up and down the aluminium window frame.

The window doesn't open, says Coles, removing my hand from the frame. The muscles in her forearms are taught and defined. Her skin is silky smooth and pale. I stare at her hands and forearms and she shifts them to her side, letting them hang beside her slender legs, alongside her flat, flat stomach. She is not thin: she is exercise-junky skinny.

Did anyone else pass you on the beach today? Mills speaks slowly and clearly.

NO, I say.

Was...

Hang on, I say. There was a group of women, a walking group. The leader had a rod, a stick. I hold my arm out to the side, imitating. She was calling out instructions.

Never mind about that, says Mills. Was that after the man with the dog?

No.

Coles steps forward, chest out. When you last saw the children, they were in the boat.

No.

Your friend said that you were chasing the boat. The woman with the Labrador. Coles takes a few steps back, refers to her notes on the table. Janelle, she says.

I don't know her, I say, my voice high. What else did SHE say?

Mills takes a deep breath and then speaks loudly: Where did you last see the children BEFORE they were missing?

Teddy was in the water. Chelsea was asleep.

Mills turns to Coles and sighs loudly, cracks his knuckles. I can't make heads or tails of this, he mumbles. He puts his hands behind his head and stretches his elbows back. Look here Annie, he says in his bastard voice: ANY HOPE OF FINDING THE CHILDREN DEPENDS...

I FELL ASLEEP, I yell.

And when you woke up they were gone, says Coles.

Yes. FUCK. I was exhausted. I didn't mean it.

Mills fiddles with his bushy eyebrows, grunts loudly. Coles makes her way back to the table and takes up her pen. She stands over the notepad, writes something down and underlines it twice. Then she puts the pen down and

approaches me. *Do you think it's possible that Teddy took the baby?*

Where? Where would he go? Teddy wouldn't take Chelsea. The beach is his favourite place.

If he was upset and confused about the fight...

He wasn't upset. I say, staring her down.

Teddy's behaviour could be very out of character. In these situations...

SITUATIONS! This is not a fucking...

Settle down please MISSY, says Mills. If we could get a better idea of time, of about how long they'd been missing when you woke up.

I can't believe he called me Missy. I want to shove a groyne post up his ass.

~ ~ ~

Before you go, just read this please, and sign here. It indicates that we have undertaken an interview today. It will stay on our system, that's a protocol thing. It's a reference for us, that's all, but nothing on you... Coles clears her throat, clarifies, nothing listed against you, that is. But it'll stay open to view.

...I need your date of birth in there too, for our records, and then you're free to... OH. It's your... Happy um Birthday.

~ ~ ~

Grace leads me through a series of doors and into a room: white walls, white linoleum floors. Teddy is lying on a stainless-steel trolley. The trolley is covered with a white sheet. Teddy's body is covered by another sheet. Grace leads me to him.

Teddy has a mole above his knee, on his right thigh, exactly the same spot as mine.

Grace removes the sheet covering Teddy's body. She lifts the medical gown so that I can see the mole.

I'm sorry, I cry. I'm so sorry. I brush Teddy's hair back and kiss his forehead. He looks asleep but smaller than he was before. Oh God, he's so small, littler than today.

Oh Fucking God, I hate Dean, I fucking hate him.

I turn to Grace: *Can I hold him?*

Of course, but you will need to sit down, Honey. He will feel heavy to you because he can't hold himself anymore but I will help you with him.

Grace brings a chair and I sit. She walks over to the bench along the far wall. She brings back a packet of jellybeans and, discreetly, shows them to me. She says: *Can I give these to Chelsea?*

I nod.

Grace opens the jellybeans and holds them out to Chelsea. *Look what I have for you, Chelsea. Look.* When Chelsea has one jellybean in her mouth, and one in each of her hands, Grace pours the rest of the packet into an empty coffee mug, placing a teaspoon in the mug and stirring them around. Grace crouches on the floor, just beside my chair, rattling the lollies in the mug. *These are for you sweetie-pie,* says Grace, placing the mug on the floor. Chelsea wriggles down from my lap.

Grace is level with me now. She holds one of my hands and strokes my forearm. She speaks quietly in rhythm with her movements. *It will look a bit awkward when I pick him up but I will be as gentle with him as I possibly can,* she says. *He will feel cold to you, and heavy, because he can't hold himself any more. He can't hold his head or his arms or legs. Okay Honey, are you ready?*

I stretch out my arms to show that I am ready. Everything seems to be happening in slow motion. There is only the rattling of the jellybeans and my moaning. With her back to me, Grace scoops Teddy up from the trolley and she places him in my lap. I kiss Teddy's forehead, eyelids, lips - *I'm going to vomit*, I say.

Grace grabs a silver dish from the bench and rushes to me.
Shall I take him?

NO, I say. *Don't take him*. I am dry reaching and I can't get the words out. *Please don't take him*.

Grace holds the dish up to my mouth and I heave but nothing comes, only foamy saliva. *Do I have to go?* I say.

You DO NOT leave here until you are ready, she says. *When did you last eat or drink anything?*

We had a picnic...

Teddy's head lolls awkwardly in the crook of my arm, his mouth is open and awful. Grace squats beside me and holds Teddy's head.

Chelsea is grinning, jellybean juice dribbles down her chin. *Ted*, she says, her bright toddler cheeks up against his drowned-dead face.

I am heaving and moaning. It is a type of crying. It's like the birth noise.

Yes Chelsea, it's Teddy, says Grace.

I retch again but there is nothing. I feel empty except that I love them both, so fucking much. My love for Teddy is still here but it's like a punch in the stomach: it winds me and makes me vomit.

She-can't-understand. She-won't-understand. Where-he-is. Where-he's-gone.

No she won't, says Grace. *It's too hard to understand.*

The beach is his favourite place. He would have been frightened and it's his best place.

I know Honey.

I stroke Teddy's forehead. *He loves it when I do this*, I say. I heave, choke, swallow and gag.

He called out to me. I think that's when I woke up. The children weren't there anymore; they were both gone, but I was sure I heard Teddy calling me and I didn't know if it was true or a dream but I definitely heard it. I can still hear it. Teddy calling and the wash of the waves; it's all I hear.

The love is the same, I say. I want to tell her that there's all this filthy yearning too, because the love has nowhere to settle. The love is sucked in and out relentlessly, like vomiting waves. It's so thick and I can't breathe and he's calling me, he needs me.

...I love the wind, I say because I still want to love it.

Book three

Chapter four

By hook or by crook

'Meaning

By whatever means necessary – be they fair or foul

Origin

It is sometimes suggested that 'by hook or by crook' derives from the custom in mediaeval England of allowing peasants to take from royal forests whatever deadwood they could pull down with a shepherd's crook or cut with a reaper's billhook. This feudal custom was recorded in the 1820s by the English rural campaigner William Cobbett, although the custom itself long predates that reference. Another commonly repeated suggestion is that the phrase comes from the names of the villages of Hook Head and the nearby Crooke, in Waterford, Ireland. Hook Head and Crooke are on opposite sides of the Waterford channel and Cromwell (born 1599 - died 1658) is reputed to have said that Waterford would fall 'by Hook or by Crooke', i.e. by a landing of his army at one of those two places. A third suggestion is that the phrase derives from two learned judges, called Hooke and Crooke, who officiated during the reign of Charles I (born 1600 - died 1649) and who were called on to solve difficult legal cases. Hence, the cases would be resolved 'by Hooke or by Crooke'.

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<http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/by-hook-or-by-crook.html>

~ ~ ~

(Chelsea)

I don't ask any questions because I worry that Mum will stop talking. I'm scared if I speak I'll break her and she'll go back to the greylands.

I can't believe that Mum was alone for my birth and for Teddy's death. It's not the way it's meant to be. To some extent, we're on our own no matter what, to some extent we are, in many ways, but we should be on our own together, not all alone, because then there's no one to never mind.

~ ~ ~

(Annie)

I should be able to forgive myself because I have no choice, but I cannot. It is impossible for me to do anything else, and it is impossible for me to forgive myself, and those two things must sit, curdled sickeningly together.

I have no other options, literally, no options. We have no money and I know people say that – I'm so broke – but I mean none: no money, porridge for dinner.

I tell the woman at the morgue that I will transport the body myself and she says - *Honey, we will be very careful with him.* She thinks that I am guarding the body. She probably thinks that I don't want other people touching him, groaning over him, stickybeaking at him, and maybe, given the luxury of straightforward grief, I might feel some of that.

I can't afford to do what I am supposed to do and I worry that someone will find out and point the finger. Don't get me wrong: I don't care what anyone thinks, but I don't need the scrutiny.

I know this is the best I can do but I also know that it would be hard to believe it's my best. If you were seeing all this from the outside world, where people have choices, it would look wrong. I understand that.

If someone finds out that I am burying my boy in the back yard they will want answers, explanations. Some sense will need to be made of it all so they can ensure such a thing never happens again, so they can read about it over a cup of English breakfast tea and tsk-tsk-tsk, but the making of sense is a luxury, people conjure it. I'm accustomed to the riddles now and I've got a job to do, simple as that.

I pretend that I'm going to bury him at my parents' farm. I make out like it's because I want to bury him in a place of happy memories. I say that my Dad is hand-carving a coffin, and it almost sounds like a love story, almost, except that love stories aren't usually about a burial.

Today is the day, by hook or by crook, because time's up at the morgue. It's an awful word, morgue, even if you didn't know what it means it sounds deviant, underworld. Hook and crook, they're ugly words too.

When I arrive at the morgue, the woman isn't there. I can't go through all the bullshit about the farm burial again, not to this asshole. He looks as though he's seen too many dead people to care about the living. He has thick, matted sideburns, black and orange, mongrel tabby, and the same festering thickness grows out of his ear-holes.

He has the body packed to go, zipped-up in a bag as if it is a new suit. He says that the body would ordinarily be

transported in a coffin, not loose in the bag. He emphasises in-the-bag and he stares me down.

I focus my mind on Teddy's dead body. He belongs to me and I want to get him away from the feral morgue man. It makes me sick to think that he has touched my boy's body. I stare back at him with hate and rage, but I say nothing because I am frightened that he will make things difficult for me.

He thinks I'm guilty and he wants to make it clear that he's not fooled, even if I do think I have it in the bag. He spends more time with the dead than the living and no one cares about his foul breath in this job. He thinks I'm a shit excuse for a mother and taking my boy away in a bag is the epitome of shit, as far as he's concerned.

I consider skipping the burial. I consider driving down to the sea and ending it all, driving the car to the water's edge, where the lucky people put their boats in. I could inhale exhaust fumes as if I were sipping a cup of English breakfast. I could watch the waves lap lazily against the shore, release the hand brake and roll into the water when I'm nearly done for, with Teddy in my arms. Except that I owe this burial to love, greedy, greedy love, and I can't leave Chelsea all alone. She's already lost her brother.

Aah to be free enough to end it all, unimaginable.

~ ~ ~

Yesterday I dug a hole for him, yesterday and most of the night. My palms are blistered and I am grateful for that; I am grateful for the rawness, the burning and the throbbing, waking me through the early hours of the morning like breasts full of milk: throbbing, aching, keeping sleep at bay, out in the bay.

I am frightened to fall into a deep sleep because he may be there, out in the cold dark wash, crying and gurgling and calling for me.

I dug a hole for him near the laundry because it's his favourite place: close to the house, close to the beach. The afternoon sun catches there, lingering, browning his knees. The lawn is thick and green and a gusty breeze sweeps his fringe up and off his face as he plays. He blinks and laughs, throwing his head back. He loves to play there - *sorry*, he *LOVED* to play there - past *FUCKING* tense, resting *FUCKING* place.

When I get home with Teddy in the bag, I can see the grave in the ugly light of day. I worry that it is not deep enough so I get the spade and I dig again, my blisters bleeding.

I dig until the earth is level with my breasts. I had thought that I would put him into the earth, just as he is, wrapped in a blanket, but the earth has turned to clay - ugly, thick, windless. Teddy loves the wind and I can't put him against clay. Clay does not care for wind. Clay does not care for anything.

What can I put him in? What will I do?

Love means you will do anything. Love means you will do all the things you thought you would never do - cock against your gullet - even if it makes you sicker than vomit and lonely as death, you will do it; that's what love actually means.

I take Teddy inside because the sun is shining into the car and that can't be good. I put him in his bed because I can't resist tucking him in, one last time. I unzip his head but it's not enough and it was never going to be enough so I unzip everything.

I fill a tub with water, so warm, and I carry the water in, washing every bit of him as he lies there in his dead bed: every dip, every nook. I kneel beside him, on the zip bag, and the zip digs into my knees like what might have been.

I dress him in his pyjamas and I wipe his face, again and again, rubbing extra soap around his neck and face until he smells like himself. His face feels like clay but it smells like him and I tell him: *I love you*. Then I do his voice. I say: *I love you too; I love you with all of my heart*. It sounds wrong. I cry hard and there's no air.

I cut some of his hair, a few of the longest pieces, and I empty the tea bags out of the box, shaking out the loose tea leaves, so I can put his hair in there. It looks accidental, like a mistake. I wasn't careful enough about making sure that the box was empty of tea dust and it is a stupid idea anyway, because his hair doesn't smell the same in a box.

I walk around from room to room, trying to find something to put him in before he goes in the hole. I say *fucken, fucken, FUCKEN-SHITTY-LIFE* and then I say *GET IT TOGETHER* – I make a cup of tea and I pour a glass of water too, thinking I'm probably a bit dehydrated from all the digging: yesterday afternoon, most of the night, again today, and nothing to eat, nothing much to drink.

I take the milk out of the fridge for the tea, but the milk is not cold and it smells wrong. I tip it down the sink, lurching after it, but there is nothing, only lurching and a claycold face.

I check the thermostat inside the fridge and, although it is up to the max, the fridge is barely cold. I know immediately that this is where I will put him. Perhaps I knew before now, because the hole seems to have been dug with the fridge in mind. I begin to take the things out: butter, milk, wilted carrots.

I fill the sink with hot water and disinfectant and soap – I take the grater and I grate Teddy's soap into the hot, hot water. Then I take out the wire racks and I rub at the inside surfaces of the fridge, bending into the depthless white so that I can smell as I go, so that I can be sure that it smells like him.

I remove the screws that held the freezer compartment in place. I cut the electrical cord with the big kitchen knife, denting the floorboards because the cord is so stubborn. I take some steel wool and I scour desperately at the tracks that held the wire shelves in place, because wire smells like blood, like a cage or a garden rake, but not like him. The steel wool shaves the tops off my blisters, but I deserve it.

I clean the outside of the fridge as furiously as I have cleaned the inside. I know the fridge will get dirty as soon as it hits the earth but it will be clean first: by hook, by fucking crook.

I rub his doona and pillow with a dry cake of soap. I lay the doona on the inside of the fridge to soften it. I try to make it look less like a fridge and more like a bed. I keep the pillowcase because it smells like Teddy's breath: it smells like him, laughing in the wind. I loop it through my bra strap and I bend my head towards it and breathe him in.

Then I go and get him, lifting him gently as if he's fallen asleep in the car, as if I'm carrying him inside to bed. As I lay him down in the fridge he looks beautiful, superb, too good to be true.

I tuck more blankets around him and around him, all tight around him: so that he can't wriggle around, so that he can't come undone, so that he can't wriggle around when I put him in the ground.

I can't cover his face, not yet, not ever in fact so I put more blankets, around him and around him, and he looks like a newborn baby, his dear little face poking out of the blankets. It makes time seem like a dream; it makes all of my time with him seem like a wish, something that I wanted too much, so much that I imagined it hard and it seemed real, but it could never be as real as I wanted it to be because he was too good to be true.

I take my double bed doona into the kitchen, lifting one corner of the fridge and then the other corner, wriggling the doona under the weight of it, inch by inch. I am sweating, crying and moaning, thinking that I will never be able to get the doona under the fucking weight of that fucking fridge. I consider giving up, taking him out and putting him in the hole just as he is, but then I remember the clay, thick and suffocating.

Lifting the fridge door, I breathe his dear little face, knowing that I will do what I set out to do, for him I can do anything because I love him – fucking-fucking-love - and even if he becomes thick without his smell, and rank, even if I cannot stop it, my hands will not move him closer to the clay.

Once the doona is under the fridge, I push him and drag him toward the laundry. I stop a minute, my head in my palms, sobbing deep breathless breaths, and for a time there is a calmness, some sort of reprieve, a wafting. I know that it is not quite sleep. I can feel his warmth against my chest, panting his precious breath against my neck.

Opening the fridge, I kiss his clay lips. I hold my lips against his and I know that he is too dead to be true. I know that I can get him out to the earth. I can get him near the water where there is wind, because he loves me, I can do anything.

His love for me is still here: it feels like clay, swallowed thickness setting in my stomach, but nevertheless it is here.

It is nearly dark when I get him near the hole. I open the fridge and kiss the raw meat of his lips. I kiss him until the air is thick without smell, like clay against my windpipe. I vomit but nothing comes, I heave and it sounds like an echo because it goes on and on, like ugly love.

I pull the doona, shifting the fridge until it rests just beside the hole, and I lift the door and kiss him, holding my lips there without breathing, listening to the smell of him, until I know, with raging disgust, that my lips will never touch his again. I

can't bear the thought that the fridge will open on the way down so I tie it tight with string, two balls of twine sawing at my open blisters. The blisters weep and bleed and sting. I hope they never heal.

I stand at the end of the hole and I push. He thumps in head first, on a bit of an angle, and it is fast in the end. I land on top of him and my weight, against the fridge, pushes his bottom half down. I lay there in a trance, my eyes wide.

Later, I climb out of the hole. I have forgotten time. I am dizzy and so I lay down again, my cheek against the clay, and I wonder what happened when time stopped.

I want to open the fridge door and see him one last time. I can't believe that he is in there even though I have seen it with my own bare eyes. I get a pair of scissors and a metal garden stake. I clean the end of it with steel wool, steel splinters pricking my raw blisters.

I lay on the earth above him, considering how I will prize the fridge door open, but then I worry that I will let some clay in and I STOP, knowing that I must leave him alone in the timeless place.

I drop my head onto the earth and my body is wracked with sobbing. Perhaps I sleep but I am awake too, all the while, because I will never sleep in the old way again.

Putting the earth over him does not feel right. The rest of it I wanted to do, only I could have done it, but putting the earth over him feels wrong. I could almost leave him uncovered, except that someone might find him and tamper with him, and that would be worse than covering him with earth.

I can cover him with earth because I know that no one can touch him, now or ever again. I know that every last touch on him was from me and I know what those touches were like. I know that only I could have done them.

I sing the bath song from when he was a baby. He would fall asleep in my arms, in the warm bath water, and he would cry when I lifted him out because he was cold. I would sing to him so he knew that I was there, so he knew that he would be warm soon.

When I have filled the hole, I lie down on the dirt and close my eyes for a good while, on him, on the earth. After a time, I open my eyes and I wonder where I was when my eyes were closed, because I was not awake or asleep, and then I don't care because I was with him.

Eventually I move into some sort of sleep. I startle upright a few times, opening my eyes and standing still with the listening. It is dark but for the light from the laundry and the moonlight. The clay is on the surface now, mixed with the good soil, all roiled together like vomit, like a claycold face simmering out of the earth. All the ugliness comes together in the mottled light, like a pantomime.

I can hear the water and I stare out in the direction of it. Under the light from the laundry door, the Ti tree branches become human limbs. In the wind, under the fluorescent light, the gnarled branches move as if someone is there in the trees, watching me. It looks like the tabby man from the morgue, all sniggering shadows and Ti tree hair, but it's probably only the trees dancing in the wind, and I'm too exhausted to be frightened.

Teddy is in the ground, safe and sound. I have a handful of clay and a handful of his pillowcase. All night long I wake, clenching cloth and clay, because in my dreams I can't smell him.

~ ~ ~

(Chelsea)

I don't want to send Mum back to the greylands. I don't want her to lose her voice, it is the last thing I want, but I have to say something and so I hold her tight. I hold her so tight that I think I'll break her ribs.

I say: *The Earth does not get Fat; The Earth does not get Fat.*

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