Phoenix

The University of Sydney Writers Journal

2006

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David Brooks

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Contents

Introduction **7**
Introduction – The Editors 9
Phoenix History – David Brooks 11
Foreword – Judith Beveridge 15

The Creative Process **19**
The Evolution Of A Poem – Judith Beveridge 21
Interview With Delia Falconer 26
Afterthoughts – Noel Rowe 30
Stranded – Sue Woolfe 39

Poetry **47**
Progress Report – Chris Angwin 49
'Aussie Man Dies' – Craig Billingham 51
Doctor Faustus – Craig Billingham 52
Last Night – Craig Billingham 53
The Revenant – Craig Billingham 54
Forbidden Fruit Pastoral – Cathy Bray 55
Broken Hill Pastoral 1968 – Cathy Bray 56
History Of Madness – Paul Giles 57
The Storm Waits – Paul Giles 58
Barefoot Boy – Micah Horton 59
Country Teacher – Micah Horton 60
Eine Kleine Nachtmusik – Micah Horton 61
Early Mornings – Lucy Howard-Taylor 63
Kitchen Sestina – Robin Hughes 65
Going Home – Vesna Leto 67
Journey – Vesna Leto 68
Second Translations – Cynthia Lindstrom 69
The Women – Cynthia Lindstrom 70
Three Tongues – Cynthia Lindstrom 72
From A Sequence On The Iraq War – Roberta Lowing 73
Catching Tree Frogs – Tessa Lunney 77
You And I – Tessa Lunney 78
Martyr's Fruit – Karyn Meaker 79

The Concubine – Karyn Meaker 80
The Circus – Karyn Meaker 81
Animal – Samuel Moginie 82
The Lemon And The Sewing Needle – Samuel Moginie 83
Beyond The Garden Gate – Patricio Muñoz 84
Take Your Youth – Patricio Muñoz 85
To Our Own Quarters – Patricio Muñoz 86
Ferris – Anna North 88
Salvation – Elise Prehoda 89
China Ball Red – Elise Prehoda 91
Here In Sydney – George Quinn 92
Poetry School – George Quinn 94
Some/times – Carolyn Rickett 95
Truth – Carolyn Rickett 96
Poem For Nick Drake – Adrian Robinson 97
The Invention Of Barbed Wire – Adrian Robinson 98
The Linguists – Adrian Robinson 99
The Transcendentalist – Adrian Robinson 100
Miami – Diane Rosenthal 101
Trace – Diane Rosenthal 102
Zebra Sunday – Diane Rosenthal 103
Fence – Tessa Scott 104
Glow Worms – Tessa Scott 105
Maungawhau – Tessa Scott 106
The Park – Tessa Scott 107
Sonnets From The Kitchen – Julie Thorndyke 108
Juggling Life – Lyn Vellins 109
Grazing Death – Julianne Wargren 110
Tigers In Training – Julianne Wargren 112

Fiction 113
A Small Wave – Suzanne Brown 115
The Price Of Rice – Wai-Ping Chim 120
About The Threads – Kate Hansen 128
The Great Arch – Vicki Hastrich 136
Fly – Micah Horton 143
Nessun Dorma: None Shall Sleep – Adrienne Jerram 147
The Mirror – Ayman Kole 151

Wife Dressing – Cynthia Lindstrom 160
The Asylum At Abu N'af – Roberta Lowing 168
Bread-Scented Gold – Tessa Lunney 176
If Short My Span – Anna North 184
The Six – Karen Pleskus 189
Up At The Lake – Tessa Scott 197
An Unremarkable Woman – Luci Temple 205
Two Bites Of The Cherry – Lyn Vellins 214
Mandarin Mondays – Julianne Wargren 223

Acknowledgements 233

Introduction

Introduction

As we go to press, it is hard to imagine that only two months have passed since the idea of creating a journal to showcase students' work was merely a dream. A dream that many did not believe would become a reality. And yet making the impossible happen is what creative writing is all about.

Over the last eight weeks, we have been on a voyage of discovery as we solicited and reviewed contributions for our Guest Editors, met with publishers, typeset and proofed the manuscript.

As the *Phoenix* rises from the ashes to take on a new life, it brings with it a diverse cross-section of poetry and prose, sharing with you the richness of our authors' experiences.

Adrienne Jerram ***Roberta Lowing*** ***Julianne Wargren***

Phoenix History

By David Brooks

Phoenix 2006 is the first issue of a new journal of Australian writing, initiated by and for candidates in the University of Sydney's Masters Program in Creative Writing. If this makes it sound like yet another journal of 'work of promise', the reader is in for a surprise: this is not promise, it is delivery. The University of Sydney is attracting some of the best new writers in the country, and this journal is more than just a showcase for the program itself. These writers are mature. Their voices, fresh as they are, are also strong and confident.

It's not a full representation of the program, which also has courses in Scriptwriting and in Writing for Children, but its rich collection of poetry and prose will interest anyone who sits down with it. An added bonus – not that it needs it! – is a set of essays from writers teaching in the program which look at their own drafting process – a resource tool for the program itself but also a chance for the public to get a glimpse of why the program is working so well.

As befits an institution of its size and stature, the University of Sydney has always produced significant literary magazines, and in them has given a start to many of this country's major writers. At one point, soon after the birth of this project, one of the editors asked about these earlier journals. One of those I mentioned, in passing, was *The Phoenix Review*. Her ears pricked up. The new journal was still to be named, and the idea of a journal that might rise out of the ashes of a previous one, and that in each incarnation could be its own distinct entity, has been adopted. The name has some history. I suspect that the real reason I have been asked to write this introduction is to tell it.

In 1984, a young writer and academic in Western Australia was invited to take over the editorship of *Helix*, one of the most exciting literary publications in Australia at the time. He accepted with alacrity, and accepted numerous contributions in readiness, only to find that the money that he had thought would come with the journal had somehow evaporated. He went to the Australia Council for help and was advised that it might consider funding a new journal if he could start one out of its ashes. He did, and over the next six years, from Canberra, where he had since moved, nine issues of *The Phoenix Review* appeared.

In 1991, he moved to the University of Sydney where increased teaching commitments meant that he could no longer edit the journal. *The Phoenix Review* went into suspension, but then rose again, revived by a group of student writers looking for a journal of their own. These students published two issues before, as happens, their careers took them elsewhere. None of these editors knew, at the time, about the **other** *Phoenix*, or the key role that, in dying, it had played in Australian literary history.

The story is available in *Jacket*, another notable Australian magazine, in an intriguing article by John Miles. I'll quote just a part:

> *Minutes taken at the annual general meeting of the Adelaide University Arts Association on the Seventh of April 1940 . . . show a motion was put, that due to the demise of the Student Union publication Phoenix, the Arts Association should publish 'a literary magazine', commencing that year. The motion nominated C.R. Jury as the magazine's patron, D.B. Kerr and M.H. Harris as editors …*
>
> *That magazine was Angry Penguins, and its sole raison d'être was to replace Phoenix, its precursor literary journal that had angered conservative elements at the university, who had wanted it quashed. The editor of Phoenix had been Kerr, and its 1939 last issue attracted the comments of Jury even years later on a radio arts program: 'I thought then, and still think, that, qualitatively it was by far the best literary document produced by undergraduates that I had, have, ever seen.'* (jacketmagazine.com/12/penguins–miles).

Phoenix, that is to say – **that** *Phoenix* – begat *Angry Penguins*, perhaps the most famous (or infamous) of all Australian literary magazines, since *Angry Penguins*, while never intending anything of the sort, begat Ern

Malley, the greatest non-existent poet of the twentieth century. *Phoenix*es, it seems, launch all sorts of interesting careers, and the signs are strong that this one will be no exception.

David Brooks
Director, M.A. Program in Creative Writing
The University of Sydney
(and editor of *The Phoenix Review*, 1985-91)

Foreword

By Judith Beveridge

The Nobel Prize medal for literature is inscribed with these lines from Virgil: 'And they who bettered life on Earth by newfound mastery'. It is only recently that I discovered this, and I must say when I read these lines I immediately felt uplifted. Writers are hardly ever acknowledged for contributing to the wellbeing and development of human life. These accolades are usually reserved for scientists, statesmen, or even Olympic athletes. Our culture tends to denigrate the value of artistic pursuits and actively encourages cultural products which may support the economy but which rarely add to a person's inner wellbeing or development. If we drop our guard, it is easy to forget the value and importance of what writers are engaged in. It is no small thing to learn to do something well. There's a terrific kind of exhilaration when you read a good story or poem: you know that the energy it brings comes from the questioning that has been launched somewhere in another's heart and mind about the human spirit; you know that the writer has set about putting so much of themselves on the line for the reader because a strong, distinctive voice always comes at a cost.

The students I have taught at the University of Sydney over the last few years have been very much engaged with the pursuit of excellence in their writing. What has been so refreshing for me as a teacher is to be among students who are keen, enthusiastic and who are at the point of discovering new things each week (whether it's a new step and understanding of their own work, or a new poem or writer); students who have put me back in touch with my own beginnings, obsessions,

discoveries which, after you have been writing for some time, you can easily forget and feel disassociated from.

There has been much discussion over recent years as to the value of writing courses, whether it is even possible to teach people to write, and whether you simply end up with a melange of similarly constructed works which just reflect the instructors' own proclivities. I have found that it is the students themselves who guard against this. Keen, enthusiastic students who are devoted to the betterment of their own writing will always challenge you and keep you on your toes. They bring so much of their own to the classes that it is impossible for a class to just simply run along the same well-worn tracks. And it is this special dynamic that a class of keen writers creates that is perhaps the most beneficial and essential ingredient in any writing course. The students at the University of Sydney have been phenomenal movers and shakers in the Creative Writing program and have set up a level of dynamism and enthusiasm that I have not encountered before. The journal *Phoenix* is a product of this energy, love for, and belief in the value and importance of good writing.

Literature gives us a way of gaining a fuller sense of ourselves, always foregrounding how astonishing it is to be alive. In this increasingly depersonalising world of conflict, technology and globalisation it is very comforting to know that there are still people deeply engaged in the search for right and truthful language. A writer's task can seem an almost impossible one, for how does one go about reconstituting in words an experience, thought or idea which was initially apprehended perhaps physically, intuitively, spiritually and often in silence? It is a tribute to the ingenuity of the writers in this anthology that they have found the words which are good enough.

Perhaps none of the writers in this anthology will ever get a medal with Virgil's words inscribed on it. Perhaps some will. Perhaps several may become firm contenders. Who knows the fate or direction of any special talent, but each writer in this anthology has a style and vision that has been hard won. Each one of these writers has had the courage to look squarely into the dark abyss of words and draw from it their own significant truths. The stories and poems in this anthology take the reader through their wonderfully sustained, often tough and confronting narratives, through their rich lyrical textures, rhythms, forms, ideas and emotions with great intensity and skill.

It is a tribute to the students in the Creative Writing program that they have created an opportunity to showcase their work, to work cooperatively and to be firmly supportive of each other. It is well-known that the spoils for writers are few and that this can sometimes breed resentment, competitiveness and a lack of generosity towards other writers. What has also been wonderfully refreshing about the students is their commitment to each other and to each other's aspirations. This sense of community can only emerge when love and respect for an activity supersedes personal ambition. It has been a great privilege to work with these exceptional students and to see their work represented in *Phoenix*.

The Creative Process

The Evolution Of A Poem

By Judith Beveridge

I am currently writing a series of poems to do with fishermen, the weather, the sea, and coastal landscapes. These poems are all dramatic monologues and deal with three characters: Grennan, Davey and the third fisherman who is the speaker in all the poems. *The Shark* belongs to the series.

Initially, I had the idea of the men finding a sea-creature washed up on the shore. After a few false starts with a whale, I eventually settled on a shark when I came across a line in my fish book which struck me for its potent musical qualities. The line describes the structure of a shark's head: 'the upper jaw is slung from the skull'. Wallace Stevens makes a very useful comment by saying that a poet often needs to get their intellect off the poem, and that one of the best ways to do this is through music. By concentrating on the sounds of the words rather than their meaning, you can often bypass the terrible internal critic who is about to jump in and sabotage anything you do. I found myself entranced by the sonic qualities of the vowel sounds in the phrase, the repetition of the 'u' in particular as in: upper, slung, skull – and also the 's' sounds: slung and skull. So immediately after reading the line about the shark, my first lines came:

I heard the stuttered clutch of the winch
As they drew him up by cable and wheel.

As music seemed to be the initial prime mover for the poem I thought I might try a villanelle and I consulted a rhyming dictionary for possible rhymes for skull, winch and wheel. I found quite a few that had potential, but I soon realised that what I wanted to write was a narrative poem, and that the villanelle was not a suitable form, as its repetitions are more appropriate for the lyric. But I was still working very much with the sounds (in italics) and my poem proceeded this way:

I heard the *stuttered clutch* of the win*ch* as they
drew him *up* by cable and *wheel* and *hung* him
sleek as a *hull* from the roof. Grennan jammed

open the jaws. I saw how the *upper* jaw *hun*g
from the *skull*. I flin*ch*ed at the sten*ch* of blood
that dripped on the floor before it congealed

and blen*ch*ed when Grennan rea*ch*ed in passed
the *scowl* and the steel prop for the man's *stump*.
The skin had already bl*anch*ed, a *meal* none of us

could stom*ach*, and we *retched* as Grennan, *cool,*
began lifting out the flesh in knots and *globules*
gulls circling like ghouls …

For the next few drafts I played around with stanza structures. I tried a five-line stanza form and even a sonnet form. I eventually found that the sonnet was just too limiting a structure for the narrative. I did however manage to work out my line-breaks when I used the five-line stanza structure as I began to end most of the lines on monosyllabic words. This seemed to give the line-endings more punch and impact and provided a sense of restlessness, toughness and honesty to the voice, but the form was too heavy so I went back to my initial three-line construction and made some additions and internal changes.

I heard the stuttered clutch of the crank
as they drew it up by cable and wheel
and hung it sleek as a hull from the roof.

Grennan jammed open the great jaws
and I saw how the upper jaw hung from
the skull. I flinched at the stench of blood

that dripped on the fish house floor, and
even Davey – when Grennan reached in
past the scowl and the steel prop for the

stump, just about passed out. The child's
skin had already blanched, a sight none
of us could stomach, and we retched –

though Grennan, cool, began lifting out
the flesh in knots, stripping out the flesh
in strips. Gulls circled like ghouls,

haunting with their puling cries; our hearts
burning in our gullets, when, with a tool
we took out what was left of the child.

I felt I now had my form and that the narrative was starting to develop even though it was a little unwieldy and rough. I wanted to play around with those sharp 'ch' sounds and 'l' sounds, and as a result, I added more content, and I also tightened the poem up, trying to get rid of any extraneous words.

My last significant work on the poem was to change the first person speaker to a 'we' in order to bring in a sense of community and a feeling of collective horror at the loss of a person to the shark. I also delayed letting the reader become aware that the shark's victim was a child until the final word. Finally, I was happy with the design and structure of the poem: seven three-lined stanzas, only the first and last end-stopped, the others enjambed. I felt the enjambment helped create searching rather than settled rhythms. I felt the use of assonance and repetition of consonantal sounds complimented and supported the poem's tone and

meaning.

Here is the final version after about five hours and about ten drafts:

The Shark

We heard the creaking clutch of the crank
as they drew it up by cable and wheel
and hung it sleek as a hull from the roof.

Grennan jammed open the great jaws
and we saw how the upper jaw hung from
the skull. We flinched at the stench of blood

that dripped on the fishhouse floor, and
even Davey – when Grennan reached in
past the scowl and the steel prop for the

stump – just about passed out. The limb's
skin had already blanched, a sight none
of us could stomach, and we retched –

though Grennan, cool, began cutting off
the flesh in knots, slashing off the flesh
in strips; and then Davey flensing and

flanching – opened up the stomach and
the steaming bowels... gulls circled like
ghouls. Still they taunt us with their cries

and our hearts still burn inside us when
we remember, how Grennan, with a tool
took out what was left of the child.

Judith Beveridge has been writing poetry since 1974 and has published three books of poetry. ***The Domesticity of Giraffes, Accidental Grace*** *and* ***Wolf Notes*** *all of which have won major awards. In 2005 she was awarded the Philip Hodgins Memorial Medal for excellence in literature. She has edited several anthologies including UQP's* ***The Best Australian Poetry 2006****. She teaches poetry writing in the postgraduate Creative Writing Program at the University of Sydney.*

Interview With Delia Falconer

When did you start writing and why?

As long as I remember I've always written stories, but some time after I started university I gave it up and decided instead to become an academic. In the early 1990s I went backpacking in Europe and visited Monet's Garden in Giverny, France and started to think about what it would be like to be Monet's wife. I wrote her story – the first story of my own that I was ever happy with – and have been writing ever since.

Who inspires you?

My inspiration changes all the time. When I started writing it was an amazing time for literature. I loved Bruce Chatwin and Jeanette Winterson, I admired the way they pushed boundaries. They taught me that a literary novel can still be a commercial success. Of course, Patrick White is an inspiration to every Australian author.

Do you wait for inspirations for your novels, or do you go looking?

I always begin with historical research. I look at old photos and start asking questions. For me writing can be compared to dressing in drag. It's liberating. It's not about me. It gives me the opportunity to be a different person, inhabit a different body.

Do you type or handwrite your first draft?

I always type. I have come to think through the keyboard. When I type, things flow on to the page in an orderly way, and there's something about the evenness of the spacing of the keys on the keyboard that helps me to order my thoughts. The way that a piece of writing will appear on a page is very important to me. Another reason that I type is because I like my drafts to resemble the finished product as much as possible.

Has your approach to drafting changed since you started?

No. I like to get my first ten thousand words as perfect as possible and then assess if the project is viable. Mastering the first ten thousand words helps me to guide and control the plots and subplots for the rest of the book.

Do you edit as you go or complete an entire first draft and then edit?

After my first draft I will go back and add to what I've written. I'm not the kind of author who writes a huge amount and then goes back to find things to cut. The trick, for me, to creative writing is to rule out as many clichéd possibilities for my characters as possible. When you get to ground zero, you are forced to be creative. As a writer, it is important is to give yourself permission to take the space it requires to turn around your story in your head. Processing time is just as important as writing time.

Where do you write?

I wrote my first novel in a shed in the Italian backyard of a house in Melbourne. The garden was a practical one and was filled with things like vegetable patches and fruit trees. It was the best place to write. I had the solitude I needed to sit and write but I also had the garden as an excuse to leave the shed and turn the story over in my mind.

I also like to write at Bundanon Artists' Centre on the NSW south coast. When I'm there I have the space to take long walks and to think and that's difficult to find in the city.

How long do you write for?

I try to write five or so hours a day but, if my novel is going well, I will write for up to twelve hours.

How did you first get noticed?

When I was starting out, before I began my first novel, I won two national writing competitions – one for essays, one for short stories. I was then noticed by both editors and publishers and it was through winning one of these competitions that I met my agent. It was great to have her support from the get-go. She auctioned off the manuscript for my first novel based only on the first three chapters. It was a great time for Australian writers, there was an atmosphere of experimentation and publishers were willing to take a risk.

Do you have any horror stories?

After my first book had been published in Australia my editor sent it around to publishing houses in the UK. One rejected it, but three months later published a book by another author with exactly the same title and a very similar picture on the cover, totally coincidentally of course! I felt like I'd lost a bit of my soul.

What motto sums up your approach to writing a novel?

I aim for writing that is like a lemon meringue pie – the right balance of bitter and sweet. I want a book to have layers, and invite the reader to read it more than once.

The best friend a writer can have is …

An understanding partner – we're always so preoccupied.

The worst friend a writer can ever have is …

Anyone who only values them for having a book published.

Delia Falconer holds a PhD in English literature and cultural studies from the University of Melbourne and taught the advanced novel class in the Creative Writing Program at the University of Sydney in 2006. In 2003 she was a James Joyce Fellow in Dublin, Trieste and Beijing. Falconer has written two novels: ***The Service of Clouds****, which broke sales records for a literary first novel, and was short-listed for the Miles Franklin Award, The Age Book of the Year, the Kibble, and the Victorian Premier's Awards, and* ***The Lost Thoughts of Soldiers*** *which was published in 2005.*

Afterthoughts

By Noel Rowe

It appeared to be just another email: an old friend describing a hermeneutics conference in Spain. I was thinking sunlight and sangria when I read, 'You might remember John Cecil who studied with us at Toongabbie years ago. He died of a heart attack and was buried a week ago'.

Might remember? John Cecil was one of my close friends. He was also a friend I now realised I had, in recent years, neglected. He had asked me to go with him to Vietnam; I had pleaded lack of time and money. He had asked me to visit him in New Zealand; I had said, "Maybe next year." He had begun phoning more frequently; I had not thought what this might mean, nor had I reciprocated. He had mentioned angina, but at a moment when I was busy with a menu. I discovered later that he had had heart surgery. All seemed to be going well. Then, a week after the surgery, he had suffered another, final heart attack.

I didn't think about those theorists who talk of death and writing; I just felt the need to write something about him. Writing, for me at least, usually begins with a need, and usually the need has an emotional base. I didn't know it was going to take a few years to get something that was even close to what I wanted, to what he deserved (poems of this kind are not just word games).

The form choose itself: it would be a portrait poem, an attempt to bring John Cecil back into the room. The first thing I tried to do was note down as much as I could remember about him, working roughly but listening for that rhythm that would be his and would give the poem its shape, its movement. Peter Porter once recommended this approach to

an MA Creative Writing class, back in the days when Professor Michael Wilding was director of the programme at Sydney University. It does not always work for me, but it is good advice. On this occasion I used it, letting memories and images flow, waiting to see what might happen.

I found a version of these notes on an old floppy disk. I am now more and more inclined to work directly onto the computer, which means I quite often do not have drafts. In this case I do, and that is one reason why I have decided to discuss the writing process involved with this poem.

Rough Notes

John Cecil

John I've tried to put you in a poem but you won't fit.
Every time I think of what to say, there's something else
like how you kept budgies, but then you were at the last
breeding finches, I have images of large aviaries out the back
of your presbytery, and I wonder if someone opened them
and let all those birds fly as they do at Wat Po
where you can make a prayer.

and fish tanks, it's one of the first memories I have of you
in the staid seminary, your little room down the corner,
not too many books, but the shortwave radio and the fish tank
you said it was relaxing just to sit and look
you never were contemplative
more what they called the active life
you had a good instinct for what would help people
even if your metaphysics was doubtful
in a way even Descartes didn't mean
the last phone call we had you told me you'd built
another fish tank. I never got to see it but it stays in my mind
the white stones, the little bridge, the plastic growth, but you would
never have had the chance to put any water in, or any fish
and the sun will be putting its hand in
and there'll be no water to feel

When it came the news of your death
was attached at the end of another email
in which the sender talked about the trip he was to take
to conferences in Barcelona, Rome and London.

Death as afterthought. Though perhaps you wouldn't mind:
you always were one for travel – indeed the last time we met
you were just about to make a secret trip to Vietnam
(you thought it best your religious superiors didn't know).

"You may not believe it, but I'm getting old," you said,
"I have to make the most of any time I've got. Besides it was a bargain."
We were having lunch at Circular Quay, putting our hands
through sunlight to break the bread. We agreed it was better not
to wait for institutions to show gratitude for a life's work.

You hadn't recognised me – your hair's gone white. Yours
somehow still seemed sandy blonde, though you must have been
in your seventies, and still had its Elvis wave. You still wore
the white T-shirt and your collar turned at the corner slightly up.

You'd only just retired. Your heart was playing up,
you couldn't keep on climbing hills so it was time to leave
the missions where you'd worked all your priestly life.
You told me then
you'd left the missions because your heart was playing up
and I thought for the first time you were starting to look old,
though on the way home you bought
salamis and cheeses for dinner (while I worried about whether
the chicken breast was going off in the fridge)

and I thought to myself you are at last starting to look old,
though you were past seventy then. On the way home you bought
salamis and cheeses for supper, though you'd just confessed
the reason you left the missions was because you'd discovered
you were getting angina pains when you did too much walking.
"You might remember…" was the way the message started
obviously written by someone who didn't know you well

So much to remember
the karva and the gin and bitter lemon
the sarong in the western suburbs of Sydney
the way you wore your hair – even in your seventies
it still reminded me of Elvis, one of your idols
always the white t-shirt
the way you dotted your conversations with
you fellows
and heh, said as if to entice agreement
breeding finches and fish
the order of lay brothers that you founded
Martin de Porres you who were considered too dumb
to become a priest, we walked your way into metaphysics
strolling up and down the drive – the roses
and beside us the grave of the philosopher
while you taught me humanity
the superior who drowned before he could prevent
your application; how his thongs were found
next morning on the beach (was it a tall story,
certainly it confirmed for you a belief in a personal providence
though it left me wary)
and you took me to see Man From Deep River
telling me it was a travel movie, how you'd always been fascinated
by this culture
and there I sat watching someone scooping out a dead woman's breast
and eating it
the grace you had to leave the missions when your time was up
when climbing hills began to tell against the heart
(though the cheese and salamis that you ate for supper hardly would
have helped)

Of all the priests I've known you were the only one
who was simply happy in his vocation. (yes, that's it, your capacity for
joy)
"I have enjoyed my life" Enjoy was a word
you often used.

The secret of writing is, of course, not what you put in but what you take out. These notes included more material than I could use; somehow

I had to select the moments that seemed to have rhythm and resonance, to find enough to suggest the character, give some sense of the voice, without lapsing into a character description.

After that the main difficulty I had was clarifying who the poem was about. For a year or so my attempts to write it were thwarted by the fact that I kept putting myself in the way. I could not seem to let go of 'When it came the news of your death' as the first line, and this (I did not realize it at the time) meant that the poem kept turning out to be more about my shock than about John. I liked the line because I thought it would introduce the idea of death as afterthought, but all it really did was key the poem in a depressive note that was quite out of character for its ostensible subject. One day, when I thought I was close to finishing, I showed a draft to another writer who said she did not get a sense of the character and that there was too much of me in it. This is the version she saw:

To Make the Most

(I.M. John R. Cecil SM)

The word of your death appeared
like an afterthought,
a note beginning "You might remember,"
handed on, weeks afterwards, with information
about conferences in Barcelona, Rome and London.
I doubt this would have bothered you too much:
you were never self-important and always had
an interest in travel (though not in conferences).
The last time we met you were on your way to Vietnam.
"You may not believe it, but I'm getting old.
I have to make the most of any time I've got.
Besides the ticket was a bargain." You'd just
given up being a missionary. For more than twenty years
you'd been climbing hills to talk with people you found
"so fascinating". Then the angina pains began.
We were lunching at Circular Quay, putting our hands
through sunlight to take our bread. It was your idea

to sit outside. “More interesting,” you said. “Noisier,” I thought.
If you knew this was goodbye,
I didn’t guess. Instead I noticed how your hair still held
its Elvis Presley style, how your collars still turned
their corners up, fifties style, how you still repeated “eh?”
as if you’d charm anyone to agree, and how simply you said,
“I have enjoyed my life.” Words I would have envied
had you not always been so keen to share
what you enjoyed: karva, movies, gadgets
(especially electrical), gospel, stories
(almost being taken by a shark, almost being
made into a bishop), but always in my memory
you’ll be breeding birds and fish. At the last
it was finches. You’d filled your back yard, you said
cheerfully, with aviaries. Perhaps after you died
someone opened them to let the birds go free
as they do at Wat Po, Bangkok,
when they want to make a prayer.

It was good criticism, although it almost made me abandon the poem. I simply could not see how to solve the problems the piece was creating. Then I had, for other reasons, to put aside writing for quite some months. By the time I got back to it, I had achieved the necessary distance and could see how to remove my mourning self and rework it so that it had a feeling more in keeping with John. (Writing may be a gesture of sympathy, but sympathy perhaps needs to be detached if it is not to fall back to self-interest.)

I cut. By now I could see that the voice of the poem was still too heavy, that its rhythm was more prose-like than I wanted (for me rhythm is the key to a poem since it gives it breath and in that breath something that might almost be called its body language). It contained information that did not resonate (I like the idea of resonance because I think of poetry in terms of analogies talking among themselves). I heard (I hope) a lighter rhythm that suggested something of the enthusiasm with which he had embraced his life. So I finally reached what was to be the penultimate version:

Last Time

in memoriam John R Cecil SM

It was all there the last time
we met: your Elvis Presley hair, your collar turned
slightly up, like mischief, that "eh?"
you used to finish off opinions that might sound
too strong, sandals that only missionaries wore,
and, of course, your stories: the man who said you were too dumb
to make a priest but drowned before
he could prevent it happening, his thongs
looking out to sea, the time you were adrift
in the middle of some circling sharks, or in a mountain village
getting rid of demons, how heat could melt
a vow of chastity, how close you came
to being made a bishop…

We were having lunch at Circular Quay, outside,
crumbling bread and sunlight. Angina pains
had made you give away the life you'd led
for forty years, but you were on your way
to Vietnam. It was a place you'd always
wanted to see (it was perhaps your greatest gift
that you always found people "interesting").
"You may not believe it, but I'm getting old.
I'm over seventy. I have to make the most
of any time I've got. Besides, it was a bargain."
If you knew we'd never meet again, you didn't mention it,
and I was too busy envying the way you said, simply,
"I have enjoyed my life" to notice that
it might be your epitaph. You went on to say
you'd filled your yard with aviaries. Perhaps by now
someone has opened them to let the birds go free
as Thais and Vietnamese sometimes do at temples when they want
to make a prayer.

Even so, it was not quite finished. When I have reached this stage with a poem, I try to put it aside and then get it out a few weeks later to see if I need to do any finetuning. At this point, I read it aloud, over and over, checking the body weight of each word, the rhythmic shape of each line, looking for repetitions, dead spots, and obscurities. In this case I spent some time deciding to have 'Vietnamese and Thais' instead of 'Thais and Vietnamese'. Once again I showed this version to other writers, one of whom said he thought the penultimate line was too long. I had to think about this: I had thought I wanted a sense of exhaustion at this point, and I knew I wanted to end the line with 'want', since that word suggests desire and lack, which was an ambiguity I wanted in the poem. Eventually I decided to break the line at 'do'. I preserved the final line as it is, since, as well as explaining why the birds are released, it signals the intention of the poem.

Then I began to worry about the phrasing of '… how heat could melt / a vow of chastity, how close you came …' Only at the last minute did it occur to me this might be read as implying he had himself broken his vow of chastity. He used to tell stories about the 'heat' in the missions, but I have no reason at all to suspect he had not been loyal to the priesthood he loved. I felt strongly that I had to keep faith with him, that an easy appeal to 'fiction' was a soft ethical option. A writer has to serve the truth of each particular poem, however that truth is imagined. I think it changes with each poem, requiring us to move again and again between aesthetic and ethical concerns. I do not think the truth of writing is a simple matter of congruence between word and thing, as I think truth is often discovered between words as between things, indeed as between experience and narrative. Yet, to become lazy about truth is to deny imagination its reach as well as its responsibility. So I hold to the notion of truth as impossible desire, something that does not enter fully into writing but is always calling it forward, asking it to do justice to its subject.

I revised that line. But at the moment I cannot recall exactly how I changed it – just after I sent the final version by email to the editor of the *Australian E-Journal of Theology* (which seemed like an appropriate home for this poem as some of the journal's readers would know John), my computer crashed, taking the poem with it (as well as another that was almost finished).

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Poetry

Progress Report

And then he awoke,
checking to make sure
they hadn't stolen his fingerprints.

He needed to eat.

The house was still cold.

Ignoring a sermon on the radio,
he burnt his toast.
When God wanted him back at church,
he would go.

He saw snow on the lawn.

In the still air,
out on the porch,
he put on his shoes
and observed the muscular haze.

It was Tuesday.

In the car he breathed into his hands,
rubbing them together.
He had not seriously dated a woman
since he was shot
in 1999.

The car wouldn't start.
He suspected faulty wiring.

He stood with his back to the falling sun,
watching his shadow claw itself
across the yard.

It was the one thing, he noted,
that could truly disappear
in the darkness.

'Aussie Man Dies'

(After Shelley's 'Ozymandias')

I met a traveller from an antique land
Who said: 'Two dazed and tired soldiers stood
Inside the compound...Their throats, torn by sand,
Stayed speechless for an hour, as if they could,
By looks alone, discharge their cold command.
Go, they'd been told, find someone at the bay,
A soldier who will do this type of thing.
The acts he wanted done, they dare not say.

But in next day's headlines these words appear:
'Aussie Man Dies (An Accident, We Think).'
How could this be one mistake, when it's clear
Two bodies are on the slab? And they say
Of their colossal wreck, Nothing to fear:
The lone and level sands stretch far away.'

Doctor Faustus

Cast down from the unreliable sky
cloud-shadows drift across this icy ground
like cataracts. Doctor Faustus, your soul
now lives in our snow dome, vain but shattered,
passed from giant palm to giant palm.
We rap on the glass but you hear nothing,
say nothing, so we shake your afterlife –
weather erupts in a tickertape parade.
The bent, bitten trees do someone's bidding –
I mean, Faustus, can you see the wind,
or feel the winnowing of these branches?
No, for you have no body, no senses.
Your thoughts are sleek with uncommon sweat,
but spirit bleeds for its muscled haunches.
Faustus, there never was a prospect of flowers.

Last Night

A burnt out car smoulders behind her eyes
as memories rekindle Lisa.
She wants to fly, or vent, to shout 'a man's ankles
are his fate', but she doesn't know how,
or knows but can't complete her thought –
                it withers on her brow.

This morning, Lisa woke in a hospital bed.

She can't move, but fear gives legs to feelings.
What's happened to him? meaning, where's the boy
with thongs and a tattooed ankle? He'd smiled,
moved a milk-crate up beside her, leaking stories.
She'd laughed but hadn't believed him –
they'd all been drinking.

This morning, Lisa woke in a hospital bed.

The Revenant

A local man walked me along the escarpment
but stopped ten metres from the fire-blackened bark
of a tortured melaleuca. I'll come back for you later, he said.
Moving closer, I saw the trunk was riven at the base:
I saw a mouth I'd known at school, and remembered its owner
forever touching squalid fingertips to his cleft palate.
I put my palm against that tree, cool as shinbone,
feeling for disease. Beneath my boots, teams of white ants
rounded from the wounded trunk. No one stood a chance
that day Marshall chucked himself on to the tracks:
we could only watch. I sat at the edge of the escarpment,
staring at the mangled body, at the treetops in the valley,
at the blood spots on my shirt. I wept openly for an hour,
and now those sixteen years have passed.

Forbidden Fruit Pastoral

When winding our way up to the border
through the hilly backblocks
above the flattened cane fields
we would always come by accident
(and never cease to be amazed)
upon a quarantine station
in the middle of nowhere
checking for forbidden fruit.

A censor dog on high alert
would come around the iron gate
to round us up and relay our arrival.

We'd stop beside the inspector's titivated cottage
with newly painted gnomes toffee appled in the grass,
china frogs and flowering cactuses elbowing out
the spilling geraniums.

Cuttings prospered in every rusting can
rescued for the purpose by Eve
unseen behind the flyscreen door.

While passionfruit and chokos ran unchecked
we waited 'guilty until proven innocent'
amongst the tyre swans. After an age the boot slammed shut
and we were free to leave.

Broken Hill Pastoral 1968

Eight hours out from Central….

We came onto the heavily watered plains,
hosed down now, to puddles.

Clumps of green lay strewn around
like lurid plastic bath mats on the red dirt.

We saw pink and purple wildflowers
enough to derail the most devoted English gardener.

Cinematic wildlife demobbed and oversensitive to noise
appeared confused beside the train.

The rattling wooden windows,
thrown wide open, were roaring their approval.

I balanced my elbow
on the peeling windowsill.

The carriage-cradle rocking me to sleep
as the silent newsreel relentlessly played to the racket.

History Of Madness

(Using elements of Michel Foucault's text)

deaf to any exchange,
almost dead
to each other

a language more original
much rougher
confrontation below
the language

absolute division of dreams

all the words
without language

dull sound
from beneath history

obstinate murmur
language talking
to itself

with a lump in its throat

bend down towards
this murmuring
world

so many images that have
never been poetry

absolutely understood

stubborn, bright sun

The Storm Waits

The storm, attraction
rough and precise, waits.
The storm, heavy in the air
longs release; for now
it waits. The storm
is nothing, really, just
words falling
in chancy space, awkwardly
aligned weights. The
storm is, perhaps, reality
somewhere, sometime, being
beyond this attraction,
this precision, yet
for the moment
this mass of clouds, mass
of charge, this exact
indeterminate, spatial, temporal node
flinging furies syntactically apart

waits.

Barefoot Boy

(After Judith Wright's 'The Child')

The ferry, the campers, the family
are a whisper far off,
giving room for the ring and rasp
of winged conversations.

He is looking up at a shadow
puppet play about
birds and clashing boughs,

his feet skitter
through the stones & sticks
and flow on along the ridge.

Finding a cleft in the cliff face,
he enters.

He clasps his eyes to the shrinking
chink of the sky and the patterns
of high casuarinas, reaching across the gap.

Until the shade cools his limbs –
until the tree of his blood trembles and

he looks down to discover
in the narrow passage walls –
in the floor beneath his feet –

a universe of funnel web spider holes,
multiplying beneath every fallen limb,
in every seam of rock.

Each holds its own patient hunger,
each is its own dark galaxy.

Country Teacher

About mid morning –

through the slant-window kaleidoscope –

the children are an even cant
of laughter and tears

the nice-day sun is
hitting the world just so –

making the gums a garden of cool –

And she thinks

"This is not so bad after all."

Losing the shudder of bells –
and green linoleum noise.

Eine Kleine Nachtmusik

You walk to the station
through a horror cliché underpass;
lonely streetlights, furtive bed rolls and
cask bladder pillows,
walls cast with calligraphic scrawls.

Past the high-siding banks, where
immigrants slip through
hurricane fences to snip
wild aniseed in scented explosions.

Past the dry storm drains
cupping teenage lovers
and alchemists,
looking for the elixir that turns flesh
to golden breath.

Passing trains give rhythm to your feet
and swing to your shoulders as you pass
through the glass littered car park.

Then melody comes
from a nearby window.

A violin soars, slipping
around the click and clatter –

It draws to a slow crescendo
through the antiphony of brakes,
as the train sighs to a stop
blushing light –

then it sings the train
out from the station again.

This music
is a perfect accompaniment for
the smile of a cat off an evening rail,
as it bunches to jump and catch at
the high siding with a shrug of ease
and a soft mewl for the standing stranger.

The ancient rain, no-longer falling,
looks back up at the cat-haunted sky.
A reflective pause in its millennial journey
around the earth.

It wears the brief scud of cloud,
it wears the buckshot sheet of black sky
and dances with the passing trains.

Early Mornings

Early mornings and
the unpeeling of limbs, sticky
in a tangle of sheets.
One eye;
the other;
lazy pupils yawn in the squat light of
seven o'clock Monday morning;
coolly acknowledge the sky; begrudge the sun
and shutter closed.

That swaying waltz from the bed
to the slippers
to the bathroom
to the stairs;
that roll and heady trip into the cupboard
with the spoons and grinning cereal packets.

At the wharf
'Friendship' drags in dolefully
(painted yellow)
and sweats and pants by the pier;
smiling nicely at the ferryman
(wearing a bow tie)
and complaining in
cathartic grunts and puffs.

Click-clack onboard
turn right
sidle
    sidle
and sit nicely in someone else's squeaking imprint.
Newspapers unfurl witty headlines
and proclaim the latest catastrophe

(in the absence of a world calamity
a thrashed rugby team will do)
as patent shoes and polished scalps glare at the opposition.

Slicing through the green-grey
the air whistles slowly to the beat
of juddering glass
and the scratchy snores of the old fat man
with his head in his armpit
and his hand on his crotch.
The little Asian with the glittering hair
paints her face with different colours
and smiles at her teeth (very white)
while I:
scale the clouds,
walk on water,
and dance with the dipping masts
of pleasure boats
(the toys of jingling pockets
and men with booby trophies
that fashion Aryan babies
in the likeness of
round
gold
coins).

The sun smiles and splits the clouds
slapping the water and tired eyes,
upending snores
painting
and papered patriotism.
Yawning,
I swallow the morning
and watch their shiny masquerade
of yesterday;
the day before;
and tomorrow.

Kitchen Sestina

Here in my mother's warm kitchen,
Where the subtle scent of a rich ragout makes my mouth water
Uncontrollably, my hungry heart
Seeks to fill its empty spaces with mouthfuls
Of pheasant terrine on new-baked crusty bread
And ocean-dewed oysters fit for a king's table.

My soul is a place of starvation but here at a big wooden table
In this blue and white comfort-filled kitchen
I eat my entire satisfaction, not just the good bread
But the stew, cooked gently in wine with no water
And luscious great mangoes in mouthfuls
That soothe the dull ache in my heart.

This kitchen is cosy in winter, it has a big stove at its heart,
My memories of meals round that table
Are of steaming thick soups, roasts and bowlfuls
Of puddings and pies and fruit tarts from that kitchen
A haven of kindness that cleanses my mind like clean water
Clears the memories of you and the longings I dread.

Each morning my mother would rise, her first task to make daily bread,
She cooked with great skill for she cooked from the heart
We children also played a part, our job to go out on the water
And catch fresh fish from the bay to put on the table
Whole jewfish and mussels and flathead prepared in a kitchen
Where mother served love in giant spoonfuls.

We brought from the garden fresh herbs in armfuls
She often baked them in bread
And there by the fire in that cedar-lined kitchen
I sometimes learned poems by heart
My mother listened quietly as we sat at the table
Sipping lime juice with bitters and water.

My own soul is bitter since you left me by the water
I sweeten it the only way I know, with bowlfuls
Of carrots and cumquats and quinces and cheese on the table
To eat with crisp crackers and wine and brown bread,
My one consolation since you took back your heart
Is the love I find here in my mother's warm kitchen.

I dreamt of our table, our home and our kitchen
With basketfuls of home-baked bread
But that day by the water you broke my heart.

Going Home

With a shuffle,
he left the forests
of this world,
a wildflower fading
under the twilight,
where once rivers flowed
and bare feet roamed...

Still,
his voice resounds
above the bells that toll goodbye
and his smile radiates wide
like a grinning moon –
his laugh lingers
and as winter passes into spring
he waves from the singing pines
where once wolves strayed
and children played:

when shall we meet again?

Perhaps in the sibling orchard
where figs and pomegranates germinate
and cobble-stones echo
welcome home.

Journey

(In memory of Zac Leto)

There are some things, long gone, untouched,
forgotten. I now know why the binds of your youth

frayed yellow while green remained hidden.
I now know your journey was not of your choosing,

but Fatum's crooked spear, generations of spears,
but the last one ends with you. I now know

your interior, where once time chimed backwards
until midnight retreated to where darkness

once led. I heard triumph call your name.
I heard your words peel away another's fear,

and watched your hands work their internal pledge.
I heard the clock chime sunrise. I listened

for your homecoming. Then I saw you slipstream,
an exalted voyager toward blue heaven.

Second Translations

I miss the Spanish in my mouth.
I miss its ripe, overcooked sounds;
I miss its loud radio stations; I miss its mariachis
strolling in sequined tops. I miss its stream of bus
stops and children in strollers. I miss the Ranch Market
and the busty women making tortillas in the window
with fatty gold rings popping out through the maza.
I miss the aguas frescas (tamarind and hibiscus). I miss the fathers
from Golden Gate walking me through the dark lot.
I miss Wednesday bingo with Pati and the seniors.
I miss kissing instead of shaking hands.
I miss the time I used horny instead of excited
and shouted it across the gymnasium.
I miss Lila Downs spilling over the fence of the backyard.
I miss it so that sometimes I feel like I am the only woman
who paused to stomach the two nations
of Phoenix like the elusive green flash between
the ocean and the sky on vacations to Mission Beach.

Like letters from the dead,
I miss how I mourned Flora that summer in pinks and blues and browns
with flowers bursting out of the curves of her Depression hand.
I even miss the three airplane rides to bury her,
before my people took her heart (the one that exploded
in a suntan after a day of golf).
They laid it out to dry as a slice of exotic fruit
and then mouthed eulogies in pearl and in starch.

The Women

In the back of my head is a wardrobe of women:

the debutante refuses to let all the blonde out of her hair,

the revolutionary waits for an award from the country
where people are still pulled from their beds and shot,

the gardener plants hydrangeas in a loose blouse and drinks sunscreen,

the runner paces up and down the street looking
for hills and muscular calves,

the writer bumps into furniture and tries to unearth
the quiet, the room with the desk, the dogs and the instant coffee.

These shapeless women shift
slowly, the way the light hits the blinds
in the morning, slat by slat,
and in every corner
at once, full of grey and unexpected light.

One evening I saw the opening in my mother.
We were sitting in the smoking garden
with the lavender and the mint

and she got up to put something out
in the bushes and I saw it there, right
behind her ear and covered with pieces of brown
hair, right on a bone, but soft when I put my hand to it,
soft like a hand after a harvest.

She said the lover in her still speaks of the man in Melbourne.
I can hear this woman rattle and swing around wild like wire to mast.

I hear her breath move from violent to slow
and hear the others chatter, some just mouthing
words that hum like bone.

They do not listen to the traffic and empty
bedrooms, the sleeping dogs and violence,
and the woman asking to be left alone.

Three Tongues

The three tongues survive inside our mouths:
the pink tongue (ordinary, spotty)

that remembers to say grace on Christmas Eve
and saps the juice from a slice of blood orange.

The second tongue is harboured at the back
of our throats as a secret about our parents,

it speaks lingua franca in hot elote and calls baseball
scores with breath from painted television lips.

The last tongue, our tongue, hangs in between borders
(inaudible and tasteless to others)

inclines to the sounds before words, as people say
Listen, you two, finish your sentences.

This is the language of sisters,
the one acquainted with the gush

of the Colorado, of airplanes, the busts of two
young girls breathing through one another

and thirsty to taste, this disobedient river.

From A Sequence On The Iraq War

May had been a terrible month: carnage grown from ravenous March,
corrugated suburbs, cordite sky, the city coated in yellow ash.
Ribcages at the roadside, bleached skulls home to rats,

no safe point of entry. We limped to greet
our broken boats returning from the past; thought redemption
lay in excavating that quiet place inside ourselves.

We turned from mad racketing among the stars, the sword tips red
in June air, the river sullen in the dark, the children
shouting through the hot wind.

July seemed to breed calm out of summer: we no longer drank
from cupped hands. Shops stayed open 'til nearly dusk, newspapers
lined the pavement again, poets met on Little Saddoun Street.

Schoolchildren sat patiently on piles of bricks, wrote vanished names
in trays of sand. Our frail vessels reached the radiant shore:
we saw the clearing ahead, bees somnolent in the sun,

liquid jewels on peach blossom, the many-fingered palms unfolding
in the tiger light. We ignored the shadows –
the rotting meat, sound of knives sharpened on the rocks,

the skins in the pits on Nasireeyah Flats – until the day
the men in masks rushed within our rightful dream and cut off
the head of the teacher in the class.

Like a broken boat returning from the past, the sound arrives
from a long way off, infected by what is within.
Children are shouting goodbye through the hot wind.

****

I am embedded.

A black moon in the sun.
A computer talking to itself.
A division of dreams.
A face of clay. His face. Our face.
A liquidation of light along the Potomac.
A history of madness, a war built on rage.
A whole unknown language.
Allal la ilah.
Arrows moving through fog. Authorization. *Nuances*.

Before.
Beating upwards, beyond history, believing everything. *Belonging*.
Beads of water on the windscreen at dawn.
Bent over our desks under small hard suns in the midnight room.
Building invisible cities together.
Bogeymen, queue-jumpers, invaders, as a kind of solution.
Both of us obsessed with being *at the top*.

Collapsing towers. Comets barked forth by rabid dogs. Spuming smoke.
Confetti blizzards of sorrowing ink. Falling bodies.
Chaos. The world in love with us. Opportunities.
Confrontations sawing beneath the syllables. *Contradictions*.
Crescent moons, children playing with pebbles under olive trees.
Cluster bombs, craters, starfish in the desert.
Co-workers. Collaborators.

Days stepping off into radiant yellow.
Days like silver cylinders.
Dreaming through windows of warrior hills.
Data. Destiny. Deployment.
Definite proof that Saddam Hussein possesses weapons of mass destruction.
Dead spaces growing around the city. Where you can't hear what anyone is saying.
Duct tape.

Everything hides Nothing nicely this year. Even quiet words shudder in the darkness.
Exasperated trees. A tall man stooping to cradle a broken child. A house open to the sky.
Ethnic cleansing. Extraordinary rendition.

Falling planes. First flush of passion fading. *Flaws*.

Ghosts locked on my lips.

He watches pornography constantly. He says, It's the perfect moment.
History scuttling out from the white hood, the swastika, the black dragon scales.
Hearing stories of secret alliances. Holding my feelings tight.
Horrible images of war should not be seen on the front pages.
Human skulls sobbing on the river bank.

If one feels good so does the other, he says.
It hurts, I tell him.

Just words. Just Words. Justwords.

Language as a house of mirrors.
Laws apply only to law-abiding citizens.
Life goes on, he says. There are kiosks at Auschwitz. Dandelions on the Somme. Movie stars riding motorbikes on the Road of Bones.

Making my way slowly through the office at night.
Mists wreathe the river at dawn. Murmurs trapped in reeds.
Mustard gas.
My language used to be my roof. My walls.

Notebooks of ash.
Nothing between us any more.

Once there was dancing, music.

On his fear of disappointing his father.
On my fear of growing older.
On growing older.
On worries, again and *again*.

Prams in the park.
Photographs of faces pinned to white walls.

Replaced by the not real.
Ragged breaths across the yellow moon.
Shuttered windows.
Scribbles of chalk on the doors of freight cars. Scud missiles.
Stuff happens, he says.

The letterboxes bombed.
The puppet-master never sees the strings in her back.
The toxic fog returning. *There is no bottom to evil*.
The truth in layers, the truth peeled away, the truth at the empty core.
The wooden people won't go where I tell them any more.
Vanishing pianos.
Vietnam.

We have been deceived getting here. Was it always so?
We decide who comes to this country and the manner of their coming.
Words like maps, like weather.
Wet trees in the park shift and slap against the concrete overpass.

> What is this thing called civilization? So ephemeral, so fleeting.
> Just an idea, unsteady as a candle flame in dark water.

It doesn't matter if it is true. Soon, it will be.

Catching Tree Frogs

In a feline crouch,
wait for a pause,
then flash one hand out
and trap it –
it will spasm in panic, so
slip the other hand
quietly underneath to form
a soft pink cage.

Beginners, fierce and afraid,
will leave one limb crushed
between trembling hinges,
so the frog straightaway
leaps for freedom.

Old hands, like my father,
can pluck a frog out of the air.
He can contain it in
one padded palm,
so still,
when his fingers unfurl
the frog stays,
singing, absorbing
his soft confidence.

He would then tenderly
place this delicate song
on my arm, or my chest,
watching me relax into
our shared experience,
my total trust in his
treelike presence.

You And I

You see.
You see and you love.
You see and you love and you honey.
You see and you love and you honey and you ocean.
You see and you love and you honey and you ocean and you sky.
And I sky.
I sky so I ocean.
I sky and I ocean and I honey.
I sky and I ocean and I honey so I love.
I see.

Martyr's Fruit

"Watermelons come from India," he said watching her in the garden. The melons slouch, like green tigers, among the elephant leaves and twisting vines. Her fine boned hands, pluck. Against her hips the melon sways in pregnant wholeness. Placed on the block she thinks only of pink gauzed flesh. He sees instead the wood crisscrossed with ancient scars, kissed, by ringing blade. She gorges on the sweetness – spitting black seeds upon the loam. Around her feet: discarded rind like skin, peeled back by surgeon's knife. Flies drone, drunk on sticky wine.

He sees wine meander, over cobblestones, like blood; flecked pink flesh on prison walls. A fine boned girl unbidden comes. The delicate scooped cups of her collar bones, kissed raw by hungry blade. A body broken, smashed like a melon dropped from a medieval tower. Her martyr's seed spilled. Some see only artistry of form the priceless pink and green marble. Rolling the foreign name 'Santa Maria Della Fiore' around their tongues like sherbet. He weeps for a young girl, the compost heap from which domed churches and tall spires grow. She calls him back from reverie. Her fine boned hands protectively around her belly. "I'm craving watermelon gelato like they have in Florence." She wriggles with laughter. "The church you rave about papa, 'the Duomo' it's the colour of watermelons."

The Concubine

"Here is where it cuts," she says. Pomegranate seeds of blood, sticky upon her thigh. The cloth stained pink. Pinpointed skin scrubbed rough in want of tenderness. Discarded like a garment kicked beneath the bed. She is still in the first bud of youth. It is an ancient rite this lust for youth. The concubine attracts the Emperor only once. "It was her feet that caught his eye," they say. She steps so delicate on those three inch gilded lilies. The Emperor's face engorged, his lips outlined in sweat. Her mother's cracked tooth smile, before the altar. The stone she worships is dull and unadorned. Incense smoke snakes around the precious stone. The rough hewn rock crushed the fine boned feet of five generations. "Here is where it cuts," each mother says. A blade across the arch. Bound in pink stained cloth. Her black lacquered hair shaped like a peacock fan. Unopened poppies revealing the bud of pink and red in little downy pod. "Here is where it cuts," he says. The Son of Heaven plants his future deep. His pomegranate seeds of blood, sticky on her thigh. One single drop on budded lip. Pink stains her small white teeth.

The Circus

They laugh and jeer. Heat rises in their loins. Her mango shaped breasts push against the sequined fabric of her dress. Images of snakes and dragons blush like sunset over her back. The darkened shadow on her jaw like the bruise between her thighs. Her lips hold sweet fullness, tattooed by stubble black. She is in the spotlight and works the crowd. Children stuff pink fairy floss in eager mouths. The ticket stall makes less each day. The crowd retreats like tide upon the sand. She works the limpid pools of lust. After dark, canvas shelters men who grope. Lips bite her naked breasts as sweat turns to rivulets in sand. Each indrawn breath returns her shame. Her fleshy bud of femaleness beneath her rigid flesh. Some men grow thick of breath when her manhood rises at their touch. "Freak" is the word spat out. Her bruised flesh heaves beneath the dancers' hands. "You were not born to love," the aging dancer says. "Here at least we find shelter from the mob. Flames would eat our flesh upon the pyre." She lets them laugh and jeer. Allows the hair to sprout upon her chin. She binds her breast and dresses as a man.

Animal

In dog years
A moment might seem brisk but today,
It was a lifetime. May the devil take you with *both* hands, for
Tomorrow, that bastard,
Is brisker than I, less chivalrous too (I bet)
And he hangs limp in the autumn wind today (anyhow)
Let us consider a moment, which will come as we stand naked
In the plain room's stippled light, brisk then,
But too long now, O how;
And tomorrow it won't even be.
When you looked at me
(crooked like you do) O
You, trove, battered lock and map in one,
Strode to my heart with two long pale stork steps;
The dog and the stork I wish we were,
But more like the stag and the dork,
You all the more so for being stark as you are.
I am getting my pasts and futures confused again
But that moment-to-come *did* and *will* and *has*
(and let us savour that *they* at least have
come)

The Lemon And The Sewing Needle

I am a sewing needle,
And you are a lemon.
Eleven times out of ten we're together it's lemonade,
With nothing to grieve.
And the other three it's a needle and thread
Darning a yellow lemon, knitting a rind skirt & wax leaves;

This is Spring and Summer now, your fruit
In lemon's Winter with a woollen suit I tweedle:
I am a sewing needle,
And you are a lemon.
We *can* make lemonade, but slowly; you wouldn't see it in us but
Six times out of seven it's Spring,
Five out of three we're leaving, huffing and puffing,
Heaping Spring debris on Autumn's heaving,
Keeping heat from Heaven in his shade,
And knowing either
I'm a needle
And you're an elegant lemon,
(We're seasonally separate)
Or we are together an' knit's lemonade.

Beyond The Garden Gate

I have given myself to suffering hours.
I have left and I did not close the gate.
Melancholy has its own flowers,

Dark amongst the spring crowd –
Deaf, mute, limbless, they flower late.
I have given myself to suffering hours,

And to the fleeting company of clouds –
I go alone and I carry my own weight.
Melancholy has its own flowers;

A nursery of gnarled stems, weeping aloud –
Brooding, suckling at the season's plate.
I have given myself to suffering hours;

To walking the dark path unbowed –
To making of my toiled way, my fate.
Melancholy has its own hour;

Sown and tended, aching as it flowers late –
And I go onwards, beyond the garden gate.
I have given myself to suffering hours,
And to melancholy and its own dark flowers.

Take Your Youth

Take your unbridled youth, upon whose bow age laps,
and gallant unfettered through the day, amongst the older hours,
bent clock hands, dusted bust pieces and sour fruit trees of adulthood.
Youth is a burning candle, unknown to the hand of wind;
it is the light that plays daily in the coloured window.
Do not make work of your childish play, or of your childish thoughts.
When it is time to bear fruit, a tree knows to give itself to the sun;
so a child gives himself to play, so an old man gives himself to death.
Of friends, I have made enemies and of enemies, I have made friends;
but of youth, I have made only memories. Take your youth, before it is
taken from you. I yearn for my youth, like a branch yearns for the
weight of a fruit now fallen.

To Our Own Quarters

1.
We no longer talk,
but feed the hearth and let
the flicker fill the years. While
each day lies flush with passing things.

Where once I brought you flowers in season,
now I bring you each and every reason.

2.
I've left. I've come. Goodbye. I'm going.
Hello. So long. Take care. I'm back.

No port could hold me. No room could keep me.
No hymn could teach me. No face could show me.

I made my way against my age,
and wrote in the crook of the page,
that it is best to show a face, if only to show at all.

I learn. I learn. I carry my own urn.

3.
That it is again spring on the brothel walls,
and always winter in the urinal stalls.
That one can make sullen lines of sullen times.
That one can find spring in the dullest of things.

The port and its bells, the ships, the ocean and its swells,
all these things I wrote of and wrote of well.
To lick the back of faces. To name strange places.
To fill spaces, tell me does the cat still purr?

I left. Perhaps not far enough. I go further,
and find that I can write and walk,
that as I write I talk, that we have not spoken in a day,
and that a day is not far enough.

I may have taken a bed in a brothel, or a bench in a park.
I may have spoken to a statue and walked through the dark.

So I learn. If only to learn.

That it is worn springs in the brothel beds,
that all statues grow moss on their stone heads,
that every river is a river and every face is a face.
That men and women die alike in each different place.

To fill a space. A beating heart. If only to fill a space.
To make of this staid life a hurdle,
take the milk from the fridge before it curdles.

I've come. Perhaps not far enough.
I wrote of certain things well.
To my bed. To my clothes. To my smell.

This winter. This winter.
We'll cut blood oranges in quarters.
And sleep to our old age in separate quarters.

Ferris

Tonight for the first time
in ten years I walk
the Ferris Street memory
of a house, of you, of me
I hear my heart lurch
through the fear in my footstep

Ferris streetlights shine dull
and as I move in closer still
purple rays bleed from your window
to frame an old and blunted soul
still, snapped and frozen … here
on freewheeling Ferris Street

Salvation

we look forward to the resurrection of the dead
and the life of the world to come

you were the hum of my blood
you found war in the soil of my earth
a gypsy runs in my blood
wanders ragged
unsatisfied
her supply of words heavy on her back
light in her hand

you were my wooden bed in Bergen-Belsen
your eyes surgeon blue
you were my torn love
my death-song
you know how the gypsies beg
I know how the gypsies bleed

Logos
Spirit
Sophia
Lug around this universe
the Constantinopolitan Creed
the bending wheat of a sunburned field
wrapped in bandages of soil you protect me
from the rape of the sun
God is a circle
He redeems with an arrow

outside the world spins violently but I cannot see the difference
I can only tremble
in the beauty
in the savagery of
your earthquake

we believe in one God, the father almighty,
maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible
God is a circle
He redeems with an arrow
and I am pierced
my chest heaving without ecstasy

what of it all now St. Teresa
your golden body exposed
penetrated
just like that of my wheat fields
golden – they threaten your erotic divinity

what of it all now
as the earth spins
and I look out
onto the others
hurrying to close
the eyes of the dead

China Ball Red

I bend into myself
My shoulders caved
My back carved
Starkwhite putrid
Peeled back by ox horn
The smear clear and bright
Shinning across my thumbnail
Fresh slash and white flecked leg
The rope strings up
My hollow spine
Wracked with loss

Here In Sydney

(For Bertolt Brecht)

I
Looking at the ceiling smoking
in bed she mentioned Conrad
was the master of the unreliable
narrator I hope there isn't anything
else she hasn't told me

II
Sixty years on a unified Germany
manufactures cuckoo
clocks and refurbishes
stadiums war and death
occur now
only in poor countries

III
Here the homeless are obese
eat three meals once a day
Ibis eat half eaten meals among
discarded soiled clothes, white plastic
plates and cups litter the park when the food
van has left.

They shit in the gardens
don't wash their hands or brush
their teeth, but wear
clean clothes an infinite supply
available from charity stores

IV
No creeping shadow, no kind
stranger to hide you in the attic, no drum
beat Light
Light is everywhere, it tracks
Everything even under
blankets It's a multiplicity now, no
Argument! Hell is where the heart is

Our Austrian born Australian architect died
yesterday: he could show
you a thing or two
about air conditioning and city views

V
No escape one country
for the next no refuge or camp
Everywhere is Light

VI
It's all show don't tell
Perhaps except for love
Love and poetry which don't count
Signs of photo
Sensitivity forcing speech

Things are too good here
You can't say they're not.

Poetry School

Bea, it has come to this
I have enrolled in a
Fucking poetry writing class
and count syllables like fat
Bastards count calories and drink
Aspartame from the bottle

I remember different times
Putting my hand up your green
dress at the Seymour Centre
Falling in you love bite drunk
while we had sex in the hall
writing poems before breakfast

Bea, I have this nightmare
Surrounded by cops while I
toss off in the tourist view lookout
car park above moon lit Patterson

Just like when you make pancakes
Shred the first poem of the batch
The next is yours when it's done
Hi to Andy and the kids

Some/times

some nights you fall asleep holding nothing
but your own tenderness

you would like to be
sometime, someone, something
else

and on those nights there is
handwriting on your skin

a fingered note to yourself

MEMO 2/10/2006
Must remember to find
love/r

Truth

The only truth I ever got from you was in perfume form circa 2002. Calvin Klein had mixed the telling potion coming bowed and wrapped. It was a strange smell to be loved; a surprising gift, yet one I'd howled and hunted for. Still, I didn't expect the neat, on-time delivery – such precision in the giving. Truth, 125ml of it to be exact, perfectly measured, bound by glass and silver. But I was too scared to spray it directly on me, thinking the eau de might burn my skin, wondering biblically if 'the truth might set me free' yet knowing practically it would more likely set me alight. There was nothing left to do except put it safely back in its tidy box – warily prized, dusted and daily watched to see if it changed its scent as you wore hers.

Poem For Nick Drake

1948 – 1974

You wake with the sun
as it bleeds through the windows

you play fragile guitar
your voice
barely audible
above the sounds of the day

you wait for autumn
& the cold forest floor
to break your fall

you pray that the end
will go unnoticed.

The Invention Of Barbed Wire

a tightrope
of crucifixes

cutting deep into
the flesh of angels

taste of metal
& the bloodied star

edge of silver
& the knotted heart.

The Linguists

sit with their complex clauses
argue about
this word and that

wear their accomplishment
like medals from some
long forgotten war

collect
indefinite articles
and prepositions of place
on which to build
their ivory towers

trainspotters of syntax
they forsake poetry for abstraction –
deny the grass, the moon and the stars

the stars, baby, the stars.

The Transcendentalist

Observe him
Walking around the edge of the lake
Throwing a line into the water
Hiding from visitors

He pauses, surveys the animals which cross his path
Daily he compiles a list of things seen, noises heard
The lists are exacting.

He is re-imagining the wilderness
Making an inventory of this self-imposed exile

On weekends he heads back into town
Fills up on supplies, talks to his neighbour
Reads a pamphlet, visits his whore.

Miami

Thick-stick humidity weighs on
each curly limp lock.

Rich greens of serrated fronds
defiant against battering rains

Crayola parrots preen alongside
coconuts aching to slide –

Down the rough ribbed shaft
to a sand feather down.

Hispanohablante haven
where the deafening salsa

Flirts in sweaty air
with cafecito foam

Only our mojito-bright clothes
are louder than the crash

of Cuban waves onto
American soil.

Trace

One greedy tug on the cotton
sees a shoulder unsheathed.
Bare browned constellations meet
their maker – sunlight
and the sandy grit
of unshaven skin.
His heated breath can't melt
the perky spots of wear
but pinkens the surface
they've spattered.
Never before had he known
the beauty of her leopard back,
her jaguar shoulders so low as the sun
can kiss in June.
He ached to trace those stars
find Orion, the dipper, big and small.
Where she saw dotted flaws
he found the North star
pointing him back towards her.

Zebra Sunday

Sunlight creeps through
the slanted slats, painting

his whiskered cheek with day.
He squints, closed eyes asmirk

in a room growing eggshell light.
Though she lies so still,

her eyes glide sideways, tracing
the stripes that slip
slowly over his skin.

Nuzzled against his flank,
his steady breath low in her ear,

She knows she has only til dusk
to study each shaded band

before it grows long
and glides gracefully East.

She has only until the night steals back
those beloved dancing stripes.

Fence

He builds a fence,
in the crease of a long
river valley.

The fence unfolds
to the compass points
of the house.

His arc of posts
in rough-cut
four-by-four,

tenses as the wind
plucks saplings
from shallow beds.

He sips iron
from nails clamped
between grim gums,

hovers over his own
noon shadow.

Glow Worms

In dripping ferns, glow-worms
point you out,

they write your many names
in wet leaves.

Above us, a bright colander sieves
day from night.

You ask – are stars holes in the sky
where the day comes in?

Your voice, like a depth charge,
calls me back,

to breathe black sky,
to watch tiny constellations burn.

Maungawhau

Up here, the wind buffs my car
to a wild shine, drags a song from rubber seals.

Tourists at the crater's edge, photograph
each other, pretend to fall in.

A man walks off the summit, head down,
his chin tucks into a warm breath pocket.

Below us, Auckland sinks into the Waitemata.
If it hadn't been raining for ten days

I might just step out of my red car
and lie in a kumara pit to listen to the wind

blow across me and comb the grass
to a soft nest of green feathers.

The Park

On a wet day, ducks
dodge waterlogged
wedges of white bread.

Greedy for crumbs,
they slice flat water
into arrowheads.

A statue stands in a pale
maze of quartz paths.
Buboes of mould bloom

on dirty white stone,
full-throttle green ferns
erupt though the gloom.

On a wet day in the park,
the space between them
even more than the words,

brings me here again, to walk
through clouds and throw
my poems to the birds.

Sonnets From The Kitchen

I'll write a sonnet built of liquorice tea
of almond flakes and sponge with raspb'ry jam
no one shall taste the meaning save for me –
it shall be hidden well in seasoned ham.
The bite of lemon on my eager tongue
sweet berries mixed with mascarpone cheese
I wipe away the sugar when I'm done,
leave to the sparrows crumbs that do not please.
Let sweet and savoury pies be rolled and filled
roast beef and parsnips, mustard, gravy boiled;
fresh lemon sole be caught and finely grilled
my fork with fettuccine nicely coiled.
My tonsils from their sweet hot cave rejoice:
the pastry chef has given me a voice.

I cut the grease with water boiling hot
detergent bubbling like a snow capped dome
I wash the words to see what they are not
And look for silver tines to take them home.
What shall the ending couplet now expound?
I've cleaned and polished language to the bone
fresh tastes, exotic spices rarely found
but still the sonnet leaves me not alone.
I search the cookbook longing for a taste
Of wild plums that will raise my poem high
Why let the shortcrust pastry go to waste?
For even little Jack played in his pie.
I take my finger from the pot of jam
go out into the world, see who I am.

Juggling Life

Hands made of glass
with palms pointing outward
trying to catch the colours
as they fall
eyes cast heavenward
feet dancing
madly
backwards
on a sea
of air

disbelief as the colours slip
through the clear fingers
shattering them and
leaving chaos in their wake

Grazing Death

"A simple procedure," they said,
"just one day, then
back to work next week."

There were no hints
that such a tiny lump
could make you mortal.

"Don't worry," they said,
"lie back, trust us."
And so you did.

Long hours spent
while lethal drugs seep
through your veins.

"Kill or be killed," they said.
Lying as the rays
burn away your youth.

Hairless as a newborn babe.
Puking, defenceless,
too weak to move.

"The lump is gone," they crowed,
"you grazed death and lived."
But was it worth it?

In remission, but still
dusting cobwebs
from death's plate.

"Complications, side-effects,
to be expected," they said.
"Count yourself lucky."

Lucky as you fall down,
blood exploding in your ear,
grazing death once more.

Lucky as you become
an old man overnight,
retired before your time.

Lucky as the healing burns
eat up your bowels,
dripping from the cure.

I hear it when we talk,
the question you
refuse to voice.

You've grazed death for so long,
when will that graze
become a fatal wound?

Tigers In Training

Run up the stairs
Tumble on the turn
Slip back down and run again

Pounce on the mouse
Battle with the ball
Jump up high and pounce again

Slink down the hall
Meddle with the rug
Scratch it up and slink away

Hide in the den
Scrabble in the sand
Dig in deep and hide again

Lick down the fur
Middle to the back
Curl the tail and lick again

Sleep in the sun
Rumble in the throat
Purr with pride then sleep again

Fiction

A Small Wave

Helen studies the patterns her son's feet have made in the sand as she walks to her towel. Such small imprints.

Silky dress tucked into bather bottoms, she has just finished making a circle of sandcastles behind a trench of seawater. The pretty harbour cove is deserted save for the occasional boat passing and people walking along the cliff top path. She can hear the distant voices of day-trippers wafting towards the shore from a crowded ferry heading across the bay.

Nick rakes doggedly at the water deposited in the trench by another small breaker. He is completely in the moment. All that matters is the level of the water.

Then, as if sensing his mother's eyes, Nick looks up and opens and closes his sand-covered fingers in a wave. Helen smiles as he trots the few metres towards her.

"Muuuuummy, muuuummmy."

"Yes, sweetheart?"

"Bicut, bicut."

"No darling, not now."

"Bicut, bicut for Nick. Now."

"You've already had two, maybe later."

"Muuummy, please, something to eat."

"Okay, come over to the towel, you can have some pear."

Helen watches as Nick grapples with the slippery piece of pear, refusing to use a bowl, refusing any help and then continuing to eat it even after it becomes covered in sand.

"Cuddle, mummy."

"Sure." Helen leans over to give Nick a big squeeze.

"Fishies, Nick play with fishies," he says running off towards his bucket.

As Helen puts the pear and knife back into a plastic container she thinks of the phone call she had with her mother the night before. How she had told her mother of her confusion over whether to go back to work part-time or not and how her father had been on the phone earlier in the week telling her she was letting a good career go to waste. Her mother had sighed and told her to stop trying to please her father and instead try to please her husband. There was silence on the phone after that.

Helen always thought of her mother as independent, rational, poised. It was how Helen imagined she would be when she grew up. She was sure she'd feel like an adult when she got her first fulltime job. Then she thought it would happen when she married. Then she waited for the mature her to emerge after she had a child.

She'd certainly changed with all those things, but she didn't ever feel herself transform into a selfless, responsible adult. At thirty-five, she still felt like a girl – a journalist, a wife, a mother – but still a dreamy girl.

She often talked with mothers of boys about what kind of men they wanted their sons to grow into. Helen thought it a huge responsibility. But before that she had to meet Nick's basic needs whether he was hungry, tired, cold, bored, sick or in danger.

The only time she relaxed was when Nick was asleep – and even then she often stood outside his bedroom door listening to his steady, rhythmic breath.

Helen remembered interviewing a film director before she stopped working. They were sitting on a piece of tarpaulin near the grape vines on his property, drinking sweet homemade lemonade. As she was packing away her tape recorder, the director mentioned that his sister had left her husband the day before without their three kids and driven north. The children were at his mother's house. Helen remembers feeling exhilarated and shocked.

"But she's coming back?" she had asked.

"Yes, she'll come back."

"And, gone where and for how long?"

"I don't know. She wanted a break."

Helen wondered whether taking off like that was courageous or selfish. Sometimes, when she was cooking, surrounded by aromas of

cumin and coriander, she imagined leaving her husband a note. 'Gone to India, back soon.' She'd never do it. It was a fantasy.

It made her think of all those people who just disappear. One friend's brother never returned from Guatemala. His pregnant fiancée met the flight but he wasn't on the plane. They checked hostels, hotels, hospitals and prisons. They had to live without knowing. For another friend it was her father. He was sixty-eight when he left the house one day, saying he was going to the Post Office. He never came back.

Perhaps the father had lived his whole life with a woman he did not love and finally decided to live his last years alone. Perhaps the brother met an exotic beauty at Lake Atitlan and didn't have the nerve to tell to his wife-to-be. Or perhaps both of them were just in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Helen watches as Nick carries his bucket to a little rock pool. He scoops water into the bucket and then takes it a few paces away, where he begins to dig a hole. After a few minutes he empties the bucket of water into the hole and then repeats the exercise until there are half a dozen coconut-sized holes dotted around his feet.

Seagulls land on the rocks a few metres in front of him and Nick yells excitedly as he sets off in pursuit. Then he screams and falls. Helen is on her feet, running. The rock pool seems to instantly fill with blood.

"Oh my God what happened?" cries Helen.

Then she sees. He's skidded across a rock covered in oyster shells. Helen picks Nick up. Blood runs all over his body and all over her. He's screeching. She holds him tight.

"It's okay, darling," she says. "Come and sit on mummy's lap. Let's clean you up."

Helen's stomach feels heavy and nauseous. Where is all this blood coming from?

She sits down on her towel and leans back awkwardly to get her drink bottle from her bag. She pours water over Nick's legs. The blood washes away to reveal deep cuts on his calves and knees. The blood returns and flows down his legs. She pours water over his stomach. More cuts. More blood.

Snot is streaming from Nick's nose and mixing with blood. Tears are pouring from the sides of his eyes. And then his eyes begin to close.

"Nick, Nick. It's okay," gasps Helen.

She wraps the spare towel around his legs, trying to put enough

pressure to stop the blood. Deep red blood is all over her dress, all over the sand.

"Where's this coming from? It's alright sweetheart. Hold mummy. It's okay."

She pours the last bit of water over his arms and then she sees it. His left wrist is slashed. Blood isn't just trickling, it's pumping out of his little arm.

"Oh please, please, please," she whispers.

"Help! Somebody help me!" she shouts towards the stairs to the walkway.

"Mobile phone, where's my mobile phone?" Her hands scramble through her bag.

"An ambulance, what's the number? It's okay, Nick. Hold onto mummy, sweetie."

"There, there, darling," she says, mimicking his voice when he consoles his teddy bears. There is a bitter taste rising at the back of her throat.

She takes a clean bib out of her bag and ties it around his wrist as tight as she can.

"Triple zero, is that the number? Or is that American? Triple nine, that doesn't sound right."

Helen becomes aware her whole body is shaking. She can see Nick's rapidly beating pulse in his neck. He looks exhausted. His skin feels cool. He's wilting in her arms.

Suddenly a woman's hand is on her shoulder.

"Let me see," she says. The woman is her mother's age. "I've called an ambulance," she says.

Quickly she begins to rip up the T-shirt and Helen's cotton beach bag. She takes Nick from Helen and expertly ties the cloths around him before lifting him into Helen's arms again.

"Come on, follow me."

And then the ambulance is there. Helen is in the ambulance, Nick lying on a stretcher in front of her. The men lean over him. Nick doesn't cry anymore.

Helen's feet start to tingle, her legs, her whole body. She is outside herself, looking at herself, looking at Nick. She can hear her mother's voice. What is her mother saying? Is it soothing?

She looks around. Everything is bright shiny instruments, bright

red bags. Someone asks for her name and address. She knows her name, but can't remember her address.

"Where does your husband work? Can you remember that number?" asks a male voice gently.

She looks out the window. Where is she?

She looks at her hands. She looks at her dress. The bloodied flowers fold between her legs as the material follows the line of her body. She looks at her son's hands, the only part of his body she can see. Small fingers open and close in a wave.

The Price Of Rice

"You must learn the price of rice."

Those were my mother's words. Rolling off her tongue, they hung in front of me like heavy droplets in the air.

"What does that mean – the price of rice?" I asked, sucking at the sweet lolly in my hand. I had whined, stomped and held my breath until my mother bought it for me. Its sticky sweetness was now dribbling down my clenched fist as I tilted my head to catch each sumptuous drop.

"You're too young. When you're older you'll know. Why should youth trouble themselves with such matters?" Her last words were lost in a solid crunch as I bit down on the treat, the sounds of munching echoing in my head. But even in that sweet and savoury moment, my child's mind knew enough to know that those words held a special meaning that would unlock my mother's heart.

The next time I heard them, I was certain I had the answer. Mrs. Chan, our neighbour, was over for tea. My mother had laid out the good white plates and crisp white linen serviettes that she would never let me use at the dinner table. Spread out on a silver serving tray was a generous sampling of elegant shortbread biscuits and fancy vanilla cakes.

"You won't like them," my mother warned as I helped myself to a golden biscuit decorated with a perfect lavender tulip squeezed out on a cream base. "They're just for show."

I ignored her as I nibbled on the perfect browned edges, taking care to eat around the flawless blossom.

The brittle biscuit crumbled in my mouth, assaulting my tongue, the

crumbs lodging themselves in the dark crevices of my teeth. It was tasteless, parching my throat. Making a crude face, I swallowed the dry doughy lump of shortbread.

I looked down at the half-eaten biscuit, the flower still intact. Speckles of lavender sugar caught the light and took on a sparkling hue. It looked so perfect. My dry mouth watered as I popped the pretty petals into my mouth.

It was rock solid and sickeningly sweet. My mouth discovered sharp petals that were now piercing my tongue and scraping my inner cheek, like I'd bitten down on a pin cushion or a miniature hedgehog. I felt the hunk of sugar crack in two, revealing its powdery artificial centre. The sharp edges clawed at the lining of my throat as I swallowed the jagged pieces whole.

My mother's voice was stern as she handed me an Oreo and a tall glass of milk. "I told you. Such things are just for show." I swallowed the milk and biscuit in a single gulp.

Mrs. Chan and my mother were now both ignoring the beautiful biscuits, slowly sipping their dark cups of oolong tea.

"Hong's son bought a brand new Benz – and a BMW for his girlfriend too! Wah! Such a waste!" Mrs. Chan was talking about their friend, Mrs. Hong, whose son had just taken a job in New York City. My mother shook her head in disbelief.

"This generation, they know nothing about the price of rice," she commented and had another sip from her chipped china cup.

Now was my chance. I had been sitting quietly on the stiff metal chair, careful not to swing my legs, else my mother shoot me her usual disapproving glare. They had spent hours discussing their various friends from Hong Kong and the lost generation of children brought up overseas, none of which I had understood. But here was my mother's famous phrase and I had finally figured it out.

"Two dollars twenty a kilo," I piped up.

Ever since my mother had first mentioned it, I'd paid careful attention to the price of rice whenever we went to the market. It fluctuated from week to week, but I was always certain to keep track, lest I be accused of not knowing that all-important price.

But instead of marvelling with pride, a grim smile set itself across my mother's face.

"Just numbers, no value. They see a penny on the street and won't

bother to pick it up."

I shrank in my seat as my mother's words washed over me in a cloud of mystery.

Unable to unravel the truth on my own, I turned to my father for help.

"Baba, what's the price of rice?" I asked him one day while he was making dinner. Watching him prepare a meal was like watching an odd ballet. His fingers gripped an oversized metal cleaver, the kind the butchers in Chinatown used when they strung up long rows of barbecued meats. He used that knife for everything, from mincing onions to scaling fish. His hands moved like lightning across the bamboo chopping board, blurring the misshapen finger on his left hand, where a job in a meat packing factory had shaved off the middle tip many years ago.

Right now, he was dicing up large shells of lobsters, deftly removing the head with a single thwack. A couple more hacks took away the menacing claws bound in rubber bands.

"The price of rice, where did you hear that from?" he asked, glancing down at me. His nimble fingers knew exactly where to strike even without the aid of peripheral vision.

"Ma said it. I thought it was two dollars twenty a kilo but she didn't seem to like that answer," I said, peering over the counter. Baba was scooping up the pieces of lobster and putting them in a bowl, the grey insides still twitching in their bits of shell.

A thoughtful look across his face, he dangled another lobster by the tail, its antennae thrashing with rage.

"It just means you have to know things are expensive," he said finally. With a giant swoop, the steel blade knocked the antennae off their bases. "It means even something as common as rice costs money," he went on as his blade fell again. The lobster's body was fighting feebly from the loss of its head.

I left my father with his lobster bits, pondering over what he had said.

When we went through the supermarket aisles the next day, I was ready. I took a long time as we went down the aisle with its bags and bags of rice.

"Wah! Two dollars forty a kilo," I remarked loudly so my mother would hear. "So expensive."

My mother hefted up a large sack of rice, about ten kilos' worth, and dropped it in our overflowing cart.

"It's no use knowing things are expensive," she said, turning to me. "We still have to buy them." And she made her way down the aisle, pushing the wheels of the uneven cart, leaving me standing there, as befuddled as ever.

I tried my grandfather next. Gung was my mother's father and had joined us from Hong Kong not too long after I was born. He had wispy white hair, pockmarks all across his face and a few scraggly teeth dangling from the roof of his mouth. He spoke no English, and his Chinese came out in a spitting garbled mess. My mother said it was a regional dialect called Hakkai, but it might as well have been French to me.

Still, I did my best to explain to Gung what my mother had said.

"Gung-gung, what's the price of rice?" I asked him over a game of Chinese Chess. My mother had taught me how to play when I was just five years old, but I had never taken much interest in the game. She insisted that I play with Gung, even though I never thought about the game beyond how the pieces moved. Gung, on the other hand, took each game very seriously, studying the board and carefully weighing his options as if he was playing an international champion.

"The price of rice?" He laid a hand on his pawn, ready to capture my queen. "It's a cold white grub that slithers along your fingertip. It scurries around on invisible feet, chewing its way through the solid bits rice with its hundreds of brothers and sisters. Then it bursts open into a cold wet fruit fly."

"Ew! Gung! That's a maggot," I cried, with a snorting laugh. Gung was hard of hearing and often misunderstood. Glancing down, I moved my rook across the board, where it would block off his attack. "I mean the phrase 'the price of rice.' It's something Ma always says, I just don't know what it means."

Gung looked down at the board thoughtfully. "Same thing isn't it?" he said, confidently picking up his piece. "Price is just a greedy little grub that eats away at the things we want. Checkmate." Even though it was his thousandth win against me, Gung had a smug childlike smile on his face.

As I grew older, I cared less about my mother's mysterious ways and grew less concerned about the price of rice. Clothes, makeup, shoes,

CDs, movie tickets and concerts, those were the prices that preoccupied my mind. That two dollars twenty that could have bought a bag of rice when I was a little girl was now hardly enough for a bus ride into the city.

"Where are you going?" my mother asked as I flew past her in the kitchen.

"Dinner," I said, peering at my reflection in the toaster. "Kristy is meeting some friends out in Coogee." I deftly moved a wisp of hair back into place.

"Dinner?" my mother cried, alarmed. "But I am making dinner right now. You can't let it go to waste." I took a big whiff; the musky scent of chicken soup invaded my nostrils.

"Chicken soup, very healthy, I made it from scratch," she went on proudly. "Outside, all you get is junk."

"It's just soup Ma. I'll drink it when I get back." I rushed into the dining room, rummaging through the leather bag left out on the table.

"Aiyah! What are you doing?" My mother snatched her purse from my grasp.

"I need a bus ticket. Mine's out." It was getting late. If I didn't make it out the door soon, I'd never make it to Coogee on time. And Kristy would get mad if I stood her up.

"So you go through your mother's things like your own? Aiyah!" She clutched the purse possessively to her chest.

"Maaa," I whined in my impatient six year old voice. "I'll pay you back later. I have to go. Everyone's waiting for me."

"You're not going anywhere. So selfish, I can't believe I have such a selfish and shallow daughter."

I was stunned, stung by her words. "Ma, I have to go. You don't understand!"

"Shallow and selfish," she repeated. "She doesn't know the price of rice."

"You always say that!" I cried. "It doesn't make any sense. You're not in Hong Kong anymore! Why can't you just be normal?" My heart was thundering in my head, drowning out the shaking in my voice.

"Normal?" Her voice was slow and even. It had suddenly taken on a dark menacing tone. "My daughter wants me to be normal? Okay, then, I'll charge you three hundred dollars a week. I'll charge you for rent, charge you for food, charge you for the clothes you wear. I won't

be your mother anymore, just a normal stranger, and then you will be happy."

Her chilling words sunk into me. What was this? Where had my mother gone? "Everything's about money for you!" My eyes were stinging with tears. "You don't understand anything!"

The dark creature that had swallowed up my mother went on, its slow deliberate beat tearing into my body. "I don't understand? No nice clothes, no pretty things, no going out, just stay at home and study and let's see if she dares to say her mother doesn't understand."

I couldn't take anymore. I ran into my room, slamming the door and clamping a pillow over my head. It was no use; my mother's harsh accusations flooded my ears, mixing with the salty tears running down my cheeks.

When did it get like this? When did I stop trying to understand her secrets? I remembered back to when I had first heard those words, so very long ago, and I had found them haunted with magic. I had firmly believed that discovering their meaning would secure my mother's love forever.

After a long beat, too tired to cry, I sat up and turned my tearstained face towards the window.

A ruffled magpie sat perched on a thick bare branch, warbling a haunting song. The feathers around his neck stood out at jagged angles, his tail moulted to nothing more than shreds. His little magpie eyes flicked towards me and he cocked his shabby magpie head.

He looked wise and intelligent, despite his tattered form.

"Can you tell me the meaning?" I whispered.

The magpie bristled his scruffy wings and pulled himself upright, training his sharp narrow eyes on me. His haunting warble gone, he spat out a single spiteful caw. Like a black crow emerging from his piebald form, he charged the windowpane, fearsome, ruthless, aiming at my heart. At the last possible moment, his taut body angled upwards and took flight, exposing his soft downy belly as it brushed the fine wires of the fly screen.

He flew up, up, up in a vertical line, shooting straight for the clouds. I craned my neck to catch a glimpse of his magnificent form. He was sleek and graceful, certainly not the flea-bitten mongrel I had mistaken him for.

I felt the remnants of my tears cracking as I found my smile.

Burying my sorrow and gathering my strength, I stood up and headed for the door. The warm inviting smell of chicken soup wafted through the air as I pulled it open.

My mother's small frame was hunched over the chopping board, my father's butcher's knife clutched in her slender fingers. Her hands were cracked and worn, uneven veins bulged from the paper thin skin. Generations of secrets pumped through the hollowed out depths of those coarse dry channels. These were the hands of an elderly woman, not the plucky spitfire that burned in my mother's soul.

I came up alongside her, my breath almost touching the top of her hair. I had never realized how small she was.

She shyly tilted up her head and I looked into my mother's eyes. I saw the nervous and uncertain girl, on her own at seventeen, in a strange and foreign land; her younger siblings counting on her to send money home to aid their ailing mother.

She tilted her head up more defiantly still, and I saw the struggles of an exhausted mother who had toiled away to ensure her own daughter would never know the price of rice, because she would always be full.

Folding my arms around my mother's small frame, I let her weep. The burdens she was carrying flooded from her tired, worn body, the ancient secrets pouring out, soaking through my thin cotton shirt.

Finally, after a long moment's cry, she looked up at me, drained, her eyes still wet with tears, and said simply,

"Onions, making me cry."

A hearty chuckle sprang from my throat, ringing in the terse silence. My mother joined in, her soft trilling voice warbling gently and we laughed together.

When our laughter finally died down, my mother wiped her eyes with a damp paper towel and hunched back over her half-minced onions.

Gathering up my sleeves, I went to help my mother make some rice. Kristy would understand; she was always whining about how her own father was far too busy to sit down for a family meal.

I was careful not to spill any as I measured the precious grains into the large bowl. Turning on the tap, I watched the mixture swirl into a milky white. Plunging my hands in, grabbing a fistful of granules, I felt the sharp pointy ends digging into my skin. This was the touch of

secrets that could never be told, their meanings lost in their own murky depths.

I drained the rice quickly, watching the water spiral in the stainless steel sink, swirling down the darkened drain. As I rinsed the grains again and again, the water turned clearer and clearer until you could see right down to the translucent slivers. When I finish, there will be no secrets, no clouds of mystery, just fluffy white rice, nourishing and full, stewing with meaning you can't buy at any price.

About The Threads

It doesn't look good, I'm the first to admit, but I'm not one to look at things third-full or half or quarter or whatever the bloody fraction is. Catriona is always on my back about getting my sayings mixed. Half, quarter, empty, it doesn't change the fact that my shoes are covered with someone else's blood.

So, I found the body. It's cold. It's 5am. It's me. And he's as dead as a door knob, blood everywhere, throat sliced right through.

They're the facts. The other fact is, despite the tidal wave of finger-pointing and innuendo that will flood this town at opening time, I'm not guilty.

Why walk the dog so early in the middle of winter?

The cops'll ask me that a million times.

It's not as if you have a job at the moment, is it Ted?

Second most frequently asked question.

Cops should just hang at Centrelink if that's the logic. I'm not a bad person. I'm a bloody good bloke, if you ask me, who just happens to be in-between jobs, and just happens to be a morning person, and just happens to be at the wrong place at the wrong time. Where's the crime in that?

Doug and Marg, I can hear their voices. Any minute now they'll be turning the corner with their bug-eyed monstrosity. Prepare for impact. They're good people, not murderers. Dog walkers like me. We usually just say hello, comment on the weather, let the dogs sniff butts.

But we both know we're out at this hour for the same reason. And if I confess that? Well, I may as well confess I'm not only the murderer, but also a cheat and a Nazi who steals from the church collection plate.

All of a sudden it's a crime against humanity not to pick up your dog poo.

But I'll tell you one thing. I don't care. I'm not touching any animal's faeces and everyone knows the only time you can indulge in that is 5am.

Doug and Marg think the same. I've seen them. Not a plastic bag in sight when their little Chihuahua-freak dumps. A dog is a dog, is a dog, despite what Catriona thinks, and I'm not moving its crap. "Oh, nice job dog sir – superior-sized turd." No way.

But the body – that's nothing more than a whim of nature, a coincidence extraordinaire, some universal loophole, that has sucked me in. The trouble is I know the guy bleeding all over the spongy grass. And not in a good way.

His name is Barry De Hinze, big bad blockhead Bazza. I might get my sayings mixed up, but at least I can string a polite sentence together. Hinzy was a good-looking bully, an arrogant twat of a suit who I happened to go to school with. He leaves town and then last year comes back driving some fancy-pants compressor and smoking cigars. The guy's got a mountain-sized ego and the bank account to press it. You should've seen Catriona when I mentioned he was back; her and her giddy bevy of barmaids. No point telling them a Holden's as good as any car and the bloke at the local abattoir has more of a job than someone who defends thug husbands and money-hungry wives.

Now someone's slit Bazza's throat nearly clean through. Good for them.

Only I'm left here taking their rap. I say if you're gonna do someone you may as well admit it. Be proud of it.

The dog's not happy either. It's pulling on the lead, whimpering and shaking, like a druggo desperate for another fix. Can't get enough of the chocolate-dead-body-cake-smell. Dogs are disgusting, eat anything, roll in anything, sniff anything. I almost puke when I see people kiss their dogs.

So, yes, my footprints are all over the crime scene. And, call it reaction, yes, I did slap Hinzy's pasty face to see if he had just passed out drunk. That was when I noticed his head was held on by two stringy tendons. By that time the dog's peed over everything, nose going wild, the self-sauced pudding of the dog world. With ice-cream.

Quite frankly, it's Catriona's fault. She's the one who begged to get

the dog not long after Bazza Bling Boy moved back to town. "Please, please, purty please, Teddy?"

Now I'm the one walking it, washing it, feeding it.

She thinks dogs are humans. For the first six months it slept inside, lounged on the furniture, licked the plates. Last month I'd had enough and kicked it out the back. Hell hath no fury like a woman and her dog scorned. She yowled, it yowled, there were tears and plates flying in all directions. No way. It was not coming back inside and there it sat, pure misery, scratching at the screen door, and there Catriona sat, pure misery, picking at the lint on her jumper. That soon turned into picking lint in the local pub or the Bowlo or the Bistro. Barely gives the dog or me a scratch behind the ear anymore. She comes home all wobbly, stinking like an ashtray, and snuggles into her stuffed toys while I'm the one lying there arms open. As soon as she starts snoring, I get a cold shower and early morning dog walk.

It was that dog, her dog that sniffed out my ruination. And just like Adam, I followed.

So what happened son?

What? Discovering death? Easy.

I just found him. Followed the dog. And suddenly I was hovering over a body, intrigued more than anything, I'll admit. It was just like television but real.

Sounds. Doug and Marg. Enter stage right.

Marg's wearing her green Polartech fleece and Doug matches her shade in his tracksuit. The morning air shoots out of their mouths.

That's when I stand up and croak a greeting. It's only then I notice my hands are shaking, my voice is shaking, and I think I feel a little queasy.

"Ted, that you?" Doug waves, smiles, then stops dead. They've seen the body.

I take in the special moment in silence.

"Ted, what's going on?" Marg is backing away, tangling herself in the dog's lead. She's trying to pull her hand from Doug's but he's not letting go.

"Is he …?"

"Dead," I nod. "Dead, dead, dead."

I think I even hooked my thumbs around the elastic waistband of my track pants.

Marg's shaking her head, hand over her mouth. "Well, call the cops or something. Call someone. Have you called anyone Ted? Doug? For God's sake get your dog away from there."

"Just found him," I'm yanking the dog away. "I don't have a mobile. I was just checking that … he was, dead."

I was really thinking 'wait tell I tell Catriona her high-school ex got swiped'. I may as well kiss sex goodbye for the next twelve months.

All Marg can do is shake her head while Doug fumbles for the phone, foaming into the mouthpiece. Their dog's dressed in a cardigan, blue and white striped. Ugliest thing I've seen. Chihuahuas should be banned. Marg's watching me watch her dog.

"How long – when did you get here, Ted?"

I shake my head, I can't remember. Five, ten, twenty?

"Five minutes?" I know I don't look convincing. This would be a good time to light a smoke if I smoked.

Then to add woe to misery I hear more voices. Oh Lord in heaven have mercy. It's Catriona and her gaggle of high-heeled, champagne intoxicated, stumbling geese. Catriona is in the shortest skirt I've seen for a while, all black and glittery. Nightclub material. Very nice. Good set of pins on that woman. Pity I've been usurped by a teddy bear in the bedroom. They don't notice us but the dog noticed them, so I let him loose, tearing stockings and covering the group with delighted wet paws. Wet and bloody paws.

"Wilbur, Wilby, what are you doing, boy?" Catriona cuddles his sodden fur and gives him a drunken kiss, then she looks up, and sees me against the fountain. "Ted?"

At that point Goose One screams, and then everyone's screaming and squealing. They notice the blood first. Then the body, then Marg and Doug, then the Chihuahua. Wilbur gets shoved aside and I just take a moment to consider the lost beauty of a quiet morning before moving to pick Catriona off the ground. My hesitation isn't lost on Marg.

Catriona is screaming, no denying that.

"What's going bloody on? Ted, what's happening? What have you done?"

What have I done? What have I done? Taken her dog for a walk, that's all I've bloody well done. Put up with her girly sulks for months on end. Been cool, calm and collected.

"I just found him, Catriona. Just like minutes ago." I pull her up and

she's staring at me, grasping for her friends. I try stroking her hair. "I thought you were home? Where have you been?"

The noise of sirens, coppers springing out of the patrol cars like champagne corks on New Year's Eve. There's intense furrowing of brows, some pale faces, and a hell of a lot of commanding and poking and prodding and taping and low murmurings into walkie-talkies.

I leave the mess of femininity and settle against the fountain, gathering piles. Ever-faithful dog is back by my side, sniffing my shoes.

About a week ago, I ran into Hinzy in the bar, sitting by himself, drinking and reading. Who the hell reads in a bar? It's a bar, not a yuppie café. So I took my beer and moved off to play darts. I'm not bad, a few doubles and triples, an occasional bullseye. After I've played a few he comes over and puts his beer next to mine and sits on a bar-stool, watching me. He's chewing the beer nuts, tossing them into his mouth like netball goals.

"Not bad," he says, raising his eyebrows. "Mind if I play?"

I think it was the first time we'd spoken in what? Ten years? It goes without saying he hated my guts at school. Ditto. For one thing I played the piano. Must've hurt I took his girl.

"I guess." I took my shot and stepped aside, letting him line up. I notice with some satisfaction that he has the stance all wrong, leaning too far forward. I doubt he's ever played darts. The shot misses the board and he laughs, wiping his forehead.

"Need more practice, don't I?"

I don't say anything just in case he's trying to pick a fight. I'm a woman-enforced pacifist. I take my shot and a mouthful of beer. He turns and continues as if we're old buddies.

"You come here often, Ted? I mean, you get out of town for a while after school?"

"I'm happy," I say.

"Don't know how you did it," he looks around the bar. "A lot of old faces still in town, for sure. Strange. I guess it makes you choose some strange things."

"Why're you back?" I watch my shot hit red centre and step away with quiet satisfaction.

"Nice," he whistles low, turning his darts in his hand. "Just had some things to do, good to come home again once in a while to catch up on the old days."

He misses superbly. The dart drops onto the ground. He hesitates for a moment before retrieving it.

"You need practice." I can't resist.

This is great. I shrug and smile and line up my shot.

"You go to church, Ted?"

Just like that. Boom. My shot goes way off the Richter scale. Umpire calls wide.

"I thought we were playing darts?" I look at him, gathering my misfire and re-aiming. "Are you going God on me?"

"Nah, but I just started going. It's not bad. Maybe you should try it?"

He pops a nut into his mouth, wide jaw munching like an amplified cow.

"Why, because I wanna be a loser?" I shake my head. "I'm fine, thanks, mate."

"Wanna be loser?" he slaps my back when he sees my face drop. "I'm joking, buddy. That's not what I meant. But, I don't know, perhaps Catriona would like it. You know she used to be a Catholic."

"Some Catholic."

"She's not that bad."

"What's Catriona got to do with you, anyway?"

He takes another mouthful, and looks at me, licking his lips. His *piece-de-resistance* is arriving. I can feel it. Nothing's changed. A big, fat tongue pokes through white rectangles of teeth.

"Just wondering if you're going to make an honest woman of her, Ted?"

What the hell is this guy on? Is he her father? I'm ready to shoot, but my concentration has gone and my hand is shaking. Steady there, Ted, calm down, mate. You know his game from way back. I lower the dart and lean into the table, talking real low. Real controlled.

"Hinzy, do I actually know you? Here's something. Perhaps you should just mind your own fuckin' business."

"Hey," he reels away from the table in mock surprise. "I'm just looking out for her, mate. No harm intended."

"Good of you, mate. Waltz into town, clean it up, get out. Sheriff's medal? Is that your plan? The big-toothed avenger?" I push away turning the darts in my hand. "We're not mates, mate, remember that. The game's over."

He waits for a moment before standing. Now he's sucking his lip, watching his beer.

"I was just asking for her sake. Maybe she's looking for that? I've known her for a while, you know, she's just said – "

"What do you mean, 'she's just said'?" I slam the table, jamming a dart millimetres from his hand. I know, I know, I know I shouldn't have but what can you do? He just kept his hand there, staring at me. The bar chatter goes a little quiet and people are glancing our way. I can see the bartender wiping glasses out of the corner of my eye, staring at us, ready to pounce.

"Calm down, Teddy boy," Hinzy's all smiles now, deep dimples you just want to jam out his arse. He takes a mouthful and slaps the table. "Just a question. No harm. Good game, mate, good game. Gotta lose sometimes."

"It's a nice lesson to learn. When to get over it."

He does that half-laugh thing out of the corner of his poncy lips. I know something was going on. You just know these things. Man, I just wanted to pummel his face into the table. Sometimes you just want to see someone like him in pain. This doesn't make me a murderer. Everyone gets this rush at some time during their life, in a moment, an instant. You gotta push it down. You just push it down so you don't regret it later.

I watch him leave, a cocky bastard swaggering through court, throwing pointed fingers at everyone. They're all watching him, and then they look at me for a moment before drinking again. The talk returns, a few laughs, someone changes the channel to the footy. Pete comes and clears the glasses, patting my back.

I yank out the twisted dart and look at him, red-faced. But Pete is already past caring. They've known me for a hell of a long time in this bar.

"I'll add it to the bill, mate."

So, how's that going to look? I'm a dead duck sitting on high tide. I'm suspecto numero uno. I'm out there for target practice. It's just me and the dead one.

The cops are just about done. The girls have gone to sit in the cars. Marg and Doug huddle together. It's me and the dog. I let him have one last crap and ignore the copper watching me. I'm not pickin' it up.

Sometimes I just wish I could see some white decaying dog poo on

the side of the footpath like you did when you were a kid. Never killed anyone, did it, to see a little bit of nature at work? There's a whole generation of poor buggers who have never seen decayed poo. Never whiffed the sweetness of a fresh, glistening roll, stinking and omnipotent. Never seen it dry week-by-week in the hot sun before sinking back into the ground. If we'd seen more dog poo, maybe we could deal with real shit like this.

But not in this lifetime. The world's gone sanitisation mad. It's all don't bend your back, don't carry more than a cup of tea, wash your hands, don't say that, pick up crap. Add that to career, money, cars, love and finding some poor bastard with his throat slit slumped against the kiddies' slippery-slide, and you start to ask yourself if you're not better off in a country where a man's a man and a dog's a dog, and you can swipe someone in the bar and be done with it.

I check my watch and scratch the dog, looking at the patch with Hinzy's blood.

Town gossip to commence in approximately two hours. Life to finish shortly thereafter. I bet no-one will say "if he'd only picked up his dog poo, none of this would've happened, that's where it all started".

But I say forget it. I'm not touching faeces and I'm not a murderer. Full-stop.

Next thing you know, people will be saying that Hinzy wasn't a bad fella and didn't deserve to finish it all like that. Come on. Really? Someone'll come along with a giant-sized plastic pooper scooper and sweep it into the bin, nice and clean. That way, we can all get on with business without having to look where we're going. Face it, man, some things stink and it's not a bad thing.

The Great Arch

(extract from novel)

1967
Mater Hospital

The nuns are washing him. They talk quietly to each other, something about a golden throne or is it the cricket scores, he can't be sure. He is sure of nothing.

Though they have put a towel for modesty over his genitals, he feels naked as an old plucked bird, their hands lift limbs to wash crevices. They are young or not young? This is the unknowable thing about nuns. And do they mind tending the aging body of an Anglican minister? Their handling is firm but gentle and he cannot hold onto his embarrassment, it takes too much effort, he drifts and their touch becomes Stella's. In their honeymoon bed she lay beside him and let her hand roam under the blankets all over. The next morning she sat back and stared frankly at his anatomy: "You – and I suppose all men – look an untidy mess." This was the last time they spoke openly about sex though enough was accomplished mute, occasional pleasure, and four children.

She leans over him now, hello, and he's glad to see her. He's missed her, but he's not entirely sure what she's doing here in 1967 since she gave up the ghost in '62, dead of a heart attack on the Rectory kitchen floor, feet pointing towards the pantry. What were you thinking, Stella, to get about in your bare feet at such a crisp hour? He cannot help wondering if footwear might have prevented her sudden departure.

"Where have you been?" he says to her, a little peevishly.

She snaps back – "Where I've been every morning. To get you a cup of tea."

He would like to smile, but cannot. The familiar is comforting, even conversation between them which borders, as usual, on argument.

She disappears as doctors arrive, "Will you be coming again?" he asks after her.

The senior doctor examines him and the junior ones stand at a distance in a semi-circle like fence-posts round a dam. The senior man pats Ralph's hand from time to time as if he's considering putting him down. It's true he's old, he was born in 1887 so has a leg in each century, and it's true he does not wish his dying to drag on because he's always been energetic – but neither does he wish to be denied the full experience of the process. This is personal. And professional, the meeting of his Maker. The doctor bends down and talks loudly and very closely into his left eye, as if whatever cognitive abilities he has left are now all centred there, "WHAT IS YOUR NAME?"

Disappointingly, his eye does not speak back to the man, but he does feel responses forming themselves into boat-like shapes in the mist of his brain. Ralph. Reverend. Cage. Anderson. Cage Reverend.

"We'll have to wait for the swelling on the brain to subside,' says the doctor to the eye, "and then ... we'll see."

We'll see, indeed. What we're left with.

They go and quiet settles. He has many times wished for quiet and rarely got it until Stella died and then he found it overrated. He would like to lift his tongue now and yell into the antiseptic hall, he would like to raise his fist and rail against the silence. But his body stays as the doctors have left it, neatly arranged.

In the workshops the noise was deafening. When the mangle straightened the largest plates of steel, the land shook all the way to the beach at Manly. And up on the Bridge, inside the chords in the sweltering dark, the riveters' pneumatic hammers rat-tatted a black headache – decorated by small fires of glowing scale falling from the red-hot rivets. This is when you knew you were alive, in the roar of work.

How does an ordinary man live big? He must attach himself to big things.

Might and Glory – the Story of the Sydney Harbour Bridge

Volume One
(It is proposed to make a Second Volume after the Main Arch is complete.)

by Rev. Ralph Anderson Cage

Hello.

What is the purpose of this book?

It is to explain the facts and engineering processes involved in the building of our MARVELLOUS **Sydney Harbour Bridge** so that all may share an appreciation for that great work and the *ingenuity* of its builders. It will also praise God. (Who so kindly bestowed us with a brain capable of such invention.)

Why am I the one to write this work?

Proximity. I am the Rector of St Christopher's Parish, on the North Shore at Lavender Bay, whose Church and Rectory are sublimely situated overlooking the city of Sydney and its Harbour. There could not be a more advantageous nor *picturesque* position from which to daily view Bridge developments. People run to me telling of this or that place which affords a special view but I say to them, why should I travel here or there when my own front porch, *my own bedroom window*, allows the best vista.

Special Permission. By special arrangement with the Director of Engineering for Dorman Long & Co, Mr. Lawrence Ennis, I have access to the entire work site (including the workshops and the very Bridge itself) and may visit at any time of the day or night. This is a unique privilege not afforded to *any other member of the general public*. I have the permission paper folded in my wallet but must rarely produce it, being by now *a well known figure* on the works.

Proximity combined with Special Permission makes me Johnny-On-The-Spot. Via the telephone, or sometimes by foot messenger knocking at my door, I am often summoned (early or late) to witness crucial phases of construction: perhaps the imminent collapse of a wall at a demolition, or the crane-lift of a heavy member, or the start of a day-long concrete pour. Perhaps the stonemason is setting his first piece of Moruya granite. Whatever it is, I can be there in minutes and, more often than not, can take a photograph.

Duties and Responsibilities. Being Johnny-On-The-Spot carries with it certain duties and responsibilities. Everyone – in our suburb, in the city, in the countryside, in the nation, *along with peoples all round the world* – is fascinated by the building of this bridge. It is my *duty* to share my observations with all. It is my *responsibility* to do this as comprehensively as I can.

To that end I have already taken 10,000 photographs, 118 of which appear in this first volume. This first volume extends to over 500 pages (including a detailed index) and deals only with the START of construction *up until* the imminent closing of the arch. As I put my pen to paper today to complete this introduction (in the book trade we must sometimes do first things last) the date is June the Seventh, 1930, and though the bulk of the work on the bridge seems done, no one can tell for sure when it will be entirely finished. Some guess a further two years but the story of that labour must be held over for another volume.

This volume has been published entirely at my own expense.
It is not written for profit.
It's sole purpose is:
to delight.

If that purpose is well served, proceeds from this will finance another: a second, and imperative, volume. After all, **what is a curd without becoming a cheese?**

Every beginning needs its ending.

1967
Mater Hospital

Marian in the dusk? light standing by the window. He remembers when Stella and he waved her off on the *Orcades* when she was a young woman on her way to London.

Stella had streamers in her hands like reins to a horse, giddy-up horsey. When the ship made its first laboured shudder from the wharf it let go a horn blast which quivered in their stomachs. Along with the rest of the crowd, Stella jumped up and down, bouncing on the tips of her worn shoes. Her eyes were shining with excitement for her girl, she was laughing crying, she shouted, "Hooray to the wide world! Bon Voyage!" He didn't want to wave but knew he must. He stuck his arm out straight and tick-tocked his hand, looking like a man who might in time learn how to polish a window, but who would never master the art of pretending a glad goodbye to one of his daughters. That evening he drove over to North Head and looked out to sea, half expecting to see the glittering lights of the *Orcades* still receding.

Marian's not a young woman now. He watches her staring out the window. The frown on her face isn't becoming. If it was a cobweb on her, a kind passer-by would brush it away.

She turns, sensing him awake, "There you are," she says, as if he's been the one away. She doesn't know whether to touch him, or keep talking, or shut up.

"I bought you some grapes," she states.

Grapes. He wants to ask her *where in England* did she get grapes? At this time of year they'd be out of season. He wants to say, 'How lovely to see you,' but he can't make the words. Just as vowels and consonants begin to coalesce, they shatter apart, as if they'd tripped dynamite.

She says to herself as she pokes the offered bag of fruit on the trolley table, "It's stupid, I know." She says, "I just wanted to give you something."

She comes over to the bed and strokes down his pillow-messed hair, he thinks the gesture is more appropriate than she can know: his head is a lion which needs taming.

He looks and looks at her with his one good eye, she is almost middle aged. Hard to believe.

She speaks. "I went round to check on your place. Threw out a few things from the fridge. And I took your washing home."

Of course, his house. A suburb away from hers. She's been back all these years, he's an idiot with his blood-clotted thinking.

His bad eye waters involuntarily and Marian takes a tissue from the nightstand to wipe it away. She pulls a chair over and perches on the edge of the metal seat. She says Alice has telephoned again and sends her love, she's looking into booking a passage. Ralph pictures her clinging to a ship's rail and green around the gills with seasickness. Neither the discomfort nor the inconvenience of the long journey will persuade her to abandon her phobia of flying. Marian says they've been doing their best to reach Grace but Bill says she's on a field trip somewhere in the bayous south of Tallahassee, somewhere, trust Grace, where the lines of communication are unreliable.

Ralph pictures himself nodding to his summonsed children, "Hello, Alice, hello Grace. School Teacher Alice, and Grace, Professor of Birds."

Time floats, a long time, who can say. Marian turns the pages of a newspaper. The printed headlines are strange to Ralph. Their shapes do not represent any of the alphabets he knows and he knows some: Greek, Latin, a smattering of Arabic, a little Hebrew. But this is English. And he cannot read. He thinks the realisation should set him wailing; how could this be borne, a lifetime of the written word come to an end, never to learn another marvellous or mysterious thing about the world or one's place in it? Instead, he observes the change dispassionately. So this, he thinks, is the first blow in the process of losing everything.

Marian folds the newspaper and gathers her things to go. She leans to kiss her father. She notices his lips are dry. "You're parched. Shall I ask the sisters to bring some ice, or a swab?"

But she goes to the grapes instead and squeezes the juice from a few into a waxed paper cup.

"Here."

She dips her fingers into the cup and gently wipes the syrupy moisture over the tip of Ralph's desiccated tongue and over his cracked lips and along his gums. The welcome *wetness* of it, the sweet

sweetness of it explodes in his parched mouth so that he did not know how poor he was before this richness. Perhaps, after all, he thinks, there are still some things to learn which print cannot teach us.

"Goodbye, Dad," she kisses him again, "I'll see you tomorrow."

He shuts his bad eye and tries to communicate with the good one, putting everything he's got into somehow showing gratitude and love for her. He thinks the effect most likely mad so, harder than he has before, he concentrates to form speech. He steels his will, marshalling each and every swollen and scrambled cell inside his body to say her name. She's watching. He tries harder.

The sound comes out, a gullet click. It comes out ...

"Golin."

"Colin?" she repeats and it scratches at her, she wants to walk away, she needed something for herself. She stays.

"He's gone, Dad. Remember?"

He would never forget.

He meant, "Marian."

****

Late at night, Lennie Gwideer rides his horse up and down the hospital corridors. Lennie Gwideer is coming.

How is it that at nine years old he's allowed to open the farm gate and ride out for the border and beyond, riding for six hundred miles? And in the morning, who will milk the cows?

Who cares, Lennie Gwideer is coming.

Fly

The screen door slams. I wait for the buzz of flies.

I can hear Anna's laboured breathing and muttered imprecations outside as she hauls yet another load of washing out to the line. Everything is still. The humidity sucks the sound and colour from everything ... except the monotonous constants it magnifies. The slow drone of Anna's electric clock, the creak of the ceiling fan as it stirs the heat. Worst of all is the inane chatter of 'The Gilded Microphone' on Anna's radio. Anna thinks he calms me down, but if I ever met that self-righteous bastard on the road, I'd run him down without a second thought.

Sweat is beginning to pool in the small of my back and beneath my thighs. The crack of my arse itches like crazy. This waiting for a sound that will hopefully never come has made me tense. With slow careful deliberation I unclench my forearms and neck, forcing myself to relax ... Then I hear it, soft, slow, sickly. Fat and rancorous.

The buzzing of blowflies.

I start to tense up again, but I fight it. Damn Anna! May maggots feast upon her living entrails.

But I don't mean it, at least not at this point in time. Without Anna there is no-one else. On my own I can't even call a nurse, the respite care people won't be around for another three days at least. They always come on Thursdays, but that doesn't help much. I have given up keeping track of days.

I can see them now, three of them describing lazy arcs.

They won't for long though, I know this type of fly, fat and bloated, full of carrion and shit. The seatbelt with its swiftly balding velcro

fastener is riding up again, taking my shirt with it and rubbing my hips raw. I don't care, there are more pressing things on my mind.

The first fly has landed, and sits preening itself on the vast expanse of chipped formica and swelling chipboard that is Anna's desk and kitchen table. The second is exploring the mouldering cheesecloth curtains. I have to squint against the hot, languid sunlight the curtains completely fail to cut, to see it. But I've got my eye on it.

Of that you can be sure.

The third fly worries me, I can't see it, but I can hear it. I hear the screen door again and almost explode with relief and endlessly held breath. I call out for Anna as best as I am able, which isn't much. Never so much as actual words, but the laundry is only a few feet away. The world fills with the crash and bang of the washing machine being loaded and I know that she's lost it again.

This is the third load this morning, she washed yesterday and between us, even with the bibs I use for eating and ... other things, we don't wear that many clothes in a month. She's started up again. She'll wash this load, carry it out to the line, hang it out. And then she'll notice something, a spot or a stain and she'll haul the whole lot back in again wash it, hang it out. The cycle starts again.

This means that she probably won't remember me for hours, if at all. The tension is returning to my wrists. I call again, hoping against hope. Wearing my throat raw with my senseless lowing, banging my slightly-less-fucked left forearm against my tray as hard as I dare ... which isn't that hard I admit. Nothing.

Resignation relaxes my neck a little and I can look around, searching for that stray fly ... I know it's here. Contact! There the little bastard thing is, coming in where I least expect it, crawling along the carpet. Sneaking in at ground level.

There's too many, I can't track them all at once and I give myself a migraine trying. I can feel that tension creeping back into my calves and the heavy water feeling in my sinuses and behind my eyes that means I am on the verge of tears. But I fight them like I fight the cramps. It's not easy, even if you know the trick, but I've had a lot of time to practice. Finally, when I feel like I have a modicum of control, I start to consider attempting to attract Anna's attention again.

She's been getting worse lately. Twice in the last month she's turned around and demanded to know who I am and what I'm doing in her

house. It makes a change of course, she's also taken to calling me Carol, Janice or even Henry on a couple of occasions.

I don't mind though, you have to understand that. There are times when I want to kill her and times when she makes me want to weep, but I forgive her all. She's looked after me for the last twelve years, there's not much that I would begrudge her. It's hard though.

Last week I tried to tell the respite care people about her. It took me fifteen minutes to spell out "Anna gets confused" on my board. They laughed of course, thought it was a joke. Some joke. I tried again ten minutes later, took a different tack. "Anna's crazy." Worse than the last attempt, I don't know what I was expecting, but it wasn't what I got. Do you have any idea how long it takes to spell out 'Alzheimer's disease' using a board and a stick you hold in your teeth? How about 'senile dementia'?

Tracy (the respite care leader, or whatever the hell you call them) gave me a ten-minute polemic about being more respectful of my carer. All in that condescending little tone they all use and pretend not to.

I couldn't help myself then. I tensed up straight away. It hit me so hard and so fast that I didn't even have time to think about controlling it. Tracy thought it was just sour grapes and left me twisted up and spastically howling as punishment. Even wheeled my chair outside so my mood wouldn't spread to anyone else. When Tracy came out to get me at last I contritely spelled out 'sorry' on my board.

One day they'll come to collect me and she'll be still in her slip, smearing mustard on the indoor plants. Then they'll take her, invade her personal space and speak to her in that slow condescending lilt that assumes stupidity. But what about me?

Buzzing, way too close to my left ear. I let my attention slip, I should know better by now. My eyes roll desperately around searching out the errant beast. Two are on the table, easily watched, nothing to worry about, but the third one is right by my chair, touching distance.

I hear the buzz again and even feel the pressure of it landing on my shoulder. At the same time I hear the back door slam again. I use the momentum of my involuntary locking up to throw myself against my board, howling my throat raw. Almost tipping the chair over with the force of my beating.

Rare fortune, I've managed to startle the damn thing off my shoulder. But off in the laundry I hear the clash and bang of the washing

machine being primed for another load. I have been unheard again, or ignored.

The fly takes wing over to the table, swooping low as though intending to land. No such luck of course. At the instant of set-down it reverses its course, in that curious way that flies do which I take as proof of intelligence; malevolent intelligence.

Insects have a hive mind, and they don't much like humans. We have, after all, attempted constantly to eradicate them from the face of the earth. I'd be pretty pissed off as well. This is why the moment a human stops moving they swarm to them, filling the corpses by the wayside with their eggs ...

The screen-door's slap brings me out of the thought, but it doesn't quite wipe away the memory of lying there, staring up at them. Listening to them call their brood-mates to the table ... seeing them crawl over my legs. I run my tongue along my lips to try and wet them with saliva that I do not have. My cheek tastes of salt.

The fly circles, just a couple of inches from my head and I flinch (such as I can) when it gets too close, I'm praying to a god that I don't believe in for a wish that will never be granted. The fly ends the suspense, landing on my neck.

I try to throw it off the way I did before, but without success. I can feel pressure building at the base of my spine and in the back of my head. This will be a bad one, I can feel it.

Before the spasm hits I see the fly's compatriots rise from the table, heading my way. You know what they say about misery and company.

I'm still screaming, not that I have any hope left to hold. The muscles bunch in a rush, full body peristalsis twisting me askew in the seat of my chair. My ineffectual seatbelt bursts open and I slide in slow motion to the floor, my board scraping belly and chest raw, with all the inevitability of death.

Throat too raw to scream, I feel tiny legs on my face and neck.

I want to vomit.

I look, full of transparent hope into the future.

I wonder at the length of a lifetime.

Nessun Dorma: None Shall Sleep

(extract from novel)

The Nightmare

I am screaming at the pilots. They can't do anything. They won't do anything. They nod and smile, nod and smile, nod and smile encouragingly. They look like John Travolta. The have strong cleft chins. They are dressed in pressed uniforms and large hats. They look like authority. They are not. Now I can see Sydney below me. Sydney is coming closer. And closer. The plane has missed the runway. We will have to land on the streets. The pilots will have to fly under the Harbour Bridge. I look at them and know that they are incapable. I try to scream. I am silent to everyone but myself. The other passengers are silent. The other passengers are passive. They cannot be goaded into action. They nod and smile, nod and smile, nod and smile. I try to act but I cannot. I do not nod and smile. I am scared. I am terrified. Then, we fly under the bridge. Safe, we land on a street in the suburbs. It is a wide street. It is accepting our wing span. We are driving among the cars. We indicate and turn left. I see other planes around us. They are like cars too. We all taxi among cars to the airport. We all stop for red traffic lights. No-one dies. Everyone nods and smiles, nods and smiles, nods and smiles. I wake terrified.

When the phone rang at 8.30am, I picked up the receiver. I didn't need to ask who it was.

"What the hell did they make you eat for dinner last night?"

The reply came, "Haloumi pasta, consisting of one hundred grams of egg pasta, four pieces of haloumi, a table spoon of pesto and four asparagus spears. Total calories would have been nine hundred, only I managed to hide the asparagus on someone else's plate. We have a new chef, and so far it seems to be all about foreign cheeses and coullis."

"Then tell him to stop. Whatever you're eating is giving me horrible dreams."

It was Jemima. She rang every day at the same time. Jemima, who is not usually so considerate, would have preferred to call as soon as she was woken in the morning, and only waited because I had refused to tell her anything if she rang too early. When I answered the phone I knew that she would have been up since six, pacing the floor, circling the phone and burning calories. Still, this didn't make me feel any more kindly towards her. It was one of the very few times in my life, our lives, that I held any power. She came to me on my terms because she needed to know what had happened to me, or, more correctly, to her, in the night.

Jemima and I, born on the same day to the same mother, just moments apart, are identical and yet nothing at all alike. In the womb we were so close that we didn't split until day seven and then spent nine months arguing over who should get the bigger share of the placenta. Never one to take second place, Jemima took more than her share, beat me down the birth canal and ever since has had me living off her morsels. Which makes it ironic that for the past six months my life has been about goading her to eat.

Our parents loved us both equally and treated us as individuals; the rest of the world did not. So many conversations started with "Which one are you again?" and every time I replied I had to stop myself from answering "The other one." I couldn't blame them, we were so alike that whenever I looked in the mirror and saw my thick dark hair, dark eyes and pointed nose it was Jemima who looked back at me.

When we were growing up, Jemima's friends, teachers and eventually boyfriends, knew me as 'the shy one'. I'm not shy; Jemima just casts a very long shadow.

When we were five Jemima and I stumbled across a show on E.S.P

in identical twins on the Discovery Channel. In the documentary the producers took two ten year old twins into a building and performed two experiments on them. The twins may have had names, I guess they did but, no matter how hard I try to recall them I can't. That's the thing about being a twin, no matter how hard you and your parents try, people will always know you as 'the twins'.

One twin was put into a room and wired up to a polygraph machine. The other was put into a separate room on a different floor of the building. There was no way they could see or hear each other. In the first experiment they blindfolded the unwired twin and put her hand in a bowl of iced-water. Within seconds the heart rate of the wired twin, alone in a room that was floors away, increased dramatically. In the second experiment the researchers scared the blindfolded, unwired twin by popping a balloon behind her back. This time, the heart rate of the wired twin, who was still floors away from her sister, actually skipped a beat.

Jemima, who had already planned what she would wear when the documentary crew came to film us, was excited. We were twins, and she was sure that we must also have a similar connection. She developed a range of tests to see if we could find any hint of ESP. I participated willingly, always looking for something to make me that little bit special. In one experiment Jemima gave me a pin and locked me into our bedroom. She told me to wait a while and then jab myself with the pin, recording the exact time that I had stabbed myself and the intensity of the pain. She would wait in our parents' room and record the exact time that she felt pain. I stabbed myself about ten times but when we compared times it was obvious that she hadn't felt a thing. I suggested that she try stabbing herself with the pin but Jemima declared it didn't work that way. Our experiment was over.

Jemima didn't give up; she figured that if the twins in the documentary were ten we had another five years to prove our special connection. And so we kept trying. When I was eight and Jemima's quest to find common ground was at its most intense I fell off my bike and scraped my knee and my elbow. After I was band-aided and splashed with yellow iodine, Jemima whispered to me that, at the very moment I fell, she may have also felt a twinge of pain. She gave me a couple of days to recover from the fall before suggesting that I try falling again. Who was I to deny us both our chance at fame? I climbed back on

my bike and fell, this time deliberately, onto the gravel. It was a while before I realised that she never really felt anything, she just wanted to see me fall. When we were nine, there was a short-lived period during which we thought we might be telepathic, but I could never really tell what Jemima was thinking.

Our tenth birthdays came and went and still we hadn't found our connection. By the time we were twelve we had given up completely. We had separate interests, separate friends, separate tastes and, as much as we could, separate lives. We went to Uni. I studied music, she studied law. She was the centre of everyone's attention, I kept to myself. We were, we thought, very unlikely twins.

And then one day Jemima stopped dreaming.

When we were growing up Jemima had nightmares. Almost every night she'd wake up screaming. Sometimes she would remain haunted by her dreams in the day. Sometimes they were very, very real to her. I, on the other hand, never dreamed, or at least never remembered my dreams. That was until Jemima stopped eating and started taking Zoloft.

The first night she took Zoloft was the first night that Jemima ever slept without waking in a sweat from a nightmare. It was also the first night I ever did. It was horrible. There were pits and thunderstorms and wind that tried to blow me off a cliff face. I woke up screaming. The terror was so unfamiliar that I couldn't get back to sleep.

When I rang her the next morning to tell her that at last I understood what she had been going through she asked me to describe my dream. I told her about the thunder and wind and cliff faces, she listened in silence and then said, "You're having my dreams."

So, for the past six months I had woken every night in fright from Jemima's nightmares and every morning had started with an 8.30am. call from Jemima when I would relive the dreams that should properly have been hers.

The Mirror

Sergeant Malcolm Donne was going alone. The high, dark cliffs hung over a deserted sandy shore. This wouldn't take long. Routine, in and out, then maybe some sleep. Malcolm's boots crunched on scattered shells, the noise reminded him of breaking bones. He could hear the swishing of the waves, colliding with the jagged stones – the ancient guardians worn down over years of cluttered neighbourhood watch. In his closed fist was a file. The Sergeant disliked making house calls in the evening, yet the urgency of the case did not present itself with any other choice that fitted his comfort. Usually, walking into the mouth of a new investigation gave him adrenalin, lingering sustainable energy and alertness, but the day had been long, and he was too conscious of his exhaustion to care. His copper hair flapped in the wind as he took the breeze face-on. The air was salty. The yellow disc, its flicker lost over the oily seas, continued a decline, pregnant to another night full of stars.

Then, the trees bowed. Leaves thrashed in the overpowering gust and the Sergeant listened to the extraordinary hissing as the wind signalled the advance of a wall of rain. Within seconds, Sergeant Malcolm Donne pulled his coat tightly around him as he ran to the steps of the large house. The windows and doors were firmly shut with bars for added security. All the way, Malcolm was frantically enveloping the file in his grasp, away from the pellets of rain, gradually growing in velocity. Then, it was as if the bottom of the sky had fallen out. The storm introduced its first cracking of the whip, splintering the heavens into a thousand spider webs, followed by the tears of the Titans.

The brilliantly lit room gave a full view of the outside. Professor Isaac Bernstein was a man who had firmly climbed the ladder of fifty,

tall, and quite thin with glasses. His features could not be termed uninteresting. Years of heavy research and encountering obstacles gave him a bold and daring manner. His glance was piercing and full to the brim with authority. Coincidently, Isaac was thinking the same about this sergeant, whose years of experience had given him a look so piercing that many could not stand to endure it for long.

Professor Isaac Bernstein poured two glasses of rich red wine. Malcolm thought the taste was magnificent. The earthy taste stimulated his senses and for a brief moment he thought of beef, salmon and tuna. Malcolm added that they keep this below the belt because he was on duty. Isaac nodded, noting Malcolm's appreciation, and said that good wine is the product of dedicated labour, the correct variety of grape, the right conditions to grow it, and the cellaring.

Malcolm agreed with a grin. He had heard this before.

"My father was very much into wine. Had his own cellar," said Malcolm.

"As a matter of fact," informed the Professor, "much of my collection is left over from my father."

"Does it bother you that everything about you, including your latest book, is subject to controversy?" Malcolm felt a brief tingle of guilt after asking this as most of his cases over the years had kicked up such a storm in the media that he was considered a controversy himself.

"Controversy and I are longstanding partners," assured the Professor with a grin. "My longest lasting marriage has been with her. Every year I lay down a plan. This year I requested my readers bring notebooks as gifts. I collected thousands of them and distributed them in underprivileged schools to encourage students to write down things that fascinate them."

"Is this the politicisation of Professor Isaac Bernstein?" joked Malcolm.

"When has education been a part of politics?" snapped Isaac Bernstein. "Once you educate a man, he'll cease believing in politics. Some may say that my opinions are becoming increasingly political. But I disagree. I'm becoming more socially conscious."

Malcolm took another sip of red wine and admired the rich characteristics of it once more. He found himself agreeing with the Professor. Once a man is educated he stops believing in politics. Once upon a time he had thought that he could make the streets a safer place.

He soon realised that no matter how hard he tried, there was always a dark corner somewhere; a spot that people didn't want to cross.

"On the personal front, I understand life's been tough for you of late, Professor. Do you miss your children?"

The Professor blinked for a moment before answering. Malcolm felt as if he had just hammered a rusty nail into a rotten piece of wood.

The Professor sighed with a bitter expression.

"Of course I miss them. I love them. I hate to say this but I don't know what is happening with them."

"They don't call?"

The Professor sternly shook his head.

"Why?"

"Because they live in Israel with their mother. I wanted to see my teenage daughter on her birthday. She told me not to come. I had asked her if I could come to visit her another time and she said 'I'll find out and let you know'. That's the type of family life I have."

It was obvious the policeman had struck a sensitive chord, and Malcolm let the Professor finish his glass of red.

It also occurred to the policeman that they had a few things in common. He couldn't imagine what could keep his own daughter so busy. She's a big girl, he said to himself. He reminisced about the nights he would hold her close to him, smell her golden hair and touch his nose with hers. She would giggle lightly and press her delicate frame against his chest. She was a bundle of joy on his lap. Malcolm secretly craved an aggressive response, something that would dim his anguish, so he led the Professor.

"Since when does one have to fight to see one's own child? I guess I belong to another era," the Professor opened up. "I won't fight. I'll wait."

It was this precise waiting that led to his frustration, yet Malcolm shared Bernstein's views.

"Did their mother take them?" asked Malcolm, thinking of his ex-wife.

"One day I received a call saying 'Oh we forgot to tell you, we're in Israel'. And that was it. And how about yourself Sergeant Donne?"

"My wife passed over to the other side," said Malcolm.

"I'm sorry to hear that," said the Professor with genuine concern.

Malcolm smiled. "I meant to the other side of Sydney."

Both men broke into a hearty laughter as the Professor refilled Malcolm's empty glass. Now it was time.

"A young man, Rudolph Mullins, was killed last week," Malcolm mocked, flicking through the file. "His neighbours commented that he was a very odd character. That he was paranoid. We found your card in his wallet, and his shelf is stacked with all your books."

The Professor reflected, his tongue passing slowly around his lips.

"Mr Mullins came to see me and had a fascination with the mirror."

"Pardon me, Professor," Malcolm shifted in his seat, "every morning I look in the mirror and say to myself 'what an ugly bastard' while shaving, now that does not make me paranoid."

"The mirror is a metaphor," the Professor explained calmly. "We are talking about parallelism. A bizarre twist of fate, destiny, call it what you will."

Malcolm worked with facts. For years he pieced together details to form a completed puzzle, to see the big picture. He couldn't refrain himself from thinking how absurd the words *fate* and *destiny* sounded.

Professor Isaac Bernstein could see the unconvinced look casting its spell over the policeman's features. "It really is not as uncommon as it sounds," he reassured. "History is riddled with such instances."

"I know this," Malcolm said with a sarcastic sneer. "Caligula appeared before Rome wearing a gold beard. This man had golden whiskers made out of thin wire and wore them in public to mimic statues of Jupiter, to give himself the status of a god. Well, if this is a mirror it's certainly cracked!"

Bernstein found this immensely amusing.

"You have completely misunderstood. It upsets me when people think motives are involved," the Professor said earnestly.

Malcolm, in his frustration, felt like hurling sharp-edged rocks with all his strength. It was as if only starvation and thirst would bring him to the Professor's way of thinking. In the world of investigation, motives were what cemented evidence together. Motives made a case real.

"In 1922," began the Professor, "Jean-Paul Lacoste, son of an impoverished widow, assumed a job as a librarian at the Vatican. A book on the dusty shelves attracted his attention, *Zoologie* written by Emile de Fevrier."

"Are we talking Darwinism? Survival of the fittest?" probed Malcolm.

"Not at all," smiled the Professor. "When Jean-Paul reached the last page he found some notes written on the margin in faded red ink. It read:

'I request the unknown reader to apply to the Palazzo di Guistizia in Rome and ask for file number L.J. 14./75. A surprise awaits …' Emile de Fevrier.

"Overcome with curiosity, the young Jean-Paul made his way and asked for the file. An official located it and handed him an old sealed envelope. Jean-Paul tore it open to find a letter attached to a legal document. The letter read:

'This book is my life work. Although friends and relatives praised it they never read it. They belittled my research behind my back. I burnt all copies of my book, and donated this – the last copy – to the Biblioteca Vaticana. Attached is my Will and Testament by which I bequeath my entire fortune to you, unknown reader. For reading my book, you shall be rewarded'. Emile de Fevrier.

"Jean-Paul hurried over to the French Consulate, displayed the documents and demanded a public administrator look into the case. The administrator informed him that the four million lire estate was still intact. However the will was illegal under Italian law. The estate could only be turned over to the next of kin."

"Quite a story," said Malcolm, biting his lip, and fighting back an urge to light a cigarette. "However, I can't see a mirror anywhere in the tale."

The Professor smiled. "This is where it gets interesting. Jean-Paul's mother's maiden name is Fevrier. His oldest brother was named Emile after his eccentric grandfather who vanished over fifty years ago. Once this was pieced together and proven, the Roman tribunal awarded the estate to Jean-Paul's mother, Amanda Lacoste, in 1926. And so Jean-Paul received the estate in the end after all."

"This is ridiculous," laughed Malcolm. "A schoolboy can tell that the identities were somehow faked in order to pounce on the inheritance. They had four years to work around the system. *Fate, destiny, parallelism* my left foot!"

Malcolm had no doubt that this incident must have been the biggest scam of the season. The human mind used its tentacles to make wonders come to life. Information had to be treated realistically, and when ambition and greed were mixed into the recipe, the meal was served.

Professor Bernstein seemed to take offence at this remark. His was a lifetime study of such occurrences and he was not about to conform to anyone's standards.

"Sergeant Donne," he began, "you are not keeping an open mind."

"On the contrary, that is my first rule," argued Malcolm. "I don't see any connection to Rudolph Mullins."

"Perhaps I can enlighten you further," offered the Professor. "Why do we feel happy one minute and sad the next? Find your mirror and all your mysteries are unlocked."

"What is this mirror theory?"

"Ah," the Professor chimed. "We will have to go back to July twenty-eighth, 1900. Umberto, King of Italy, dines at a restaurant in Monza with his friend, General Ponzio-Vaglia. The owner of the restaurant bares a striking resemblance to the King. So they call him over and ask his name. The name of the owner is Umberto. Through conversation they find out that they share the same birthday – March fourteenth, 1844. Signor Umberto says his wife's name is Margherita. The King reminds him that this is also the Queen's christian name. The signor says he was married on April second, 1866. That is also the King's wedding date. At this point, General Ponzio-Vaglia asks the signor if he has any children. "I have one son," he replies, "his name is Vittorio." This is the name of the hereditary prince. The King at this point seems very uncomfortable and opts to change the subject; he asks, "have you been in business long?" Signor Umberto replies, "I opened this inn on January ninth, 1878." The King goes pale because that is the date he was crowned king of Italy."

"An amusing trick," Malcolm said with authority. "Margherita and Vittorio are common names. As for the dates, they would be well known to the public. The clever innkeeper could just as well use this information, especially if he faintly resembles the King. Furthermore, the King being a frequent diner at his restaurant would boost business and prestige, which I suppose would be the key factor here. I also assume there would be some other benefit he could chew on."

"Yes," continued the Professor excitedly. "After this, the King becomes very impressed and fascinated with the fellow. So much that he decides to crown him as a Cavalier of Italy."

"There you go," Malcolm affirmed, proud of himself. His police instinct always shined through.

"However," the Professor paused. "The innkeeper had a fatal accident that morning and died. Just as the King was inquiring where the funeral would take place three shots rang out, fired by an assassin, piercing his heart, the King died instantly."

Malcolm leaned back in his seat bewildered. There was no trace of his former sarcastic inclinations. He remained mute, deep in thought. Indeed, there had to be a realistic explanation. Over long spans of time stories could become taller with each generation, this had to be such an example.

"I have spent my entire life researching such incidents," continued the Professor. "I couldn't devote much time to my family, and it cost me many things."

"Rudolph Mullins?" said Malcolm, although it sounded more like an order.

"As I said earlier," the Professor explained, "he came to see me. He looked so spent, eyes red-rimmed, sleepless. He told me that he had found his *mirror* and that he was very scared."

"If I thought I'd found someone who shared my life and was my double, yeah, I'd be scared too, of myself!"

"It is no laughing matter, Sergeant. I could see it in his eyes. He was petrified. It was catastrophic. He said his *mirror* was in danger, I don't know what the danger could be, perhaps it was illness."

"Of the mind."

"Mr. Mullins was obsessed with keeping his mirror alive. The moment his *mirror* dies, so will he. It is the reflection."

"So what did you do?"

"I told him I was impressed. In my years of research I had never found anyone who had tracked down their *mirror*. I will write about him in my next book."

"This is all business," roared Malcolm angrily, slamming his fist down onto the table.

"You drive people insane by these silly stories, helped by your advertisers, your agents, publicist, whoever they are. Some people are very vulnerable, an educated man should know better. The doppelganger is just an old half-baked German myth!"

"I take offence at your accusation, Sergeant," the Professor remained unchanged. "The reason I research these cases is not for profit, but to arouse awareness."

"In fairytales!"

"Hardly. If you have established your *mirror* you will be aware of certain dangers, you will act before …"

Malcolm had had enough. This was a circus. Time spent with the Professor was dead time. He got up from his seat.

"Professor Isaac Bernstein," he said. "I came here for facts, not fables. None of the things you said will go into my report simply because they are useless. Fate, destiny, parallelism – these make good bestsellers, but not very good killers."

Malcolm awoke the next day with a headache due to a night spent drinking directly out of a bottle. The pressure had left him with little choice. He shaved, put on his clothes, and made his way to his car. His mobile blurted to life and he answered a call from Commissioner Harry Buckley, a friend and colleague of twenty-five years.

Without waiting for the first signs of a sentence from Buckley, Malcolm apologetically began his speech. "The Rudolph Mullins case is still unclear," he said. "I'd also add Professor Isaac Bernstein to the list of suspects."

"That's a bit late, Mal," Buckley said. "His maid found him dead this morning. Heart problem, he drank too much, the autopsy is coming through."

Malcolm didn't know what to say, the man seemed well last night.

"But, I wanted to tell you something else," the Commissioner followed on. "Hugo Norris has been released from his sentence, you know, the psycho you arrested last year?"

"I remember," answered Malcolm, reluctantly.

"So just be careful, will you."

"I'm coming in anyway."

"Good, see you then."

Malcolm was just about to cut the line when he heard Buckley saying something, an afterthought perhaps.

"I didn't catch that, mate," Malcolm said.

"It's just interesting," continued Buckley. "Did you know you and the Professor shared the same birthday? October the eighth, 1951. That's your birthday too isn't it mate?"

The slot machine in Malcolm's mind began spinning helter-skelter.

Malcolm didn't get a chance to reply. Out of the parking lot a blurred face from the past emerged. It was an arrogant gaze as if defying

an invisible army that only Hugo Norris possessed. He already had his weapon drawn and fired three shots into the policeman responsible for his capture.

Malcolm's blood trickled down the front of his shirt, and through the corners of his lips. Not another soul was in sight. Swaying very unsteadily, Malcolm struggled before his legs gave way and he sank to the ice-cold concrete ground. He gulped and clawed desperately for his gun, but the fight had gone out of him. Hugo Norris, with a sadistic sneer, fired the final shot of vengeance and then disappeared before there was a slim chance of detection, the thrashes of his humiliating laughter hardly audible, like dry leaves rustling in the morning air. Excruciating pain challenged every muscle and nerve in Malcolm's anatomy. Lava snaked through his veins. Every pulse became a triggered eruption. There, lying in his own pool of blood, Sergeant Malcolm slowly closed his eyes to the world. The last thing he heard were those three words – *Parallelism, Fate, Destiny* – looping around in his head. It was the final blow, stunning Malcolm like a primitive war-horn blown into his eardrums.

Wife Dressing

I spotted the pink bedroom slipper before I found the woman lying face down under the car. The foot was slightly rough and yellowed around the heel; the long finger-like toes painted with neat pink polish. The slipper measured the same distance as my polished men's loafer but the markings — the pink satin trim, the soft sole, the initials M.R. stitched by hand on the back of the heel – were entirely female. With the light weight of the slipper in one hand and my nickel-plated pistol in my pants pocket, I felt like a regular Moses standing in the parking lot with symmetry and morality balanced on either side of the narrow mouth of my body as two variants on the same sea diverged.

It was the car, not the slipper, which had taken my thoughts from my sister's wedding tomorrow evening to a dilettante attorney with the unfortunate first name of Hill. To me, the name held some cruel, prophetic metaphor of the incline of my sister's life rising up before her and retreating back down as she set out for the horizon of marital bliss. But this car was a real beauty: a '55 Bell Air Convertible with dual glass pack mufflers in sky blue. This car would hold my future and a leggy blond with full white breasts under her chemise and pearls. She would take a handful of my wavy brown hair as she leaned in to kiss me. In this car, no notice would be given that I had not inherited the height from my father's side of the family — my brother Brooks had done this – but that I had my mother's full lips, which were quite handsome, even on a man. I slipped my hand into my pocket and fingered the cold face of the pistol again. I had fired it only once after my Granddaddy's funeral on the border town of Nogales in that small little belly of a house where my mother had come into a world of pale browns and dust and

lit it up in that first cry. I carried the pistol with me the way some people carry pictures of their dogs and children: to explain history to strangers in one glance. Indeed, both the woman and the slipper were unexpected discoveries at this time of night in the parking lot of the Rancho Solano Pharmacy and during the deepest abyss of the summer heat.

One hundred and fifty one days had passed without rain — a new record — until the monsoon swept through a few hours ago, just as the party guests in my parents' backyard on Fourth Street were toasting Sally and Hill for a third, or fourth time under the expanse of the oleanders and tiki torches. The parking lot was still slick with water that gave the night a temporal coolness. I walked quickly to find the phone. I glided. The pharmacist inside the shop held his cigarette in his mouth expertly as he talked to the switchboard operator and then to the police department, before he went back to puffing on his Kent. His round eyeglasses bordered on womanish and magnified his grey eyes as he lifted up the blinds to survey the parking lot. No-one else was in the store, but he was one of those petulant souls who rallied not in hard work, but in the allusion of it and was irritated with my minor trespass on his schedule, even with a woman breathing face down under a car in the parking lot. With a nod, he gave me the change for my Winstons and then returned to the Playboy stuffed inside his Life Magazine with a good inch of ash about to fall off his Kent and light up Marilyn Monroe's hidden breasts and bleached muff on the page in front of him. The little bells hit the glass door as I pulled it back, which to me was always a Christmas sound, but this was Phoenix. We swam in the pool after our Christmas presents, eggnog on ice and chilli pie. I was just out the door when the old man waved me back in the store, "You tell the police this is the third one of these this month. That new clinic is bad news. You look honest enough. You tell them that, will you?"

My brother Brooks walked up to the door, "What's going on here? Mom's anxious with you gone." That was Brooks always doing the right thing. And that was my mother of late; pacing in front of the washing machine, the dinner table, the front window, whispering conspiracy theories about America's favourite virgin and Dick van Dyke, and then cursing at the mailman when he arrived at half past three, instead of three. Brooks gathered it was the added stress of Sally's wedding. I said Mom was not the type of woman to stress about things that she had paid other people to do for her.

When Brooks and I pulled her out from under the car, Georgiana Parks was unconscious and covered in cuts and bruises. We knew it was her from the Goldwater's receipt for a pair of women's underwear and a brassiere that we found in her pocketbook; a rectangular alligator skin bag with two matching handles and a gold clasp that locked the bag safely shut. Her red raincoat carefully tied with a proper bow in front of her soft waist. It was amazing how her coif of thick white hair still held in place after we pulled her out. Her hands covered in rings that looked expensive and old. Her manicured nails were perfect except for her pinkie finger where the polish bunched up together as if she nicked her wet nail on her keys, or a zipper. It was strange to look at a woman and observe that – with the exception of basic hygiene – hired hands tended to the sum of her parts.

Georgiana Parks was not what I would call a friend of the family, but she did belong to Paradise Valley Country Club and golfed like my parents. Georgiana Parks had been married to the late Senator Parks who my parents had voted for three times and who had nearly captured the presidential nomination from the Republicans during the last election. But unlike my mother, who said any man born in the southwest had probably skinned animals as a child and would not be kept away from his country by health issues, the late Senator Parks had not foreseen the subsequent healing of his opponent's heart and lost. Parks had dropped dead on the sixteenth hole of the golf course with a scotch and soda in one hand and a five iron in the other.

In the morning, the article in The Arizona Republic stated the police were not treating the incident with the late Senator as suspicious. Mrs. Harold G. Parks was treated for hypothermia and superficial wounds and released from Saint Josephs. Below the article was a small photograph of her leaving the hospital, someone had brought her a proper pair of heels, but I noted the round tip of the slipper poking out of her handbag, unclasped and ready to spill out onto the hot asphalt. She was a woman who seamlessly disappeared into dark automobiles.

My mother stepped into the kitchen, rubbed her temples and asked me to drop her off at Norma's where she was scheduled to have her hair set and styled for the wedding. I did not know if it was the martinis, or the wedding, but I had not seen my mother put anything solid but a handful of salted peanuts in her mouth since I had driven home from the university two days ago.

My mother was a visceral woman. I imagined it was an instinct that found her as she listened to the coyotes and gunshots through the curtains outside her girlhood window. You could say that being born into two cultures is coming into the world with both female and male parts: one day you have to decide what you are, but you will mourn the loss of the other everyday as if an unborn child still moves in your belly. My mother found this in her cakes, her taffetas and the afternoon martini she always took alone outside underneath her favourite pecan tree.

I had just pulled onto Central Avenue, when she waved her hands and motioned me to pull over the car. All of the muscles in her shoulders tensed up catlike. She vomited in the parking lot of the drive-in movie theatre behind the property line to our house. As I drove up to the salon, she coughed like there was something loose in her body that could not get out, rattling around wild as a tin of copper pennies in her chest. My mother had always been petite, but sitting next to me in the car, she looked childlike, as her tiny body floated in her emerald green dress with matching pumps. Her face was lit up with tiny drops of sweat and she was about to tear through her cheek the way she was working on the cherry lozenge she had just placed in her mouth. Mom kissed me on the lips goodbye, but held it there just long enough for me to start to shift around on the vinyl seat. As she stepped out of the car, she snapped back, "This damn headache is going to be the end of me, Charlie," and blew a kiss as she closed the door to the station wagon.

I watched her briskly shuffle right past Norma's salon and into the shop next door.

When I opened the door to The Chubby Bunny, or The C.B., as the small pink lettering read on the door, it was as if every woman from the party last night shifted in the waiting room. The more powder and lipstick they applied, the more caked and aged they appeared. They acknowledged me the way you noticed a timid professor who lightly taps the lectern for five minutes before the authority of his position lulls into place. All of the women wore variations of the short shift dress with an empire waist. It was as if they all dreamed out of the same catalogue.

The women talked so fast that it sounded as if a dozen little radios were all set on different stations. My mother did not rest in the room of her contemporaries waiting for their weekly fix of 'doctor supervised coaching and treatment' that the brochure promised.

A classmate from New York had told me about his sister injecting herself in the bottom with amphetamines for rapid weight loss. She spent a week in the hospital and full recovery followed, until she announced that she would rather possess a condition of the nerves than remain the only woman in Westchester County too shapely for a bikini. But this was Arizona, not New York; miracle diet drugs were for movie stars and socialites on the coasts, not housewives.

My mother and her friends had practiced half of their lives in front of mirrors and ovens to be their true selves, but today their once florid complexions were revealed for the first time, and a little oily.

A woman in her early twenties sat behind the reception desk. She was fleshy with a handsome white face like Elizabeth Taylor in *The Girl Who Had Everything* and wore a sharp, grey suit. She presented a hand to me and introduced herself as Jeanne. Jeanne appeared to be the only one in the room who was not smoking and drinking coffee. Jeanne explained, "The C.B. is helping women of North Central Phoenix discover their true bodies. Please wait there, next to your mother's things."

I did what was asked of me and waited for my mother to materialise in the room. I took a cigarette and a lighter from her pocketbook. Inside the soft green leather of the bag, I found a lipstick, a wet lozenge wrapped in a tissue, a cheque book and, from the inside pocket, a black and white photograph, probably hoarded from my Grandfather's house in Nogales.

My mother is ten years old in the photograph and wears a boy's loose cotton pants. She clenches the small butt of the nickel-plated pistol in her hand and smiles as if this was handed over to her like a stick of chewing gum, or a peppermint, casually, as if this privilege is afforded every girl in the fifth grade. My Grandfather stands with his arms at his side with the rabbit held up by its feet. When my mother walks into the room, this is always the first woman I see, the one proud of her catch and her humble border town.

This is before her voracious love of western paperbacks turned into a small stomach for cookbooks, cake books and fictional books of etiquette, as if tripping and stumbling she would catch this exotic bird. Before these insouciant, ginger-fingered friends claimed her and hummed her around town until an introduction with her future self was made and laid out crisp as Easter brunch in front of her. But could she

still spit and draw water from a saguaro on a hunt?

The room was painted a soft pink and sets of love seats sprinkled around the room with coordinating coffee tables. The air conditioning rattled on and off as the women chatted in anticipation of a light tap from Jeanne on the shoulder. Jeanne only walked them as far as the curtain before they disappeared into one of the treatment rooms in the back.

Inside the women spoke in different tones. It was not the conversations about cake pans and proper place settings. It was the first time I ever heard any woman say the word 'oral sex'. They ignored me; they swallowed cigarettes; they rattled with nervous giggles. And when Trudy Rhuart announced she wanted to quit smoking, they all burst into song:

'Tell Saint Peter at the Golden Gate

Tell him that you hate to make him wait.'

Their laughter filled the clinic like headlights across a dark room with piercing light and tricky shadows. I watched as their eyes wiggled around wild and loose in their sockets. I listened to the sound of the hauls on their cigarettes and the restlessness of their heels and the patting of their moist hands on the sofa cushions. I watched the tiny black opening come in and out of focus beneath their pressed skirts and half folded legs. I watched the way they traced this new found thinness in one another like a lover; the way they rallied in it; the way they held on to it desperately, a thick knotted rope.

I asked Jeanne for a glass of water. She motioned me over to a water fountain in front of the silk curtains that lead to the treatment rooms. I pulled back the curtains that were clearly marked by the sign outside PRIVATE.

It was as simple as the slipper and the woman under the car. Would my life have changed, if I had not, in that moment resisted the years invested in my grooming and good manners, and not pulled back the curtain? I am sure my mother, sensing the disappointment of her guru, Amy Vanderbilt, would see her efforts to comb and mould us as a failure now. My mother had framed a picture of Mrs. Vanderbilt doing laundry in long white gloves and pinned it to the bulletin board above her small wooden desk that sat next to my father's law desk. She also had a picture of the outlaw Pancho Villa twisting his dark moustache with an open bottle of tequila in his hand.

There is no other way to say this; I saw my mother kissing Mrs. Harold G. Parks with an open mouth. Mrs. Parks ran her hand down my mother's backside and then disappeared out of a back, more private, exit; her grey coif illuminated by the white sun filling in all of the space around her aged, slightly humped frame.

I put my head under the drinking fountain, slicked my hair back and waited for my mother. When she appeared, certain euphoria surrounded her as if she had napped in a lemon-scented television commercial and the thought of waking her now seemed unnecessary, almost cruel.

I walked her over to Norma's. She sat down in the chair and lit up a cigarette and waited for Norma who waved to us as she put a final coat of lacquer over the top of another grey head. I kissed her on the cheek. "You know Charlie, it's perfectly safe what's going on over there. It's just a boost. Just a boost. Mothers need boosts now and then. But how sweet you are to wait for me!"

My mother stood on the side of the pool in a blue polka dot bikini and one by one laboriously opened my sister's wedding gifts – mainly light green and yellow fiesta flatware – and freed the gifts at the bottom of the swimming pool. The bright plates were like a surprise of koi fish in an ordinary pond.

I stood there and watched her, her taut and wrinkled body displaced by the wrapping paper and bows circled around her. The wedding was still a few hours away. Every hair was expertly in place, but her face looked as if it too had opened and fallen into the swimming pool with the flatware and fondue set.

She was even efficient in destroying my sister's wedding gifts. She sat on a lounge chair while she opened a gift and crossed her legs as if a room full of women might be watching her from a far. Then she threw the gift — a yellow dinner plate — up into the air like she was releasing rice, or a small bird. The plate dropped quickly and made a light splash as it fell to the bottom on the pool.

My mother – for all of her pink lips and cocktail parties – was still the girl from the border town who cleaned beauty salons at night to pay for university. Some nights I still find her sifting through the garbage to make sure no-one has thrown out something of value to her — a milk jug, or cottage cheese container — that she might be able to use again. I think she did not expect for this life to find her; the ranch style house

with the gardener, the tennis, the children and the children's friends filling up the prim house with clouded water.

It is difficult when you are standing outside the picture of your life and some character with your same little knobby nose is yelling at you to enter. I stood there and watched her arms go from tan to red, her expression shift from one of anticipation to disappointment, and then back again. I let her unveil the crystal cups and the blender. I let her eat every drop. She only broke a red cup that I fixed in my head as I watched the two halves fall to the bottom of the pool with the other coloured bits.

Then she lit a cigarette and I walked towards her from behind the oleanders popping with little buds of pink and white after the rain.

"I wasn't sure what to get your sister. I thought I would open one present, just to get an idea, just to see. I couldn't stop once I started."

My mother put her hands over her face. She did not cry.

I dove into the pool and brought up the pieces of the red cup. I repeated this movement to reclaim the buried gifts, as my mother sat on the side of the pool with her legs dangling in the water. I followed her toes up to the surface for air.

We rested on the plastic chaise longues while the plates and offerings dried with water stains around us on the lawn. She got up and sat at the end of my chair. She wrapped her finger around my big toe.

She did not blink; she did not move her finger from my toe. She had not been so still in two days as she was just there at the end of my chair.

"Did you hear the ladies burst into song in the clinic? What a bunch they are –"

"You seem bored."

"That's just the thing no-one ever tells you to worry about, Charlie."

I watched her sleep, covered by the damp towel under the shade of her favourite pecan tree. Her foot poked out from under the towel, a fatty vein ran down the front of her foot like a sound lifeline in your palm, not mapping the afterward, but motioning forward to something displaced: a gold ring, a cup, or perhaps even a slipper.

The Asylum At Abu N'af

(extract from novel)

Rene Laforche, the Administrator of the Asylum at Abu N'af, is a small man with gleaming black hair, toffee coloured teeth and a row of shiny medals pinned to his grey suit. His Anjou Rose medallion for public service has white polish clumped like beetle rot to the silver. He keeps running his thumbnail round the grooves, trying to shift the polish, frowning at me.

I sense a breakdown in communication which Mitch's solution for problems like this – the fat envelope filled with francs sitting in my briefcase – will no doubt exacerbate.

Laforche flicks out what he thinks is the last bit of polish – it isn't, and he will dislike me even more when he realises – and sits up straight. "I'm sure you know, M'sieur, the Asylum is where they brought Rimbaud in from the desert."

This is the game. Humiliate the stupid fat foreigner.

I assume my most potato-like expression, (the one which makes Mitch snap "I'm surprised anyone takes you seriously". To which I always reply, unruffled, "Sometimes I add a stutter.")

Now I say to the irate puffball opposite, "Rambo? The Hollywood hero, with the red headband?"

The ball swells further. "The famous French poet, M'sieur! Le symboliste, follower of Baudelaire, un ami du Verlaine. He came to the desert to die."

I nod as though I am pretending to know what he is talking about, even though I do know what he is talking about and am just pretending to pretend to know. It is double-acts like these which make the job so

exhausting. I eat a date – and another two – and drink the mint tea. I feel dust itching my ear drum.

"So M'sieur Deviling – "

"Devlin." I extract my business card. "John Devlin."

Laforche holds the card by one corner, away from him.

He says, "Our doctors – "

" – are very, very qualified." I reach for my briefcase. "But – "

He raises his voice. "M'sieur, how can you talk to this poor disturbed woman? A woman who runs into walls because she says she wants to climb inside a pebble? She is in the hospital now – " His voice breaks. I wonder if he is in love with her. I can't think of any other reason. "She tried to wear a scorpion … " his voice is actually fading "… for a mask."

I nod as if shocked. It is not completely an act – I did see the photos.

"How you can talk to her if you do not even know who Rimbaud is?"

Baffling. I am ground between two intractable ways of thinking: the hard, cutting lines of the stars and bars and its aisles of pills in neon-lit mega-stores, and this land of endlessly shifting curves and veiled ambiguities, of ancient herbs in tiny cut glass bottles. I imagine living in a world of sand where footprints are constantly erased. I suppose our symbol would be the moon's crescent, too. Something that reshapes itself. Disappears.

I pat the briefcase. "Monsieur" – it sounds like 'mon sewer' – "her family authorises – "

"How do they know who she is?" he says. "She does not know. We do not know."

"Well, the people who are interested believe they know."

He looks through the window, past the helicopter parked in the afternoon shadow of the high stone walls, to the mountains. Sheets of sullen orange hang over the stubby peaks and tremble there. The pilot is rubbing furiously at smears of marmalade dust dulling the shiny panels. He is having to go over and over the same spot every few moments.

"Abu N'af is famous for its storms," says the Administrator maliciously. "A grain of sand will bring down your fine machine."

"Not a grain, surely." I try to hunch my bulk lower in the chair. "M'sieur, this is very important to certain people."

"And you?"

For the first time, I am not sure what to say. “I won’t judge the poor woman.”

“It is just a job to you,” he says.

I do not answer. I open the briefcase, place the envelope in front of him. His shoulders droop. He takes the money. I knew he would.

Laforche insists on finishing his tea. To punish me. I force myself to take another date, chew it slowly. The time on my watch clicks over. Another minute. Another minute gone from seventy-two hours. And I've lost an hour in the flight from Casablanca, another twenty minutes with the Administrator. I try not to think of the time lost after I heard the news, time spent on my knees retching over the chipped toilet bowl recessed in the floor of the shabby bathroom in Hafid Street.

Mitch is sure to have started the countdown from the moment he gave me her whereabouts. There will be no extensions, no excuses.

Laforche is offering me more of the local dates, unappetising papooses in a particularly malevolent yellow. I force another one down. More seconds tick over. Now he has gotten up and is wandering over to the other side of the room. For god's sake. I try not to think about Mitch and his goons coming in.

I cross one leg. I can feel the steady thud of the generator through the marble floor. Sand is itching under my collar, my watchband. There are grains of sand under my fingernails. "We don't get tea-breaks like this at the Embassy, I can tell you."

"You Americans," he says, "always in such a hurry."

"Actually, I'm Australian." More seconds pass. Dust catches the back of my throat. I worry that grit will ruin my satellite phone. I check it on my trouser belt. The red light is still winking. I take out my handkerchief, dust the briefcase. I swear there is more dust on the silver clasps than there was a moment before. I hold its solid coolness: moulded leather over a titanium shell, able to withstand being run over by a tank.

Laforche is bent over the stereo system on the long mahogany sideboard. There is a clicking noise and he mutters about the generator. Time ticks on.

I am like a man going to the guillotine. I just want it to be over. I

avert my gaze from the low window, the spackled sky, the Martian-red plain spread out behind the helicopter. The desk in front of me is almost bare: a few files, the embossed silver tea tray and teapot, a black and white photograph of a couple kissing in a very Parisienne looking café. The couple is seated in front of a mirror, in a booth, the seats covered with some dark lush material. The girl's head is thrown back, dark lips parted, eyes half closed, almost looking over her shoulder. The man is not Laforche. I imagine a photo like that on my desk in the Hafid Street office or even in Canberra. There would be a moustache drawn on the girl, tits on the guy, within a day, within hours.

I open the briefcase, take out my colour-coded schedule for the next three days. I have allotted three hours for the first interrogation.

Once she knows she has been found, that there is no chance of escape, she would be a fool not to co-operate. Not to ask for mercy.

Laforche has drifted over, a vinyl record in his hand. He stares at the chart with interest. He points to the few small green squares in the brick wall of red.

"Leisure time," I say.

He gives me a pitying look.

I wonder what she will do when she sees me: scream, try to run away? Or the shock will make her fall, ashen and trembling, to the floor. Or she will be haughty, revile me, insult me, fingers pointing. Maybe she will surrender, she will capitulate. Maybe she will cry, "Thank you thank you." Maybe she will fling her arms around me. When I think this, I get the familiar pain beneath my ribs. Acid washes through my stomach. Mitch is sure these are symptoms of the detoxification after Sicily. But I know they are not.

Music breathes into the bright square room. The gravel purr of Edith Piaf climbs through the dry heat, wrestles with the slowly turning fan.

Laforche begins to half-sing the words, "Non! Rien de rien, non! Je ne regrette rien. No! Rien de rien … neither the bad they did to me or the good, I don't care."

He sighs, says to me, "Chanson realiste. All about the misery, the misery of love. But like Piaf, we must regret nothing." The song swells,

filling the room, like clouds.

Laforche says, "When I was allowed to run the generator at night, I swear the camels would come right up to the window to listen." He sways in time with the song, eyes half-closed. He asks me what music I prefer.

"I'm a Beethoven man myself." I look at my watch.

"Very correct." He sighs. "It is horrible not to be allowed to play music at night in the desert. It is like being without family. Or a woman."

I can't bear it any longer. My chair scrapes as I stand up.

"Yes, yes," says Laforche. He switches the record off, comes back to the desk, opens a folder and passes across a slim pile of black and white photographs.

The photos are of clouds of sand, piles of dust, the light has an odd intensity, making shadows where there shouldn't be shadows, the dark grey sky flaring into white. There are strange swirls and shapes like the imprints left in water by a trailing hand. The photos look like shots of an anti-land, the negative of a positive. For a moment, I think I see my own face in some of them, distorted, like a beast.

"Mirages," says Laforche. "She had been photographing mirages. The nuns think she has photographed ghosts. See – don't you think that is a man on a horse, a warrior?"

"Heat distortions," I say. "The combination of light and hot air combines to distort the natural perspectives."

"Ghosts," says Laforche.

I look at my watch. I swear dust has settled on the face, misting the glass.

"Yes, well." My voice booms over the pale, blue-veined marble floor. "There is nothing that can't be explained rationally. The Bermuda Triangle? Nothing but the earth spuming methane, overturning ships, disorienting plane sensors. Giant farting, that is all."

I say it again, louder. "Giant farts."

I take out my notebook in its titanium cover, uncap the zero-gravity pen from NASA.

"She came walking out of the desert," says Laforche. "At first she was a speck on the horizon, like a black spot in her photographs, a piece of sand."

"She came walking out of the desert," I say, scratching uselessly against the page, "because she had escaped custody." The pen won't write.

The Administrator folds his arms. "We are all specks in the desert. Of the desert. When we look so far out into the landscape, we leave ourselves, we become the landscape. The desert imprints itself on our retina. It enters us."

I stare at him. He could be a talkative man, a lonely man. But I don't think so. I think he is punishing me for humiliating him. This is the Arabic equivalent of a stoush behind the pub. Melee by metaphor.

"I'm not here to study the desert," I say. "I'm here to do my job."

"You won't last long," says the Administrator, "if you ignore the desert."

I jab at the white plain of paper.

"You found her wandering near the Kabir Massif," I say, "about three kilometres from here?"

I jab again.

"Yes," he says.

"With no documents, no papers?"

He hesitates. "Sister Antony would know if she had anything on – on her person," he says delicately. "But all we found was the camera. And the film inside."

The pen has still made no impression.

"It's the dry air," says Laforche.

"It's a NASA pen," I say. "Specially designed for extreme conditions."

He pulls out a drawer. The knowing eye of the girl in the photograph stares up at me.

Laforche gives me a pencil. I sigh, acknowledge my defeat. I take the pencil and write.

There is a small smile on the Administrator's lips.

The Asylum is built in a classic square, its two levels of rooms set back off deeply recessed colonnades which line all sides of the wide courtyard. The bedrooms for the staff are underground, out of the heat; the patients' rooms are on the upper level.

The sick-bay is located directly opposite the Administrator's office so we step out into the shuddering air. I check my watch. It is 11am.

We skirt the cracked fountain in the centre of the courtyard. Its square-headed lion gapes dry-mouthed at us. Chickens scratch at tufty plants growing around the chipped base. The heat falls on me like stone – I can barely see in the searing light, even with my sunglasses. Along the upper colonnade, female patients drape themselves over the balustrades, between the washing hung in the stone arches. They stare down at us. I squint and count five: thin, slack-jawed, mostly dark-skinned, with cropped hair.

"We only take special cases," says Laforche. "Only what the Church sends us. So if we are not sent – "

He shrugs and points down to a rusted iron grate recessed into the compacted earth. "The well," he says, "is below. After the old monastery burnt down in the 1400s … " he makes it sound like yesterday, " … the new building was set around the spring. Fortified." He points up, beyond the second level, and I see a narrow stone turret in each corner.

"Rimbaud used to write in … " he turns, almost stepping on a chicken which is pecking at his trouser cuff, " … in that one. We have his diary. You should read it."

I am startled. That isn't in my files.

He sees my look. "Maybe it is a forgery." He laughs. "For the tourism, M'sieu Devlin. Didn't you know? In spring, we charge for visits. On Tuesdays."

"And the Church doesn't mind?"

He shrugs. "The Church wants to spend even less."

We cross into the shade again and turn into a long room with white-washed stone walls and narrow windows facing out across the desert. There is a row of empty beds and a figure in the far one, by a window. A small nun in a white pinafore over her black habit is in a chair by the bed, reading.

This side of the Asylum sits on the edge of the plateau, with a sheer drop to the pockmarked plain below.

I take a good look around the room, looking for possible exits. There is only one door. Six windows along the far wall, no glass in the frames but wooden shutters hooked back against the outer wall. The fierce light is muted on this side, away from the morning sun.

The door is behind me. There is no escape if the door is blocked.

I straighten my tie, check my watch. It is 11.06am. Laforche, halfway across the room, has stopped, looking back at me.

I put the briefcase on the nearest bed. My fingers slip on the silver clasps.

A wooden fan turns slowly in the ceiling. I take another look around the room. A plain dresser with two hurricane lamps, both full. On the nearest wall is a faded photograph of a series of fountains set into a steep hillside, the sun catching chips of colours in the water sprays. An ice-white chateau above. People in mini-skirts and stovepipe trousers stroll on the terrace. I read the title in black along the bottom. 'The Singing Fountains at Villa d'Este'. On the far wall is another photo, of a luridly coloured oil portrait. A grim man in white robes. The current king, Mohammad IV.

I look at my watch again. The execution hour. I open the briefcase, lift up the files on top, go past the micro-camera, the laptop computer, the vials, the syringes. The gun is there, next to the burnt diary held together by the red silk ribbon. I touch the ribbon and the gun. I take out the tape recorder.

Bread-Scented Gold

Summer was dying. September was pushing the sunset closer and closer to noon. Just a few weeks ago the farm burst with gold, the wheat singing to the goats and hens. Now the harvest was in, and the wind crept through the butchered stalks as soon as the shadows grew long. Dusk was falling by the time they reached the western fence. Anna reached out and leant against it; she did not have much time left. She took a deep breath and glanced sideways at Paul.

"A different voice," she said, her own words cracking with nerves, "that's what I heard when I opened my mouth at university. Other people surrounded me, other young people, their scarves fluttering in the breeze as their thoughts fluttered across their faces and out of their mouths. The slight autumn wind carried greetings and kisses through the hall, touching every cheek and eyelid. I belonged there.

"The hall was a huge cave, hung with banners and coloured glass from past tribes. We sat, chattering, my teeth chattering in the chill that rose from under the wooden benches. I knew nobody when I walked in, but by the time I reached the college dorms, I had three new girlfriends, five admirers, and an armload of books and magazines.

"Those first few months were a kaleidoscope of thoughts and ideas. Walking the dusty corridors – watching the autumn take hold of the campus grounds – going dancing and drinking amongst the hookers and dealers – I couldn't contain all the colours in my body. The light moved them, and moved me too, and by the time Lachlan arrived, I was trembling with too many thoughts and no space to think in."

For months, Anna had been dragging Paul through the wheat

fields, tracing the western border of the property. From the fields the house was a dull blur; all that existed was row after row of bread-scented gold. Anna had grown up in the dark wooden mansion; but it was no longer her home. She was a prisoner – as was her brother Nikolai – captive to a man whose possessive nature was only tethered by the delusion that he loved Anna. He, Sergei, was terrified of Anna leaving him, and so asked Paul to mind her when he was away on business. He called Paul a business associate, but in truth, Paul was a prisoner too. He had stolen Paul's passport, his wallet, and his ticket home – and now that Paul was a social eunuch, he was safe enough to spend time with Anna.

"Lachlan was my English lecturer," Anna said, speaking against the approaching dark. "He took the classes on literature, feeding us Keats and Byron, *Frankenstein* and *Persuasion*. He said these writers were the genesis of modern English thinking, the Romantics. The language was cream, and looked out on a world that hadn't existed in Moscow for a long time – but I knew from wandering around the farm, listening to the stars.

"Lachlan gave me very high marks for that class. I wasn't thinking of him as a lover; I went to his office to hear more about these fantastic ideas of love and beauty. He spent hours quoting Wordsworth and Coleridge, while I breathed in my coffee and gazed out the window – frost encrusting the bare trees, the glittering winter. Books covered the walls, head to floor in red spines with gold lettering and splashy paperbacks, all in English. There was no desk, just two tatty armchairs, books piled beside them. That old communist cell was transformed into a den, a stage, a church, pulsing with the love of ideas, the idea of love in all its forms. He looked so ordinary, just jeans, glasses and short curly hair, but when he spoke there was promise and revolution, and his eyes sparked behind his frames."

This was the first time Anna had said anything to Paul longer than a few sentences. When he first met her, her face barely moved, not to speak, not to smile, not even to eat. She ignored him during their first few days alone, sitting on opposite sides of the dining room in dead silence. One day, in the last wisps of May, Anna simply got up and walked out the front door; Paul had to follow. She still refused to speak to him, but always appeared somewhere nearby when she wanted to

leave the house. He would find her fidgeting in a doorway, or noisily opening all the windows to get his attention.

In June, she was silent. Walking two steps ahead of him under the emerging summer sun, she kept her head bowed. The curtain of her dark hair protected her from the depth of the sky, and the sight of the cheeky green weeds that sprung up along the ditch. She kept her hands clasped behind her back, skinny fingers clutching an even bonier wrist. But nothing could protect her from the heat, and by the end of June, her hair was up, her hands were loose, and her feet were bare.

"We were first lovers on Christmas Eve. The holiday was only a week. Three days to drive here from Moscow, there was no point going home. Nikolai missed me, but he couldn't spare the time to pick me up. It would be my first Christmas alone. I was looking forward to days in the city by myself. I would wander the streets on Christmas Day and pretend nobody else lived there. I'd walk into museums and galleries alone, I would read books – no alcoholic ramblings with my college-mates and no freezing farm work at home.

"Of course, I wasn't alone at all. Lachlan was still there, staying in his rooms on the other side of campus. He'd missed his family Christmas, as it was on December twenty-fifth, not January sixth. He could have gone home for New Year's Day, but something – he said it was the idea of me, but I never believed him – held him back.

"On Christmas Eve, he caught me walking to town, and insisted he came with me. We bought so much food; I only meant to buy a few treats I can't get here – Swiss chocolate, Italian wine, Polish sausage – but we bought enough to last us the whole week. He might've planned that, as once we took the food back to his small cottage, I didn't leave." She sighed, and glanced at Paul.

"We were exhausted, laughing, arms bruising with the weight of the bags. He poured wine, put on jazz – such golden voices, such moonlit wine. We prepared a feast, our bodies rubbing together as we tasted each other's cooking. We danced, closer and closer. His little cottage was like his office, all books and cushions and mementoes. This carpet I bought in northern India, he said, travelling after my first degree. This vase is from Venice, he said, via my grandmother. This photo is of Turkey, the former ruins of Troy. This is the Lake District, the home of the Romantics. This couch I picked up from a greasy little man

on the south bank. But isn't it soft? Oh! The skin – your hand – so soft, Anna –

"He'd never touched me before, not even to shake my hand. His hands weren't soft, but smooth and slender. The skin under his stubble was like petals. His lips tasted of garlic and basil of men of the world. I was swimming. I was drowning with a smile. It was white light."

In July, she asked Paul for some water. She drank deeply from his canteen, and he watched the muscles in her slender white throat as she swallowed. She now walked just one step ahead of him, watching the flight of each bird, each butterfly. Her pace became erratic, stopping and starting, looking at Paul with such intensity he felt his stomach tighten.

"Yes, it's lovely," he said.

"I didn't say anything," Anna replied. He stared; she smiled so broadly she almost laughed. Each time her blue eyes asked him a question, he would answer in words, and she would move closer. By the end of July she was so near he could see her ribs swimming up and down her back when she breathed; he could see her pelvis steadying her weight as she walked. He started asking her questions:

"Are you thirsty?"

"Do you see that butterfly?"

"What bird is that?"

"Who lives in that house?"

"How long have they lived there?"

"How long has your family lived here?"

"Do you love it here?"

"What do you love?"

– each answer becoming longer and longer with the days. The dappled reflection from the wheat gave her golden freckles.

"The holiday ended, and I had to head back to my cold, public dorm. The other girls brought back heaps of chocolate and food from their families, plying me with the treats they assumed I missed out on. I was floating – but anxious that at any moment the consistency of my body would change and I'd sink. Lachlan asked if he could speak to me after class. This is a world of adults, he said. It isn't school, he said. It's your life. You do what you believe is right.

"I stayed most weekends at his cottage, and studied during the

week in my dorm. I didn't advertise our love, but I didn't deny it either. The girls looked scandalised, and rumour blazed through the college. But when Olga needed an abortion, another rumour was even better, and our love was left alone.

"That summer, Lachlan had to go back to England for his sister's wedding.

"I was lost. Each day was a blind groping towards night, and on, and on. I was here, at the farm, without food or shelter. I wandered the border constantly, and lost muscle and bone in my search for something that wasn't there. I persuaded him, through torrents of letters and phone calls, to come back, come back home, come visit my family, my farm, there's still time, I hallucinate that you're here, make my visions real."

Paul's tanned face was still, but his brown eyes softened whenever they touched her gaze.

"He did, eventually. When he stepped off the train I could see, from the set of his face, he was angry. Maybe he'd been persuaded to leave me. But I was an earthquake, a tidal wave, and he couldn't resist. He'd wanted to stay with his family, but he loved me with every muscle, every tendon, every pore. I'd never seen him so at ease as making the rounds with Nikolai, swapping stories with old Boris, milking the goats with Masha."

In August the wheat stretched high, praising the sun. Paul had tried to think of home – his chain-smoking mother, his filing job, his suburban brick house – but all he could see and hear and smell were Anna. Her skin took on the warm, safe scent of the earth. When they were far enough away from the house, she would grab his hand and plunge into the wheat. The husks fell onto her skin, making it shimmer. In the middle of the field, she would ask him questions; not about his life, but about imaginary situations – what would you do if … how would you treat … how much would you sacrifice for love?

When she asked him that, he stopped. They were almost at the western fence, but it could have been Antarctica. The sweat ran down his spine. His heart pumped blood faster and faster to his face. His hands swelled and he stared at Anna. She kept walking, bashing her way through the stalks, and it was only when he realised she was crying that he moved. He ran after her, but by the time he reached her they were out of the field. She traced her finger along his tight jaw.

"I know," she whispered. A breeze lifted off the grass on the other side of the fence. She leant her head on his chest. Her breath shuddered through her body; he put his arm around her tiny shaking shoulders. The green of the grass, the yellow of the wheat, the blue of the sky – the chirrup of insects, the echo of voices – the smell of dirt, of sweat – Paul felt himself dissolve.

"It was not like that when I returned to university.

"A voice, different from the one I'd heard at home, flew off his tongue. It stung with icy times and deadlines, with other priorities – with other women. It melted when we were just skin, bone to bone, but a move from the bed bought back all the wintry others. That winter was cold, and a long way from home."

That was the last time Paul and Anna played in the wheat. The harvest started the next day, a drumbeat of bare-arms, shouting and threshing machines. Within two weeks the farm looked like a shaved cat, shivering and bare. Anna still walked out to the western border, but the house was in sharp focus all the way, winking every so often as the sun glanced off the guns of Sergei's men. She had become silent again, not touching Paul, looking at her feet. As autumn ran towards them, Paul finally managed to ask her: "What would you sacrifice for love?"

"I became pregnant.

"I knew you could die from within. I'd seen my mother disappear like that, after my father died. But I never thought it would happen to me. I had sung with the larks and slept with the wolves – I was impervious – I was pure love. But the gales, the storms, that tore apart houses, that ripped up trees from the ground and flung them into the sea, couldn't be fought.

"He insisted I have an abortion, and with his money, I did.

"There are no words for death. For what you love hacked out of you and thrown away. I bled and bled, over the floors, over the snow, over the withered stars. I bled in front of him, and he didn't move. He was relieved, watching my blood drip over the steps of his cottage, the colour draining from my face. No food could fill me, no fire could warm me. A ghost in a world of ghosts.

"I kept coming back to his cottage like an addict. He gave me my

fill, my hit, that went right through me, that didn't touch me, and I left. He was careless. Or cruel. He left letters lying around from Caroline, full of devotion. He left emails in his office declaring he'd marry her when he got back to England that summer. When he put her picture in a frame in his study, just a childhood friend, I wrote her a letter. I sent it a week before the summer break, arriving just a few days before he would. I almost followed him to London, to beg, to plead, to offer up my swollen, infected heart. I delayed going home – one day – three days – five days – but then Nikolai rang, ripped into sobs by his own double grief.

"I left Moscow.

"Lachlan never came back to teach at university. He found a job in Scotland, teaching Russian, teaching all the Russian I gave him. He wrote to me – he wasn't married – he missed our chats – would I visit him?

"I did not bleed for 'chats'.

"Nikolai needed me that summer. Again, I wandered the borders of our property, touching every post, every wire, every goat, every stalk of wheat. I slept in the grove behind the house. I cooked for Nikolai and smoothed his shaking shoulders. I drank the sun, the rough hands, the wolves, the pine needles, the three full moons. Nikolai needed me. I needed him, and everything he'd kept alive for us, here on the farm. I almost completed my degree by correspondence, but Nikolai insisted I return.

"When I did, I finally went to the museums alone, to the galleries alone, curling up in my little dorm bed to read, night after night. I came home for Christmas. I laughed in bars with boys.

"I graduated, and came back to the farm."

The sun was slipping behind them, its last rays clutching the earth. A chill had wound around their ankles, and Anna shivered. In the velvet dusk the house looked almost welcoming, glowing with yellow light. Anna breathed deeply and looked Paul in the face. It was easy to see why Sergei thought Paul was weak – shaggy hair, polite words and that boyish bounce in his step. He listened. He drank in every part of her. She wanted to give him this.

Sergei would be back tonight. Paul stepped closer, trying to shield Anna from the autumn, the night, the sight of the house. If he could stay like this, shielding her, watching her chest move and bend as she spun her stories, he would give up everything.

"Lachlan is the only man I've ever loved. I didn't think I could give again. Not after that, after Nikolai. After Sergei."

"Not until you arrived.

"Not until today."

If Short My Span

I came upon it by chance. On a walk up some stairs that lead to Kurraba Road.

It's a sculpted sign, erected by W.A. Crowle in 1936 and it reads:

'If short my span, I less can spare, to pass a single pleasure by

An hour is long, if lost in care, they only live who life enjoy. '

Its letters are fashioned in steel. Like an old typesetter's plate. The sign itself is hanging, just hanging in there, from one hinge. I want to draw this sign, because I don't have the words to describe just how it hangs.

But I can take the time to sketch a story, about WA and his wife. They are a devoted couple, she dies a cancer death and he erects the tribute for her.

For most of my life I've lived in stories about the past, or in my imagination. In flickerings of lives, on a horse, a motorbike, on a piazza, in a mafia movie, dancing across the violin fret board of a dream, in which I try to break with the old cycles that keep whispering these trances. These stories.

My mother's last night alive was on the twenty-third day of August, ten years ago. I used to sit, in the hospital with her … wiping all that dryness around her mouth. Away. I wonder what dying is like and I look forward to finding out. After my mother died I went to Ireland and when the plane landed, I crossed myself like all the other Irish people do – I wanted the Irish blood to flow green and hot in my veins. I wanted green blood to thrash loud in my pulses, to bounce on my trampoline diaphragm and strum my temples.

I'm so afraid of dying I'm only half alive.

The ferry leaves Circular Quay at 9.22, leaves Neutral Bay, 4.33, 5.00. 5.20, 5.35, 6.05, 8.50, 9.22, 9.52 … Neutral Bay I wonder how you got your name and if you like it.

Neutral Bay. As I live and breathe. In and out. Tomorrow it will be Spring. This Neutral Bay trip has become familiar. The ferry's cherry red, butter yellow and the green sea peeks through those paintwork colours. The fact that the ferry arriving is called Charlotte makes me want to cry and as the jetty heaves I have no idea why. I feel sick and full with feeling.

Cherry red, butter yellow, colours dazzle my eyes. The water is grey – gun metal. The city is a Turner painting. Heavenly light shines on skyscrapers. Sydney Harbour! Bright red, soft yellow, some buildings Art Deco.

Clouds, clouds and powder grey. A plane glides through. The Olympians have landed. The reporter on someone's radio sounds overwhelmed. Every face in this hangar tells a story. Everyone here is a husband, father, mother, wife, girlfriend, cousin, boyfriend, neighbour, is what he says he is and starts to sound like some kind of poet. I saw Ian Thorpe as he won his medal. He looked so huge, and so real and so bold. The Olympians are home and it will soon be warm again. There must be thousands of girls who might be thinking about becoming Olympians today. Not me. Charlotte is here to take me to a Neutral Bay morning.

I'm standing in front of the 'short my span' poem. It's cold today and I hear slow waves breaking in the harbour below. Down a series of some forty stairs I see lavender and rosemary in pots on a piazza style courtyard that reaches for the shore. There should be a party of Mafia types down there. Violins, secrets and big bowls of pasta. It's quiet here, all I hear are birds, but behind them, if I let the noise in, the city roars. Cars on the bridge, boats on the harbour, men on the make, women on the way, and me, on a park bench in Neutral Bay.

I bought this month's Cosmo because it has oral sex instruction in it. For him. By a lesbian the article claims. There are references to down there being an acquired taste for him, and there's mention of the as-though-kissing factor which I always believed was the way to go – get Max to make like he's kissing my mouth. Because it feels good and you know it does I imagine myself saying to him.

And there are tips for me as well. But certainly there's nothing new

here. All the same old photos of a girl licking and gently biting icy poles and lollipops. As I bite my own lips I tell myself that when Max learns to kiss me down there the way he kisses me up here, that is the day I will start designing our wedding invitations. They'll be all bright colours, made of cloth, maybe, with a piece of Eastern wisdom inside them … sexy and chaste, with a Karma Sutra feel …

It was summertime when Max came into my room. Powdery blue into violet on the floor, look up and the colour darkens into deep purple with orange, threaded through Thai silk, for curtains. I let myself go because I wanted to be fun, and carefree.

When his mouth touched my nipple I made sure he heard my breath, in and out, I just kept breathing, because I didn't have the words. I'm happy when he kisses me in public. That's when my skin feels soft, just the way I want to feel under his hands, his lips.

His lips? A cupid's bow of the finest, stretching, fleshy, pouty, soft. No knobbly feel on this boy. Beautifully covered in flesh and lovely brown skin. His hands and feet are large and fingers long, each section of each digit flat, square.

And square white teeth. So handsome, so virile, so silent. Usually the beautiful ones manage to find a voice. But this one, he's a quiet one. A Huckleberry Finn boy whose face makes me think his dark brown hair is actually blonde. Be light not dark, be as sunny as a day, that might make me forget to pray, is what I say. But that day he arrived late and angry because the taxi driver didn't know how to get there. He wore a blue shirt, a leather jacket, Lee jeans, lace up shoes, black socks and eventually he put on a smile … just for me. He looks like Val Kilmer and until I met him I never gave a damn what Val Kilmer looked like.

When I first met him he asked me did I not find it incredible that we actually perceive, that we have the capacity to look, to see, to interpret the world. I told him I found it more incredible that we had the capacity to live in it.

This summer I will swim and dance around some beachside place wearing a swirly skirt and no shoes. I feel my skin warm from the sun, and see my hair blonde in the light. Max will have a lot of love, and I'll have orgasms with him and I'll tell a good story. I'll take ferry rides and dinner out and breakfast in bed. Coffee, tea. Water. Fresh salads and fish and chips. Virility.

My shadow is eager to please and wants to be liked, is fussy and

afraid. My shadow wants to be part of and doesn't know how to make friends, wants a father and feels unloved. My shadow keeps asking the blunt questions but this shadow can't hack the blunt answers. My shadow needs new clothes. My bed needs new clothes. I walk the streets in a low grey blue sky shadow. The low sky, heavy sky, the almost no future in it sky, the sky has watched many shadows like me, has seen them all before.

I make phone calls during which I wail and weep and sometimes words come out like barbed wire, other times Grecian laurels, sorrow, garlands, grief and I pray for white light to protect me, which I think so New Age and so suitable. Suits me fine. White on white. I wonder what impulses make me move, and which ones keep me still. I can hear cracks in my heart and blood running around and away. Poor girl, I say. And then I go out to the garden. My mother's death has made me physically ill. I gaze and gaze and stare in the mirror. What happened? Where did she go?

If I don't pray when the sun shines, I can't pray when it rains, but I can recite strange found poems.

If short my span, I less can spare, to pass a single pleasure by
An hour is long, if lost in care, they only live who life enjoy.

I'm a dreamer. Always was. Dreaming, day and night. I dream of new houses, of little dogs, of vampires in my room, and I always want to go on holiday. I want to scream and stamp my feet when I think about the fact that me too, I will die.

Jugs and vases full of roses, of flowers. And I've laden a tray with the smallest apples I could find. Deep purple curtains threaded with gold, and a breeze, and twenty candle flames flicker. Max is here. His hands move down my body. His lips on my nipple, he hears me breathing. And down he goes, further down, all the while making like he's kissing my mouth. In time, this time, my orgasm comes down in a multicoloured shower – involuntary muscles come into their own without the help of magazine articles. On the inside my eyelids, colours red, butter yellow, sea green, endless blue, pearly grey and iridescence, on glass, on paper, on flesh on bone, and on brilliant coloured wedding invitations, of cotton, linen, silk … with a sexy Karma Sutra feel.

Before we get married, I want Max to go with me to the garden, to where the poem is so I can show him, and talk to him about never letting a single pleasure by, about him and me becoming those that live,

so life can be enjoyed.

But the sign is gone. Through ivy covered tree trunks Max and I see the city peeping back at us. Neon signs say OPTUS, HYUNDAI, ONETEL and WESTPAC. They read dull in the daylight against bright endless blue. It's quiet here, birds sing, but behind these songs, the city roars: cars on the bridge, boats on the harbour, men on the make and women on the way.

The Six

(extract from novel)

"Gerry?" A girl stood in front of him, twisting the strap of her satchel. Her face was pale, her nose red and a deep smattering of freckles stood out on her face. For a moment her eyelids fluttered and she looked like she was going to burst into tears if he didn't say yes.

"Uh huh?" Gerry barely nodded. Who was this?

"I thought I would recognise you from Ann – from the photos," she faltered as she pulled out a sodden tissue and dabbed at her eyes and then her nose. "Detective Williams called me …" The words tumbled out in a breathless rush. Her nose started to run and frantically sniffing she dived into her satchel looking for a fresh tissue.

Gerry shifted his daypack across to his left shoulder. The brown paper bag was slick with grease. It was also firmly in his grasp, he'd brought it this far.

"I hope you don't mind," she continued once her face was dry again and she had brushed back some hair that had fallen forward. She had tight brownish-ginger corkscrew curls, long at the back, they fell a few inches past her shoulders. The front was just long enough to tuck behind her ears, which she did now. "He told me you were coming, asked if I could meet you. You know a friendly face and all that …" She burst into tears, mortified at her attempt at being light-hearted. "Sssorry, so sorry!"

"It's okay," Gerry leaned forward and touched her arm. Then drew back quickly, feeling awkward. This must be Charlee, he thought. The girl Annie had become close friends with, who stayed in the dorm room next to her. How had Annie described her? 'Wild hair, pale skin, jump-out-at-you freckles and the nicest, sweetest, kindest person you could

hope to meet'. Gerry stood patiently staring at the ground.

Finally, she seemed to have regained her composure. "You must be Charlee?" He watched her nod. "Annie told me what great friends you are … were."

Charlee nodded with her mouth clamped shut. She didn't trust herself to speak. She had already made a complete fool of herself blubbering in front of this poor guy.

"Why don't you lead the way and I'll follow. I'll get my bearings." Gerry shifted his daypack to his right shoulder.

They walked silently for a few minutes before Charlee felt composed enough to start talking again.

"My name is Charlee Parks. You know, Annie was always mentioning stories about the two of you. She said she was working on trying to get you over here ..." Her voice broke on the last word and she clamped her lips tightly together again as tears fell down her face. This time she didn't try to wipe them away.

Gerry took in the surroundings as they walked through the main street, past numerous small shops and cafés. He was worn out, he just physically couldn't cry anymore. His chest felt heavy. With each urge to break down he felt a deep pain squeezing his heart and lungs. He could barely talk at these moments, let alone breathe.

Charlee started shaking. "Sorry," she hiccupped, "can't seem to stop crying and shaking. They called a doctor in to see me, wanted me to take sedatives." She shook her head from side to side wiping her cheeks. "But I don't want to sleep through this."

"I know," Gerry said, but he didn't. He felt distant, like he was standing outside his body, barely part of all this. He'd come to find his sister and instead found someone that looked like her lying in a morgue. It felt awkward but he put one arm around Charlee's shoulder, and steered her towards the closest café. "Let's go and have a coffee. You do have time for one don't you?"

Charlee said nothing, her eyes fixed on the ground. She just nodded.

They found an empty table by the window. Gerry ordered a double espresso. Margie's rich black coffee that morning seemed like a lifetime ago. Charlee ordered a hot chocolate with marshmallows and, excusing herself, went straight off to the toilets. By the time the drinks had arrived, she was weaving her way back through the tables and looking a

lot more composed.

"The guy thought I made you cry, he gave me an evil look and practically dropped the espresso in my lap." Gerry forced a smile. "He also gave you some extra marshmallows." Gerry indicated a small plate with three marshmallows sitting in the middle. "You feeling a bit better?"

"I'm sorry about all that, probably the last thing you need right now. I can't imagine what you must be going through. It has all been such a shock." She tapped her teaspoon on the edge of the table. "I can't quite come to grips with it. I heard someone say what a tragedy. That sounds so foreign. I think – they can't be talking about Annie. Nothing about her was a tragedy." She drew in a deep breath and tipped two more marshmallows into her drink. "I know that's not what they mean though."

They sat in silence sipping their drinks and absently staring at the saucers. A tragedy indeed. Gerry looked around at the other people in the café and out through the glass windows. People walking by deep in conversation, laughing, talking and just two days ago a fellow student was murdered in a London nightclub. It was only someone they didn't know, a friend of a friend of a friend, some American girl.

"... Keep asking myself if there was anything noticeably strange going on."

Gerry looked up, aware that Charlee had been talking. "Sorry, I was far away."

"I just keep rehashing everything that happened that night. Everything! To see if I missed anything obvious or even not so obvious," she sighed. "Oh, I wish that I hadn't been so drunk, we'd all been quite drunk because we'd started off with a few drinks at a bar before going on to Pips and because the drinks are so cheap there we were really ..." she raised her eyebrows and rolled her eyes, "... we were really getting our money's worth." She put her head in her hands and shook it from side to side.

"You were there?" Gerry sat up straight, he felt sick.

Charlee nodded. "It's all just a bad dream. I have no idea what happened. One minute Annie was there, the next minute the whole nightclub was in a panic. People were screaming, running, it was all so … so crazy. We were all split up around the club. We didn't know what was going on. Didn't find out about Annie until much later when the

police started questioning everyone. We had to give them a list of everyone we had come with or knew that night. When I got to Annie …" Charlee paused, "they told me."

Gerry breathed in sharply. His head was spinning. Breathe! Breathe! Breathe! He felt air leave his lungs, but nothing came back. He wiped a clammy hand across his forehead.

Charlee looked at Gerry, she screwed up her nose and winced. His face had just drained of colour. He didn't look good at all. Charlee opened her mouth and shut it. For once she was going to keep her big mouth shut. The obvious question that sprung to her lips was – what's wrong? How dumb a question was that!

Gerry moved his hands below the table and dried his palms on his jeans. He clamped his lips together fighting back tears. He couldn't, he just couldn't in front of this girl and in this café. He had so many questions.

Details, details, oh God, the details. Annie's last words. Was she happy? Was she with a guy? Did anyone go to the toilet with her? When did Charlee last see her? Who had she been talking to? Who had she come with? Why was she there? Why on earth was she there!

Instead they sat in silence once more, both concentrating on their drinks. "I'll get this." Gerry stood up and pulled out his wallet. He put a five-pound note on the table. Probably an excessive tip. Charlee mumbled thank you, grabbed her satchel and followed him out.

They walked in silence to the halls of residence. With his heart pounding in his chest Gerry fought back tears. Who had done this to Annie? Why Annie?

Less than ten minutes later they stood on the second floor of the halls of residence in front of a locked door. Charlee fished keys out of her satchel.

"Annie and I had each other's keys. In case we got locked out." Charlee pulled off a worn silver key and gave it to Gerry. "I'll let you, uh I'll leave you to," she faltered, "… be by yourself." Charlee pointed to the door they had just walked past. "That's my room if you need me."

It was chic, totally unexpected from the outside. Like stepping into a breath of fresh air. A small room that ached with life. Cheesecloth draped elegantly over bland brown curtains that hung lifelessly in front of two wide windows. The crispness of the cheesecloth lightening up what could have been a drab room.

Against one wall stood a cupboard, recently painted white to hide the dark scratched worn wood. The doorknobs glimmered reflecting light from the single bulb hanging from the ceiling. They were polished and new. Two brass door knockers each shaped in a hand. A left and a right, each reaching out, startling and creepy. The combination strange and yet striking. The cupboard tilted slightly to one side. Gerry noticed a strip of wood missing on the right. A folded piece of cardboard was wedged in its place. It was covered in droplets of paint. The faint smell of which still hung in the air, mixed with whiffs of perfume and mustiness a few days old.

A small desk stood in the far left corner, propped partly against the wall and partly against the edge of the cheesecloth that draped down. The desk was old, second-hand like the cupboard. Unlike the cupboard this hadn't been repainted. Every inch of the desktop was worn in deep grooves. Pen marks digging away the wood, writing, ink-spills, colours. It was well-used and well-worn, a treasure. In a neat line against the back edge of the desk, cardboard magazine holders covered in striking floral prints made the desk look serene, comfortable. Burnt orange poppies, violet blue pansies, bright yellow sunflowers, there were two of each all spilling over, crammed with essays, articles, newspaper clippings, reference journals. This room ached of life in progress.

Books stacked on each other rose precariously from the ground in columns. Old, dog-eared and cherished. Two of these columns had toppled over, the books lay across each other like fallen tombstones aged and crumbling.

Annie's personality seeped from every inch of the room. Gerry reached behind and ran his hands across the bedspread before sitting. Closing his eyes, he listened to the silent echoes that reverberated through the room. He knew Annie had spent a lot of time here. Everything around him told him that. He felt like he was twelve years old, sneaking into Annie's room without her knowing. Any moment she would walk through the door. Still with eyes closed he lay back on the bed feeling the soft bedspread melt against his body. She'll be here any minute, I'd better hurry...

A knocking sound, faint at first then louder. Gerry moaned and bunched up the bedspread under his head. Finally, such a nice sleep.

A key in the door. Annie! Gerry bolted up. Head spinning from the sudden movement and heart racing, he was at the door in seconds. It

swung open. Shoulders drooping, jaw slackening, his disappointment was palpable.

"Sorry sir. I knocked… no-one answered. I thought the room was empty. You must be Mr Charles?"

A mean fist clamped Gerry's lungs and his legs felt wobbly. He leant against the door frame and nodded, running a hand backward through his hair. "I must have dozed off."

"I meant to have these boxes here before you arrived." He held a pile of flattened out boxes to Gerry. "I hope you found the room in order sir? I had to let two constables from the local police station in. They wanted to have a look through. Told me they would leave it in the same state … same as they found it." He shifted nervously from one foot to another. "Awful this is, just awful. Very sorry for your loss. Indeed, a very horrid affair." He propped the boxes in the door frame. "The name is Russell if you need anything. Anything at all. Ask for me at administration, they always know where I am working."

Gerry nodded and said, "Thanks." Taking a box, he fit it together and surveyed the room. He shut the door again and the tears slid down his face. Sitting cross-legged on the carpet, he wiped his face, leaned over and picked up a book. It looked worn. The edges were curled back slightly and the cover had lost its gloss.

Annie loved the notion of preloved books. "The more worn," she said, "the more cherished." And therefore you could always feel you were buying something special. Annie had always adored second-hand bookshops. It was not just the books, but the smells and she loved watching people look for books. She would have known every second-hand bookshop in Oxford. Annie said she could tell the mere browser and one time buyer from the serious second-hand booklover.

For Annie, there was more to be enjoyed from the book than just the story. Like if the book had an inscription that made it more precious to her. She would conjure up romantic and elaborate interpretations of the inscriptions.

Another odd thing she did was stuff in folded scraps of paper, newspaper cuttings or anything she found that was connected with the book. She once found a magazine article on an entire chapter and insect character that C.S. Lewis wrote and then omitted from *Alice In Wonderland.* You just never knew what treasure you would find in one of Annie's books.

"These books hold secrets," Annie said. It was the day she left for England. "Take care of my books Gerry. Some of these books hold secrets only the dead could reveal."

It had made him shiver, these strange things that she had said. He had looked at her and shaken his head. "You're weird," he'd said to her. It was typically obscure of Annie. He hadn't thought to ask her why. What secrets? What dead? Now he wished he had.

Annie had left with a backpack full of clothes and one book to read on the plane. So, Gerry thought, all these books had been bought since she'd left. Annie had read these, touched these. She had made up stories about some of the previous owners. They had meant something to her.

What secrets do these books hold, Gerry wondered, as he packed each book into the box. What stories do they tell? He stopped and read the back cover of each book. He opened the covers and flicked through the first few pages, looking for pieces of Annie.

Gerry had finished packing the books when Charlee came in. "I'll get you some masking tape for those boxes." She placed a shoe box on Annie's bed. "I emptied out the drawers in the Professor's rooms where Annie was doing some work for him. She had her own desk and this was about all there was in it."

Gerry stood up and stretched. "I'm going to grab some fresh air and coffee. Can you point me towards the administration desk? I'll pick up the masking tape."

Refuelled with coffee, Gerry sat under a tree and inspected the contents of the paper bag that Margie had given him. He pulled out the oily roll, and looked inside. It was breakfast, literally, breakfast in a bread roll. Shrugging, he bit into it. Not too bad, cold but quite tasty. Tempted to doze for a while, Gerry got to his feet and headed back to the dorm room.

He sat down on the bed and set aside the shoebox lid. He pulled out a clump of jewellery knotted together, earrings, several beaded necklaces and some paperclips all intertwined. Snapshots of Mom and Dad which Gerry recognised from their last skiing vacation in Vermont, and then a family picture taken the Thanksgiving before Annie went away. A packet of tampons, a few sachets of cup-a-soup, a pile of crossword puzzles torn from a newspaper. Some started, none completed. A slip of paper which, when Gerry turned it over, turned out to be a picture, or rather a copy of a picture. The quality was bad, a bit

fuzzy probably because it was a photocopy. It was Annie and another girl. A pretty awful picture of Annie. Her hair was all bunched up loosely and pinned back in a very old fashioned style. Both girls were wearing bonnets and unsmiling. They sat up straight, looking directly at the camera. It was an eerie photo.

Gerry knocked on Charlee's door which was wide open. Sitting at a small table, she looked up.

"I found this photograph. Do you know who this is with Annie, why they are all dressed up?" Gerry put the photograph down on the table.

"That's odd." Charlee picked up the picture and held it closer, squinting. "That's Amelia. A girl Annie met at a second-hand bookshop a few weeks ago. I'm sure she said she had just met her a few weeks ago?" She shook her head and looked at Gerry. "I have no idea where this was taken. I can't imagine where they would have gone. It's odd."

Gerry returned to Annie's room and threw the picture back into the shoebox. He sealed the box with masking tape, there was something about the way Annie was looking at the camera that unsettled him. Gerry felt all shivery. It was like he didn't really know her. Something wasn't quite right. He drummed his fingers on the shoebox.

They weren't her eyes.

Up At The Lake

In chequered slippers Timothy shuffles back to his room down the corridor of D wing. He stops in the doorway and peers at his bed with a frown. Normally Rose does the laundry while they're all at Sunday lunch. She puckers the foam mattress into a doughy U shape with taut clean sheets and folds his red mohair blanket on the end of his bed.

He frowns at the pale yellow hospice blanket where his red blanket should be, checks the wardrobe and the chest of drawers. Nothing. He dimly recalls something on the notice board about the Archbishop's visit … could all residents of St. Agnes Hospice ensure their personal belongings are … now, what had it said? Shakes his head and crosses five paces to his TV chair. Switches on. Must have a word with that Rose. After *Dancing With The Stars*.

Slender feet resting on a worn suede pouf, Timothy Herbert, retired dance instructor, watches glossy couples wrap and unwrap limbs to some newfangled step. A far cry from the hops he'd held in bare-boarded town halls across the country. Even so, the hypnotic glimmer of the mirror ball sucks him back to life before St. Agnes.

It feels like only yesterday he'd driven Route 88 to Omarama and beyond to Lake Ohau. He can still see how the land gradually rises from flat farmland up into alpine plains. Timothy closes his eyes and drives through the back country again, passing hydro schemes where the force of contained water stretches like an intensely still skin over artificial lakes. Golden orbs of autumn willows float at the azure edges. The Falcon points inland and slowly up until pavlova peaks in a million shades of white rise up from the horizon. He crosses over into alpine country where blunt brown foothills squat around Lake Ohau. A perfect

double of the mountain hangs in the lake's flat waters. Timothy tilts his chair back and relaxes into his favourite Sunday reverie. The TV blares as he dozes.

His new station wagon rolls down the main street of Lake Ohau, a wide shingle lane with deep channels, ending at the lake and the ski lodge. Once in a while the lodge doubles as the local hall. Timothy pulls into the lodge car park to unload LPs, leads and lights in the late afternoon. Dusk dwindles and headlights advance around the lake. Carloads of girls arrive in twin-sets, they twirl ropes of pearls and smooth their skirts. The men stand together outside the hall and smoke. Every autumn they drive from miles around for Timothy's dance. All night he has the place jumping and then, as usual, a crooner to finish. Dancers wind-down, they meld into pairs with flushed faces and warm skin. The mirror-ball flashes out diamond pinpoints over swaying couples.

He pulls the lights down to a soft pink and looks out over the crowded hall. It's then he sees her, standing under the exit sign fiddling with a dark curl. Vera. The hall empties out and they dance until the stylus scrapes into the smooth edge of the LP. As the last taillights fade, Timothy and Vera stand together to watch the lake race on the night wind.

"Vera?"

She moves her head into the crook of his neck, breathes in aftershave, smoke and sweat. It's been a year now since she last saw him.

"I've gotta head back down to the coast, in a few days." Vera looks at him with dark eyes.

"But I'm gonna … I mean … I could come back up to the lake this time … for the summer."

He pauses, "... If you'll be here?"

She stands on tiptoes to whisper in his ear. Her voice like a tiny point of warmth in the blackness.

"I'll be here."

With the autumn tour over Timothy drives back up to Vera and summer at the lake. By the end of the summer, they're out on the road together. From one town to another they travel around doing shows and sleeping under the red mohair blanket. Vera stitches souvenirs of the

towns in loops of fat silk thread. Bursts of wild crimson and orange bloom under her needle as the blanket slowly crusts with a map of their lives. She touches everything in Timothy's world with colour.

Pulling the thread tight, she bites it off with her small even teeth. "Another town Timmy." She clucks her tongue, shaking her head in disbelief.

In the seventies they come off the road and move up north to the big smoke to a white wooden house that came up from Maramarua on a barge in two pieces that never quite sat flush, doors stuck and windows rattled. Up in the north Vera folds the red blanket away. They go into school dances, with kids in flares dancing under marbled blue and green lights.

Their daughter Kate grows up in the back of the old station wagon. In a nest of leads and lights she waits every night, doing her homework as Timothy and Vera pack down another show. When the school dances dry up they hang a white sign on the side of the house, 'Timothy and Vera Herbert Dance Academy'. In her upstairs room Kate hears the wheeze of the Casio organ through the floorboards, as her parents shout out square-dancing turns. When she was seventeen she moved to another city, to study accounting. Rows of figures enthral her with their predictable marching across perfectly spaced columns.

Despite dwindling class sizes, Timothy and Vera keep the academy open until the day that Vera didn't make it downstairs to open up the studio. Timothy found her on the landing, her arm through the banister trying to pull herself up. The fall shattered her left hip. Vera was in and out of hospital for a year. She grows weaker with every visit until one spring morning she dies in a narrow hospital bed.

Timothy comes home from the funeral to an empty house. He sits and looks out at the wisteria blooming in the front yard for a long time. Then he picks up the Bakelite receiver and dials St. Agnes. He waits downstairs in his best suit, a small overnight bag at his feet.

From his new room, Timothy waited for Kate's visit. She arrived in a neat brown suit her hair pulled back into a ponytail, complaining about the parking.

"Dad?" her voice is tight. "I've been over to … to your place to pick up that blanket you wanted." She glances at the empty walls. "So you've got something nice to look at in here." Her manicured hands smoothed

his as she tucked the blanket around him.

"Can you stay?" he asked, looking out the window.

"I have to get back to work, Dad." She stayed just long enough to remind him of Vera with her dark eyes and nervous half smile.

He opens his eyes and sits up. It just won't do. He switches off the TV and stares at the yellow blanket folded at the base of the bed. Timothy opens the window and slides the blanket out through the security grill. It lands in the azalea bushes with a rustle, one corner clinging to a white bloom. He rushes along the corridor of D wing in his socks to the polished foyer to speak with Rose. To demand answers.

Puffing slightly, Timothy leans on the front desk breathing in pungent white lilies busting from slender green pods. Rose half stands with her headset on, absorbed in cutting away rusty cushions of pollen from the flowers, with silvery surgical scissors. The red light on her phone blinks as she sits back down to her screen and intones, "Welcome to St. Agnes Hospice, how may I help you?" Some days she can hardly breathe for the sick smell of old bodies creating lint, building up scurf, farming hairballs. The decay that advances with each sleep, she thinks, as she puts the call through and looks up to find Timothy Herbert from Room 382 lingering within her field of vision. She hopes he'll go away of his own accord. Residents are encouraged not to loiter here, who knows what indignity of old age might occur and scare the visitors.

"Excuse me. Ah … excuse me, Rose?" She raises an eyebrow to indicate her displeasure at his appearance and dabs the remaining pollen from her hand. It leaves a yellow stain. "It's my red blanket …" Rose's wiry hair frizzes up over the ledge of the reception bar as she bends her head over a pile of forms.

Timothy continues, "Rose, I think you may have, ah, accidentally picked up my red blanket … when you did the laundry .... earlier." Wanting to sound firm, it's coming out all ragged and catchy, an old man's voice.

"Whatever can you mean, dear? I'm sure I didn't even see your blanket today." Rose doesn't look up. "I am sorry, but I can't help you now, I do have a lot to get through this morning, what with the Archbishop's visit."

Rose knows lying is a sin, but she promised Sister Ambrose not to say anything about the removal of non-standard items ahead of the

A.B.'s visit. In the lead up to annual budget bids it was crucial to create a good impression. As for that cruddy old blanket with all those flags and badges sewn into it, well, it's just asking for trouble. Ruffling paper she staples with vigour as Timothy turns on his heel and slinks over to the large window overlooking the garden. He jams his hands into his pockets and peers down the gentle curve of lawn, swaying onto the balls of his feet. Past the heavy iron front gates of St. Agnes Hospice a pile of taped up boxes sits on the grass verge. He considers with alarm the possibility that his red blanket is in one of the boxes.

Rose looks up from her filing to see Timothy hovering by the visitor's chairs and the water cooler in his hand-knitted blue and red socks. "Mr Herbert, you know Sister will be cross if she sees you in those socks again," she scolds.

"Eh? What's that Rose?" He wiggles some imaginary wax from his ear and turns back to the window.

"You Should Be Wearing Your SLIPPERS," she raises her voice, "It's danger …" The phone rings again. "Welcome to St. Agnes Hospice, how may I help you?"

As Timothy turns to ask Rose about the boxes, a solid column of efficiency in a stiff blue tunic swoops into reception. Sister Ambrose's voice booms out, "Mr Herbert, *where* are your *slippers?*" Chewing her words for maximum effect, she repeats, "Where are your *slippers*?" advancing with one hand out to grasp his arm. She grins at Timothy, an approximation of a smile tightens her lips. Her small blue eyes are gimlet hard as she bounces toward him on non-slip soles, to grasp his arm with the strength of a python squeezing the eyeballs out of a rabbit.

"Let's go and get your *slippers* on. We don't want you to have a nasty *fall* do we, dear?" Leading him up the corridor, she punctuates her sentences with squeezes. Back in his room, Timothy gazes ruefully at the green digits of his bedside clock radio. Nearly time for dinner anyway. Have a rest and make a plan to find the red blanket. He felt more alert than he had for a long time.

After dinner Rose covers the dining room tables in dusty green baize and hands the bingo cards around. Sister sits up the front to call. Peering down at the numbers over her spectacles, she trumpets, "Legs … *eleven* … eleven!" A murmur erupts at the octogenarians' table, as Timothy puts down his dauber and waves his hand. As Sister

approaches he begins to explain in a loud whisper about his upset tummy.

"It's best if I have a try on the toilet now you see because ... "

Her eyes narrow as she hisses, "Alright, Mr Herbert, you may leave. You may *leave*." She repeats in a way that makes the pendulous skin under her chin wobble. Like a turkey, Timothy thinks, scraping his chair back on the grey linoleum. Sister Ambrose marches back up to her collapsible card table to resume calling. "Two fat ladies ..." The swing doors of the impromptu games lounge collapse behind him and he hears the ragged reply from the players. "Eighty-eight ... " as he walks back to his room.

Timothy changes into his pyjamas and dressing gown. Obvious spots first – yes, that's good, start with the laundry room. After that, things are a touch vague but he's sure he'll find his red blanket, one way or another. He puts his little torch in his pocket and reties his dressing gown cord, stealing out in to the deserted corridors.

Timothy pushes open the door of the laundry room; the sweet chemical smell tickles his nose. The turbo drone of industrial dryers cover any noise he makes as he moves through the rows of white enamel machines. Lifting the lid on the clothes hopper with a wheezy grunt he pokes around in a pile of soiled flannelette and floral poly-cottons. Nothing. Lowering the lid carefully he turns to check inside the washing machines, one, two, three … better hurry up, bingo'll be finished soon. The heavy lid of the fourth machine slips out of his grasp and slams across his fingers with a loud crunch. His gashed knuckle wells up and blood spots spatter onto his pyjama top as he hops about in pain. "God dammit!" he whispers furiously in the empty room, holding his damaged hand and heads for the first-aid cabinet in the kitchen. As Timothy tackles the steel clasp on the first aid box, Sister's voice floats down the corridor toward the kitchen, underscored by the rubbery staccato of her rapidly advancing shoes.

"Come along now Rose, we've a lot to do before tomorrow."

He ducks into the cool store and pulls the heavy door to as the voice comes closer.

"What have you done with the rubbish you cleaned out from the rooms today, Rose?" Rose answers breathlessly, skipping every few steps to keep up with the taller woman.

"It's in the cool store, the rag people are coming in the morning ... to pick it up ... "

"Excellent, at least that's sorted out, now what else. There's the welcome banner, the labels on the knitting guild display and … " she pauses for a microsecond. "Did you leave the light on in the cool store, Rose? I've told you again and *again*! Shut it up properly and then let's get going. It's already eight and we've still got a lot to do. A *lot*!" The cool-store door closes. The light goes out with a click. The mismatched steps recede.

The door only opens from the outside, everyone knows that. Timothy tries to keep his hand from quivering as he feels in his pocket for the torch and clicks it on. Behind a shelf full of Arnott's Assortments and teabags a square hessian sack is hooked open over a metal frame. He steadies himself on the frame, raising one leg and then the other with difficulty until he stands thigh high in the cloying tide of confiscated items.

Leaning down to feel his way through the linty swamp he strikes the silky threads of his red blanket. Scrabbling into the heavy pile, he pulls up other people's treasures and throws them to the side of the bale. Finally he sees a bright red corner and leans backwards and tugs the blanket out triumphantly with the last of his strength. Timothy wraps his prize around his shoulders and sinks down on top of the musty mass. The rush of discovery fades, leaving his pulse thronging in his temples and his breathing uneven. He feels the room slipping away as he lies still in the bale. They'll find me soon, he thinks as his eyes close.

He falls in and out of consciousness. Along glacial valleys and up past the lake he drifts, the cold seeps into his teeth and bones. He glides with Vera. She spins in and out of focus as they dance together.

The cool store door opens and the light clicks on over Timothy lying on the clothes bale.

"Oh my Lord. Mercy! What have I done? Mr Herbert!" Rose's words reverberate over the hum of the chiller. "Mr Herbert, wake up!" She shakes him, slapping his face and rubbing his cold hands.

"Vera?" Timothy murmurs and faints back into his frozen dream.

At 3am by the illuminated clock on the bedside table he wakes himself up with a rattling cough. "What day is it?" Timothy wonders

out loud, his brain a pulsing lump of pain. The night nurse pads in.

"I see you're back with us, dear. You've been out for days." Moving to the foot of his bed, the nurse busies herself with a chart. "It's Saturday, Mr Herbert." He looks at her in confusion and then he sees it.

"My red blanket," he wheezes.

"Rose left that for you before she … went."

He stares at it.

"Did you want it on, dear?" Without waiting for his reply she snaps it open to cover his narrow bed.

In the early morning light of the ward Timothy strokes the soft red blanket, he recalls those foggy, uncertain hours in the cool store. He hadn't known if he was dead or dreaming. But one thing was sure. Vera had been there with him and they'd danced together again like they had that night up at the lake.

An Unremarkable Woman

Rick counted back dates, and soon felt guilty. It was ages since he'd last seen his grandmother. Somehow, once she'd relocated to the Golden Valley Retirement Home, the days, weeks and months had whizzed by. Much like the train stations blurring past his window now. He had meant to visit her, had often thought about it, but somehow it never happened. That is, not until today, when it was too late.

I did try, Rick justified weakly. The problem was, she tried too hard. Every visitor had to be served a meal, real tea from a tea pot, and all with the best china. As she'd aged it had become more difficult for her to maintain the performance for her guests and her discomfort showed. There was no permission for a quick 'pop in', as she required a good week's notice to prepare. Yet, given more than a week she would forget the appointment.

Regardless of self-rationalisation, the memory of his grandmother continued to haunt his conscience. The nagging feeling remained because, despite the excuses, the real reason he hadn't visited her was that he quite simply hadn't bothered.

As a child he had enjoyed visiting his grandmother. They all had. Something to do with the easy bribery of children, quickly won over with cake and lemonade.

There was a bucket of wooden blocks kept in the cupboard especially for their visits, and he could remember the joys of exploring the 'junk room'. In that room – unlike the rest of the house, which was filled with glass cabinets displaying his grandmother's doll collection – they could touch anything they liked.

The dusty airless smell of treasures long forgotten, exotic cracked

painted faces, jars full of corroding copper coins, ink-faded stamps, marbles hiding in never ending nooks and crannies, army figurines camouflaged by cracks and crevices, cupboards sagging with photos, all from an era long gone.

Playing dress-ups amongst the dust, with old gentlemen's hats and wooden walking sticks, torn rain coats became invisibility cloaks. Each object was rendered valuable due to its age, despite peeling paint, broken knobs, or ambiguous usage. They understood the term 'antique'; that if something was kept long enough, it could become valuable – even the most commonplace of items – and that excited them.

Then they grew up, and realised that it was indeed junk. Wooden blocks and chocolate biscuits no longer sufficed. As an adult he had to converse politely about the most mundane and controversial subjects. His Gran was a pleasant enough person, but he had nothing in common with her, and disappointment permeated her presence.

The resident manager let Rick into his grandmother's place, and respectfully left. Half dazed, Rick meandered through the small, overcrowded unit. Once, her belongings had filled a four-bedroom house, but they had since been whittled down to squeeze into this one-bedder.

Rick wasn't sure exactly what he was doing here, only that he had felt a compulsion to come. One last time. He knew that he should be sad. Everyone expected it. But, more than anything, he felt an absence of feeling, a restlessness, like he'd put something down and forgotten where it was.

A half cup of bitter tea sat coldly on the antique coffee table. The teacup stained by a tannin ring running an inch below the rim. If he hadn't known better, Rick could almost have expected his grandmother to shuffle in, to break the dense silence, to finish drinking it. She had always liked her tea strong.

Dust lay thick on the mantelpiece, interrupted only by a clutter of photographs. Photos of him and his family when they were young, enjoying one of their many visits to his grandmother's old house. His mother had taken those shots, framed them, and bestowed them upon his grandmother for birthdays and Christmases. What else do you give a woman who has long finished her own life, and could only live through her offspring?

Rick ran his fingers lightly over red round stickers, which littered the dark heavy furniture, trying to gain a sense of something bigger, of greater significance, than the mere physical contents of the room.

He trod lightly across the carpet into the bedroom, trespassing into her inner sanctum. He approached the elegant oak bureau in the corner, and hesitated. He slid a drawer open. Crocheted linen lay inside, neatly pressed, just as she liked it. The cloth edges were yellowing with age, and probably hadn't been used for years.

The second drawer revealed a mess of old photos, the smell of dust and damp clinging to them. The mess was unlike his grandmother … yet was perhaps another sign of her getting on. Sepia photos, curling at the corners, captured his grandmother and many unknown-yet-familiar people in formal pose. The photos were pale and faded, like the ghosts within them.

And then, there were other photos. Not of people, but of his grandmother's doll collection. The collection had lived with his grandmother in her old house. Rick's sister, Keira, had stared enviously at those glass encased dolls, imagining them to be princesses frozen in time and place. Each doll wore traditional dress from a different country around the world, and they were his grandmother's pride and joy. Strictly no touching allowed.

At the foot of each doll was a plaque naming a country and year, ranging from 1953 to 2002. But one doll was missing – Hawaii 1967. Rick and Keira had always wondered about that doll. How had it escaped? Where had it gone? Hawaii? Its absence somehow felt greater than the presence of all the other dolls put together.

His grandmother had been forced to leave a lot behind when she moved into the retirement home. Her prized doll collection had been donated to a museum, and the old junk had gone to the tip.

Rick's pocket vibrated. Green Day's *Boulevard Of Broken Dreams* ring-tone broke through the silence. He leapt guiltily into the living room – as if caught – before answering the mobile phone. It was Keira.

"Found any sordid diaries?" she asked. "Lurid love letters from her heyday?"

"Keira, as if I'd go through her stuff!"

"Jeez, Rick. She's dead. She's not in a position to care." She paused, "By the way, the stuff with the red dots is mine."

"You don't wait long, do you?"

"What would you rather – it go to the Duffield cousins? They never even visited her!"

"And how often did we?"

There was an indignant silence on the end of the phone. "More than they did," she finally answered. "Oh, and I volunteered your services for the eulogy," Keira added casually. "I'd do it myself, but I'm so busy with the kids. And besides, you're the writer in the family."

"Engraving hardly constitutes…"

"Close enough," she said, and then, more archly (he could imagine her raising an eyebrow), "You really want to argue about this?"

Rick bit his tongue, only out of respect for his dead grandmother. Keira always managed to manoeuvre things to meet her liking. Why she'd given up her high-powered marketing career for the trivialities of childrearing was beyond him.

Unfortunately, now that her focus was on 'the home' she took pleasure in trying to 'order' his life, and would regularly manipulate him into babysitting with her clucky-but-single friends. That is, her few friends who hadn't yet given up on men and joined the IVF queue.

"What am I meant to say?" Rick asked, with an air of exasperation. He'd never had to write a eulogy before.

Keira was not fussed. His problem, not hers. "Something short and sweet. Nobody has much of an attention span these days…" she paused in thought. "'She will be sorely missed' sort of thing."

"Keira, she's our *grandmother*. You make her sound like a stranger."

"Wasn't she? I mean, really …"

Rick paused, Keira was right. "I know. Just because we're related…" he sighed. "I don't want it to be like that. All fake and sugary. Nobody ever tells the truth at funerals."

"Yeah, it's such a farce," Keira said with a grin in her voice. "Why doesn't anyone ever say if they had a bad temper and wore dentures?" she laughed. "It's about celebrating life, Rick, not wishing them good riddance!"

"It should still bear some resemblance to reality. False sentiments are worthless," Rick said. He looked around the empty room. "It's just sad that this is all a life amounts to."

Rick loitered in the unit, searching for words of inspiration. How to sum up a person's whole life? It was a responsibility he didn't want. It

magnified the guilt he felt for not visiting his grandmother more frequently.

In the past he had always blustered pragmatically about death. "We all go sooner or later," he would say without any real thought. Death was intangible. He wasn't any the wiser with the death of his grandmother.

Old age can hardly be considered a bad way to die, he thought, having had plenty of time to enjoy life. Or did that make it worse? Would it be better to go at your peak, before the onset of old age? Before arthritis, weak bones and bad sight. Before failed hearing, loss of loved ones, and being carted off to an old people's home. Like leaving a party early – while it was still fun – rather than waiting for it to die down to the dregs.

And what if you hadn't enjoyed your life? If grand heights weren't reached, the dreams of optimistic youth dashed? To die, knowing only failure.

What of his grandmother's ambitions?

Looking at a photo on the mantelpiece, he saw that her eyes frowned. As people age, lives are etched into their faces. Not just the years, but the emotions.

His grandmother had made no attempts to cheat the mirror. Had she a happier life, her crow's feet would have accentuated a twinkle in the eye. Instead, her eyelids drooped like the curtains closing on the third act at the end of a show. Face wrinkled and sagging – the sad sight of decay – her one vanity was bright red lipstick drawn on thin, nonexistent lips.

Rick wandered into the bathroom and examined his own face in the mirror. Could he read his fate, like a gypsy reading a palm? Five day stubble hid the corners of his mouth from inspection. Faint lines crossed the bridge of his nose, too weak to define. Blank eyes … blank like a kangaroo in headlights. Life had already stolen optimism, and what remained was weary and cynical. He'd taken to shaving his hair short to camouflage the early onset of baldness.

In that split second he knew himself intimately, yet didn't recognise himself at all. A shiver ran down his spine. Rick turned from the mirror abruptly. He left without looking back, trying to extinguish the unsettling image from his memory.

He had once overheard his mother urge his grandmother to get a

'touch up', as if plastic surgery could wipe clean the slate. He had glimpsed hurt in his grandmother's eyes, and felt embarrassed by his mother's insensitivity. But his grandmother was hardly the type to require defending.

"I wouldn't want to show you up, dear," she had said with a wicked smile. She was a tough one. Nothing soft and grandmotherly about her, 'sharp as a tack' is what she would have called herself. She was a proud relic of the golden fifties, never updating her wardrobe to suit fashion, never altering her Chanel No. 5 scent, and never, under any circumstance, stooping so low as to use a tea bag.

Yet the years had weathered her, leaving her disappointed and forbidding. Her stubborn withered hands clattered teapot against teacup, and tea leaves escaped the pot to swirl spitefully with each mouthful. The leaves were left to seep darkly into the water, and the brew turned bitter. Bitter like his grandmother, from soaking too long.

Rick persevered with the eulogy, trying to put his thoughts into words. Honest words, heart to heart, rather than sugar-coated superficiality.

What did his grandmother mean to him?

What did her death mean?

And what, if anything, had his grandmother achieved in all her years? With this thought in mind, Rick began to write the eulogy:

> *There are many stories about people who have done remarkable things. This story is about an unremarkable woman. No doubt those other stories are more interesting, but this is a tribute to the ordinary, for the successful require no further congratulations. They have achieved; this woman did not. Those people were awarded prizes, applauded and given continual praise; this woman could not fathom the meaning of her existence. Those people died happy, knowing that they lived a rich and fulfilling life, well loved; this woman did not.*

"You can't say that," Keira said, when he read it over the phone. "It's terrible!"

"But it's true," said Rick.

"Whose truth? One day we may be dead and buried, but that doesn't mean it's all for nothing."

"The meaning of life," Rick mused.

"It's not rocket science."

The pews were sparsely populated by her descendants. Death had already taken her friends. Old age was a lonely way to go.

"It's such a waste," Rick said.

"I know," Keira nodded, "all those flowers, already wilting in this heat."

Rick rolled his eyes. "Not the bloody flowers," he sighed. "Her life. What has it amounted to? A church full of empty pews."

"Not so empty. We're here, after all," Keira said.

"We have to be. We're relatives."

"Exactly," Keira shook her head, sadly bemused. "You still haven't worked it out, have you?"

"The meaning of life?" he snorted. "Who has?"

"I hope you work it out one day, Rick. I really do."

Rick edged to the pulpit and unfolded his speech. "My grandmother, Margery Glynnis Brown, was born in 1923 …" he began.

Each son, daughter, niece and nephew, grandchild, and even great grandchild, said a few words for her. As Rick heard each story, he couldn't help but mentally add his own bitter mouthful of truth. His mother spoke of her love for his grandmother, Rick remembered her rolling her eyes behind Gran's back; when his grandfather got up, Rick thought of how he'd left Rick's grandmother for a younger woman; Keira sang a hymn, and Rick recalled the little red stickers marking his grandmother's belongings. But slowly some words got through to him, words that reminded him of the good times, words that connected him to his grandmother and to every other person in the room.

When Uncle Nev shuffled to the microphone, it whined feedback from his hearing aid. He switched the hearing aid off, and began to talk, or rather to mumble. Like many who lose their hearing, he'd also lost his clarity of speech. His words were incomprehensible, and several in the audience urged him to "Speak up!"

But, of course, as he had turned his hearing aid off, he couldn't hear them. He rambled on, oblivious, until Rick crossed the room and tapped his elbow. Rick gestured for Uncle Nev to turn his hearing aid back on. The squeal of feedback echoed around the church, in harmony with grimaces around the room.

"Speak up," Rick yelled to Uncle Nev.

"Alright, alright," Uncle Nev said. "I'm not deaf."

That raised a laugh from the audience. Uncle Nev turned his hearing aid off once more, and began to yell his sentiments to the gathering.

Margie's favourite subject at school was geography, and she could name all of the rivers, peoples and cities in Angola, The Sudan, the Belgian Congo and Abyssinia. She read about missionaries in the Sunday papers and at night she dreamt her way through Africa, down the Nile into the Mediterranean, across the Middle East and into the Orient.

Then she grew up, got married, and had four children. While her feet were firmly rooted in the home, she still had her dreams. In 1952, Margie joined The Country Women's Association. Each year the C.W.A. studied a sister country. There would be talks and slide shows, and always a doll competition. Margie went in for the doll competition, and every year she got better and better. She went to amazing lengths to make them perfect. If the Alaskan Eskimo traditionally used seal gut for sewing, or the Shona of Zimbabwe used ivory buttons, Margie found a way to get her hands on some for her doll. It wasn't done for fame, fortune or a sponsorship deal.

She did it for love, bestowing it freely on each individual doll, as if they were additional children. Her family of dolls grew and grew. And her dolls slowly gained greater and greater recognition; first winning the district competitions; then the state competitions; and finally, one day, she travelled to Sydney for the national competition held at the Royal Easter Show. That year, marvel of all marvels, her Hawaiian doll was awarded first prize.

But there was something about winning that Margie didn't expect. First prize dolls were kept in the Country Women's Association Hall Of Fame – she didn't get her doll back. After all the love she'd put into that, and every doll, it hardly seemed much of a prize.

She continued doll making, but after that her dolls never got further than state level. You see, the competition was judged on authenticity – everything had to be exact – and for some reason, from that day on, while the dolls on first glance looked perfect, on closer scrutiny the judges would realise that the button was left over right instead of vice versa, or blue coloured thread had been used in the under garments

when it should have been red, or a bone button had been used instead of a stone one. Margie was still proud of coming runner-up each year, almost as proud as she was of her growing collection.

Rick stared around the gathering, at all the faces that were related to him in one way or another. Descendants of his grandmother, here, because the link that joined them had been severed.

He leant over, and whispered in Keira's ear. "I'm free to baby-sit this weekend."

Two Bites Of The Cherry

"We wondered whether or not you would make the trip," Surour said as she extended her hands to accept the steaming mug. "The videos are one thing. Having you all here is something else. She's such a beautiful child."

"We think so. Ahlon begged me to come." Sandra looked away, she didn't want to have this conversation right now. She searched for a way to avoid a discussion about family relationships. After a moment she said, "Mariam hasn't eaten yet this morning. I'll just tell her to come inside."

Sandra took two steps towards the front door and almost toppled, one foot poised above the floor, suddenly unsure of its natural rhythm. Cocking her head she became aware of a whistling sound. She struggled to place it. She had a sudden vision of beautiful colours bursting through the night sky. The explosion finally made itself felt – she had to reach out and touch the walls to keep her balance. Then there was a moment of sinister silence.

The two women locked eyes. A nameless fear clutched at Sandra's heart. She felt absolutely alone, cut off from all she knew in this foreign place, cut off from any certainty.

They ran outside to be greeted by confusion. All around they could see dazed and dishevelled people. White clouds unfurled, rising and falling, mimicking the steam leaking from the grates where Sandra had just come from. Home. Manhattan. These white clouds were sinister and generated no warmth.

Surveying the carnage that had moments before been their homes, their castles, their fortresses, people began to weep, some falling to the

ground clutching their arms to their bodies, others beating their breasts. Sounds of distress issued from deep within them, until everything around them resonated with infinite sorrow.

Looking towards the heavens, saying a hasty prayer to the Lord, Sandra noticed the strange appearance of the sky. It was an odd mixture. Blue patches of brilliance could be glimpsed through the rain of hard grit that was settling back down over the ruined streetscape. A strange odour reached her from the earth. It was similar to the odour that always precedes a thunderstorm – the smell of electricity, acrid and earthy. Beside her, black dust swirled and danced on the air, causing everybody to choke as they inhaled it with their frantic cries. The street was eerily silent in the wake of the ear-splitting blast that had reduced solid buildings to rubble.

The initial shock wore off and the thunderous sound inside Sandra's head quietened to a dull roar. She became aware of the keening sounds issuing from the frightened women around her. The immense, the unknown, enfolded her. She remained still and expectant, a chilling terror creeping over her.

Twisted scraps of metal swung crazily from hollowed out facades. Torn red bricks that were once a wall, lay in isolated clumps, amongst earthenware pots that were shrouded in scraps of lace curtaining torn from windows as they shattered and exploded. Sandra could see where glass shards had lodged themselves into the garden, resembling translucent, menacing blossoms.

Further along, a red velvet saloon couch, its cushions worn smooth from years of being sat upon, lay tossed on its side, astride the tectonic like plates of broken cement that were bunching up against each other making small mountains out of the debris of human life.

Sandra's head did a double-take. Her heart hammered in her chest as a gut-wrenching wail forced its way through her lips. In front of her stood the intact tricycle with its pink bunny head complete with a blue bow tie. Its buckteeth were exposed, and it was grinning idiotically like a clown from the circus. It was the only thing on this topsy-turvy landscape still in an upright position. Mariam had been fighting over it with her cousin, Mahmoud, and she had been the one riding it before the blast.

Hysterically, Sandra began clawing at the debris with her bare hands. Her nails split and small cuts bloomed over her knuckles, leaving

trails of blood mingling with the mangled earth as she tore at broken bits of wood. Smouldering shards of metal seared her skin as she sieved through the junk. She pounded the dirt with her fists, "No. No … not Mariam, she's just a baby."

The three houses opposite had all been reduced to rubble. In this surreal landscape everybody seemed to walk in slow motion, stunned. Then, with a thunderous crash of a wall collapsing, time restarted itself with an urgent hiccup. Two old women, dressed in black, began anxiously searching the wreckage for anyone left alive.

Alarm filled every cell in Sandra's body. Wildly she swung her head around calling, "Mariam, Mahmoud!! Where are you? Can you hear me?"

Not being able to speak the language of these people had only been a mild hindrance so far, but now, all she wanted to do was scream – a scream sounds the same in any language.

The debris was heavy and difficult to move. She grabbed hold of a mattress that was still smouldering; its springs sticking up through the pale fabric, sharp and deadly, and tossed it to one side.

"We need equipment. Tools." Sandra made a gesture with her hands and arms, mimicking digging.

"You," she grabbed a man by his shirtsleeve and jabbed the air above the ground again. Her face showed how distressed she was, how important it was that he understood her. Deep lines appeared on her forehead.

He looked in her eyes for a moment and then he turned and disappeared behind one of the houses across the road.

Her mouth was parched from the smoke and dust. Her stomach shrank to a fist, pushing itself toward her bowels. In Lebanon, these eruptions were commonplace; it had touched their lives before.

"What was I thinking?" she said to no-one in particular as she threw a brick to one side.

Mariam had been impatiently counting down the days. Every bedtime, when Sandra or Ahlon tucked her in, she would say, "How many more sleeps before I meet Siti?"

"No more sleeps," Ahlon had murmured just two days ago as he brushed his lips on her forehead and unclasped her tiny hands from around his neck.

Sandra raised her forearm to her forehead and rubbed her head

slowly. Drenched in sweat, she bent down and placed her ear on the dirt near where the bike still stood, hoping to hear something.

The earth moaned and sighed, like a pregnant belly. It felt warm beneath her cheek, a small promise of life. Alarm filled her, she held her breath, she heard no crying, no whimpering. Her lungs, starved for air, shuddered and pushed out against her ribs. Her lips sprung open, forcing her to gulp hungrily for breath. She sucked in a mouthful of dirt. Hunkered there with her back arched, she resembled a cat spitting up hairballs. For long moments her body shook convulsively, alternately choking and sputtering saliva mixed with the dirt until finally, she was able to draw a ragged breath without gagging. Her back gave up its rigid arch and she slowly relaxed her taut posture and lay on the ground in a foetal position.

She lay like that for what seemed hours, unable to get up, not wanting to go on, uncertainty robbing her of action. Terror held her fast and her mind, unable to cope with the shock, retreated.

The man returned with a couple of old shovels and a bent pitchfork. In his right hand he held a long iron bar. Gazing at Sandra, he threw the shovels down on the ground behind where she lay.

Adrift from the outside world, something seemed to be invisibly and immutably weaving a silver web around her. Boundless bliss lovingly enveloped her, softly and completely.

Her mind struggled, and an image began to form. A luxuriantly thick, royal blue velvet curtain slowly and noiselessly parts, revealing a hospital theatre. The brightness of the theatre suddenly dims and she is left looking at a circular fluorescent light. Inside its black centre a grey number ten appears, hangs there for a second and proceeds to count down to zero. She is pushed further back while glorious technicolour bursts over her features, cascades over the shadows of her face, illuminates one eye briefly and then the curve of her cheek. Highlights her hair and dances lightly across her neck before dimly falling over her pregnant belly, vanishing forever. Looking down she understands that her water has burst.

She is aware that she is watching herself from somewhere else. Thousands of butterflies dance across her vision, colliding with a rain of tiny yellow blossoms. Soon the earth is littered with a thick yellow carpet and the flowers continue to bounce against the butterflies. She shifts her gaze and is surprised by the small blossoms raining down

over her. Their touch is soft at first but then they start to pelt her skin, like hateful yellow stones.

One of the silk threads cocooning her mind sways from the weight of the blossoms. It pulses slightly, causing the rest of the web to quiver. She sees herself and her ex-husband clinging to each other as they gaze at the ground. In front of them is a small marble headstone. Fresh dirt creates a tiny mound at odds with the lay of the land beside it. Hundreds of perfect yellow blossoms decorate the gash in the earth. This is all that is necessary to rend the questionable thread of memory that runs inside her head. Tiny tendrils of silk perform a graceful ballet in the wake of the whispered breath that is born by this extraordinary event. Every event has consequences. Every breath requires another breath, and on an inward breath the entire scene warbles at its very edges and is sucked away like a genie returning to her bottle.

Sandra resisted opening her eyes. She was tired, so tired. *No. Go away I'm asleep. Please leave me alone, its dark and warm here and I'm so cosy. Go away.* The yellow stones kept striking her, causing her to swim up through the layers of fog that enveloped her. The warmth that had been holding her began to recede. Her eyes opened to reveal her mother-in-law leaning in close, worriedly slapping her. Consciousness poured back into her brain. Sandra pushed her mother-in-law out of her way. "Leave me alone. I told Ahlon I didn't even want to come to this place."

"How can you say that? He is your husband and this is his home. People here love him. He has family here too." The corners of Surour's mouth pulled her face down, giving her the appearance of long-suffering. She extended her hand and helped Sandra to her feet. "Help will be on its way. The roads are all torn up; they've been shelling them. The phones are dead. My friend used her mobile phone to call her son. He's coming."

"Have you spoken to Ahlon?" Sandra asked. "Have you told him yet?'

The old woman shook her head.

"Surour," Sandra couldn't quite bring herself to call this woman 'Mum', "we have to get hold of him. Quick! Go get my mobile phone."

Sandra watched her mother-in-law as she headed in the direction of the house, until she saw her back disappear through the door.

Sandra's eyes swept the ground for a moment longer and she bent to pick up the pitchfork. Tears mingled with her sweat. It was summer

here and she was not used to the Mediterranean heat. *I can't deal with this. It isn't fair.*

The man with the iron bar was having a little success in clearing some of the larger debris away. His small efforts renewed her own. Pitchfork in hand she walked over to where he was digging. He stopped prodding as she approached him and squinted in her direction. Running her hand through her dirty blonde hair she simply said, "Hello." He spat on his hand and ran it down the front of his pants and then stuck it out. She started to reach for his hand then changed her mind and hugged him, surprising herself. "What is your name?" she said hoping that he would understand her.

He was quiet for a moment, and then he thumped his chest and said "Ephraim."

"My daughter … was riding her bike." She gestured vaguely in the direction of the trike. "I can't find my daughter." She held her hand thigh-high to indicate Mariam's height.

Sandra looked away and murmured. "Please God, if you exist at all, please let me find Mariam alive." *God doesn't exist; you make your way in this world. Get over it, Sandra; if there were a God, would he let so much suffering continue in the world?* It was her mother's voice.

She worked the pitchfork tirelessly to block out the sound of her mother's voice. Her digging began to hammer out a primitive rhythm. Blood pulsed through her veins and throbbed with every heartbeat. It kept time with the pitchfork, creating a bond between her and the earth. *Why did I let him talk me into coming? I knew we should have stayed at home. The last thought, unbearable as it was, became a mantra. How will I live if something has happened to her?*

Ephraim let out a yell. He called to the men nearby, waving his arms wildly. They ran over and dropped to the ground, pulling at broken cement and rubble. He threw a dented silver teapot to one side. Thin black liquid dribbled from the spout, pooling onto the parched rubble.

Scrabbling wildly at the dirt, the four men spoke over each other. Sandra ran to where they were digging with their bare hands. They had uncovered a body pinned at the waist by a chunk of ceiling that had collapsed on top of her. One of the men sobbed. It was Khaled, the elderly mother of one of the villagers.

Her grey hair framed her tiny shrunken face. Black soot had settled

onto her creped eyelids and tracked the wrinkles etched on her yellowed skin. Her head lolled to one side, the broken earth her pillow. Below her waist nothing could be seen. They knew it was no use digging any more.

Further down the street, a group of women had formed an excavation of sorts, each of them digging with intent. Each of them silently acknowledged that their small individual efforts made a huge difference when done in combined harmony. Their strength and solidarity made Sandra feel small and weak. *Why me?* She pondered. *What did I do to deserve this?*

Sandra looked back down to where Khaled lay. Her eyes widened. Poking from the rubble, the toe of a tiny shoe was just visible. Goosebumps crawled across her flesh.

"Oh my God. Mariam! Is that you? Please tell Mummy where you are."

Sandra's scratched and bloodied hands shook violently. She looked at them, not recognising them as her own. These hands were puffy and bruised, with fat fingers with chipped, dirty nails. These hands hesitated over the gash in the earth before plunging in to the cavity – as a surgeon might do when he prepares to perform heart surgery.

She reached in to the open cavity and extracted the shoe. She held it cupped in both hands and gazed at it for long moments. It was a pink court shoe, the right one. The leather was scarred at the front, next to the first little embroidered flower that was one of three that ran across the toes. Mariam had torn the leather yesterday, their first day here, when she had learnt to ride Mahmoud's bunny tricycle. The dainty little strap that held it on was still buttoned up.

Ephraim broke away from the group and gently placed his hand under her elbow. He helped her to her feet. Not disturbing her hands, or the shoe in them, he guided her to the side of the road that had not been destroyed by the missile. Placing his arm across her shoulders, he walked with her to a house with a veranda. Their feet crunched over bits of gravel and jagged shards of fragmentation bombs. He sat her in the shade, still cradling the shoe. After watching her for a while, he hesitantly left her to continue searching for her daughter. The men resumed their search in the area where Sandra had found the shoe. Their shoulders strained with the effort of removing concrete slabs of wall and ceiling. Their faces were black with dirt, their hair grey from dust. They were already tired and thirsty. Grunting and swearing, they succeeded

in moving a large chunk of wall that had fallen. Still clinging to the wall could be seen a pale blue venetian blind, bunched tight at one end and fanned out at the other. It flapped uselessly over a window that wasn't there.

Surour came over to where Sandra was sitting. Her breath shallowed when she saw what Sandra was cradling in her hands. The old woman's sharp eyes teared. She bit down hard on her bottom lip. She felt powerless to help but put her arms around her daughter-in-law anyway.

"I feel so alone. I can't do this." Sandra said as she looked into Surour's grey eyes. "Ahlon should be here to help me."

"I know," Surour said simply as she handed Sandra the phone. "No-one knew this was going to happen."

The phone seemed to ring forever.

"Hello."

"Ahlon," she swallowed hard, his voice sounded so good, "you have to come now."

"Sandra? What's happened?"

"The children, I can't find Mariam." Her voice caught in her throat. "We were hit, Ahlon. She was outside, riding the bike. I can't find her!"

"Are you all right? I'm in the car with Sam. How bad is it?"

"People are missing. There are dead bodies. I don't even want to think about it. No-one understands me, I can't make them understand me." Her voice was rising. "I found her shoe."

"Okay, we're trying to get back now. I'll call emergency. It'll be at least an hour before we can get there. The roads are dangerous. I'm coming, baby. We'll find her. Stay strong."

Sandra took a breath, "I need you here." He was gone. She was left staring at the phone, a yawning gap opened up where his voice had been moments before.

Sandra had an endearing habit of twisting the charm on the end of her gold chain when she was nervous or anxious. It was a small fine filigree butterfly and she slid it back and forth, twirling it in her fingers. The weight of it comforted her.

She thought about how Mariam had looked this morning as, tiny hand inside his, she had walked outside with her father to wave him goodbye.

Just underneath where the wall had been, outlined against the black

dirt and amongst broken pieces of a vase, palm upwards, lay a small white hand.

A cloud passed over the sun, darkening the brightness of the afternoon, causing shadows to tumble across the landscape. Almost imperceptibly, one small finger trembled.

Mandarin Mondays

(extract from novel)

Peels torn
from ripened fruit
shared out segments
history etched in juice
sweet memories
reborn

When my brother Pete was born my parents planted a mandarin tree in our backyard, in between the lemon tree and Dad's compost heap. We grew up with that tree. Every year we counted the number of mandarins on it, patiently waiting for them to ripen. Pete and I always shared the first fruit of the season – it was tradition.

We grew up on an average quarter acre suburban block in Tipponglen on the outskirts of Sydney. Our house was a standard three bedroom red brick California bungalow built in the mid-1920s. We had the usual selection of neighbours and across the road from our house was a common corner store. In fact, Tipponglen was often known as Typiglen, because everything about it seemed to be so typical.

However, we were not your typical Tipponglen family. To start with, my dad came from Sweden so our name was hard to pronounce. No-one in Tipponglen seemed to understand that in Swedish 'W's should be pronounced as 'V's. They regularly butchered 'Lundwall' and were always quite surprised when we corrected them. Many even went so far as to tell us that we had it wrong! In the end, we gave up and let them say it their way, while we continued to say it our way. No-one seemed to notice the difference.

At least Dad's first name was more normal and there was even another Eric living down the road. I don't think Tipponglen would have coped if his name had been Olaf or Per. Being fifth generation, Mum had been christened with a typical Aussie name of Elizabeth Ruby Hutchins. But Lizzie Lundwall had a distinctive ring to it that made Mum stand out a little in Typiglen.

My parents named me after my dad's Aunt Susanna and my maternal grandmother Ruby. I hated my middle name, as it always seemed to me to be an old person's name. I wished my parents could have given me a more 'normal' middle name like Jane or Mary. Pete came off worse in the name stakes. He had two middle names, Olaf after my dad's father and Alfred after my mum's dad, which combined to form the acronym P.O.A.L. (later on, he shortened his name to Peter Alfred Lundwall).

When my parents moved into the house, they had great plans of creating a huge garden in the backyard. But my grandfather Alf was dead against it. "Your boy will need a cricket pitch," he insisted even before Pete's conception.

The compromise was to plant more trees around the edges of the property leaving the centre free for cricket and other games. As there was already a plum, a peach and a lemon tree, Mum decided to plant a grapefruit, a couple of orange trees, a wattle tree, three flowering gums and of course the mandarin tree commemorating Pete's arrival. They also dug a veggie bed up the back of the block where there had once been an old chook pen and the veggies thrived on the manure that had seeped into the soil over the decades.

The only tree that wasn't lined up around the edge of the property was a lone raggedy cassia tree that stood a little off centre two thirds of the way up the backyard. It had been there when my parents moved in. It looked so pathetic and scraggy that Mum took an instant liking to it. We always referred to it as 'Mum's cassia tree' and luckily, it never grew very big so it didn't get in the way of our cricket matches.

We lived in number one Killarney Street, which ran directly off Sydney Road. Our neighbours, the Kings, lived in the corner block and had the auspicious address of 1013 Sydney Road. Mr King's grandfather had built their house in 1875, the same year that the Tipponglen Primary School was established. Mrs King moved down from the country when she married Mr King. They had four children together. Their eldest son

and daughter were fifteen years older than me, so I didn't have a lot to do with them. Their second son, Dave, was nine when Pete was born, but his love of cricket bridged the age gap and he spent many afternoons teaching us all the finer aspects of the game.

My mother and grandmother referred to the King's youngest daughter, Amy, as 'a late in life baby'. It took me several years to work out what they meant. Amy was almost three years older than me, but only two years ahead of me at school and one year ahead of Pete. Amy was the closest thing I ever had to a big sister, and it was great to have a girl to play with, as my other neighbourhood playmates were all boys.

I don't remember the day that I met Amy but she remembered well enough for the both of us. Her favourite catch cry when she wanted to embarrass me was, "Hey Suse, remember when you spewed up all over me?"

"Not this again!" I would always reply, pretending to be upset. But secretly I didn't really mind. I knew that big sisters always said that sort of stuff.

Living in number three Killarney Street was the Doyle family. Don and Jan Doyle moved into their house about three years after my mum and dad. At the time Jan was heavily pregnant with her first child. Rick Doyle was born on the fifteenth of September 1959, eight days after I arrived in the world. Unlike me, he never vomited on Amy.

Don and Jan were about ten years younger than my mum and nearly twenty years younger than my dad and Mr and Mrs King. They were schoolyard sweethearts and had married soon after Jan's twenty-first birthday. We called them by their first names and Rick and his five younger siblings all called my parents Eric and Lizzie. This made our families close as everyone else's parents were always known as Mr and Mrs.

In the early days there was a farm down the road from our house. It had real dairy cows and an orchard of fruit trees. Across the road from the farm was a park with four swings, a giant yellow slippery dip, a whirling red merry-go-round, two see-saw sets (one large and one small) and several sets of monkey bars. The farm backed onto bushland that eventually became part of the national park.

Every Saturday afternoon Dad would take Pete and me down to visit the farm, play in the park and go adventuring in the bush. My Dad worked in the city, catching the train from Tipponglen Station each

weekday, while Mum stayed home to look after us. Dad figured that on the weekend she deserved a break. Instead of heading off to golf, footy or the pub like the other Tipponglen fathers, Saturday afternoons were his special time with Pete and me.

He would play games with us in the backyard pretending to be Puff the Magic Dragon (for he came from a small coastal Scandinavian town named Hollalea, which to our small ears sounded much like Honnah Lee). His favourite trick was to make a lemon disappear then magically reappear. In our eyes he was truly magical and even Rick and Amy were convinced that he had special powers.

When we got sick of playing in the backyard, we would cry out "Let's go for a walk Dad," followed by, "Can Rick and Amy come too? Please. Please. Please. Please. Please. Please."

Dad would pretend to think about it, rubbing his 'Old Spice' smoothed chin and muttering words like, "Well I'm not sure … They would have to check with their parents … If they want to go down the bush they'll have to bring along a pair of shoes …"

And we would reply, "We'll be good … We'll all take shoes … Pleeeeeeeeaase …" all the time knowing that Dad was going to say yes.

My dad was nearly twenty years older than Rick's dad and had grey hair from as early as I can remember. It gave him a distinguished look that set him apart from the other dads in Tipponglen. Even Amy's dad, who was the same age as mine, still had dark hair. We figured that Dad's hair had just quietly faded from fair to grey sometime when we weren't looking. He was a jolly fellow, always ready with a joke and usually pretty good to us kids, unless we did something really bad, like the day I ran away in the bush.

It all started out like a normal Saturday afternoon right down to the 'Please – Please – Pleases'. Dad led the way down our letterbox red front steps, along the front path, through the wrought iron gate and out into the street, us kids running along in bare feet while he carried the bag containing our shoes, a bottle of cordial, half a dozen mandarins and some home made chocolate chip biscuits.

When we reached the farm we stopped for our usual chat with the cows. My favourite was a black and white jersey cow that I had named Florrie. I named her after a cow I read about in a book. When she heard us coming she wandered over to the fence. "Can I have a bikkie for Florrie?" I asked my Dad, giving him my best cute grin.

"There might not be enough for you then," he teased, pulling the biscuit tin out of his bag.

"That's okay," I said, knowing he always bought along extras.

Florrie munched on the biscuit with total bovine delight. Watching her constantly re-chewing her food, I decided that having four stomachs had certain advantages. Unlike me she could relish the biscuit for hours, while normally I was hard pressed to make one last more than thirty seconds. They were just too good.

When we finished petting the cows, Dad took us across to the park. We went to the merry-go-round first. It was a large circular wooden contraption with two metal bars crisscrossing the middle at about chest height. To start the spin each of us kids grabbed a side bar and ran as fast as we could in a clockwise direction then leapt into the middle of the merry-go-round to enjoy the ride.

Dad kept the spin going by standing in one spot and pushing the bars as they passed him. After ten minutes, Dad said (or rather panted), "Enough!" and went to recover on the park bench.

All feeling quite dizzy, we staggered off the merry-go-round and slurred our way towards the see-saws. With no awareness of the existence of the word 'physics' let alone the principles of it, we decided to see if we could balance a see-saw with three kids on one end and one on the other. Our experiment was a dismal failure. Pete was just too light to counterbalance Amy, Rick and me.

Ever eager to teach us anything scientific Dad suggested the three of us move towards the centre and Pete should move as far to the end as possible. That was all it took. Soon we were jumping up and down along the see-saw testing the effects of sitting and standing in different spots. Some of our experiments had more catastrophic results than others and we each fell off repeatedly as we tested out wilder and wilder ideas.

After Rick had fallen off for the tenth time, we decided to call it quits. Ravenous from all our activity we dashed for sustenance. "Hey Dad, I'm starving," I shouted.

"Okay," he said, pulling the plastic cups, cordial bottle, mandarins and biscuit tin out of the bag. He poured a small amount of cordial into each of our cups and we filled them up using water from the bubbler in the park.

"You know, your Grandma makes the best lemon cordial," said Amy sipping her drink appreciatively.

"Grandma didn't make it, I did," said Pete proudly.

"Na – not possible – it tastes too good," Amy retorted.

"Tell her Dad," said Pete going quite pink.

"Well, he did have a little help from his Gran …"

"I knew it," said Amy smugly.

"… but only to pour the boiling water. He did everything else on his own including squeezing all the lemons."

"Wow," said Rick admiringly, "I didn't know you could cook."

"The men in our house are all good cooks. Aren't we Dad?" said Pete referring to the fabulous omelettes that Dad made for us every weekend.

After I'd wiped my mandarin juice-covered fingers on my shorts, I tugged on my shoes and socks and said, "C'mon, let's go for a bushwalk." The others scrabbled into their shoes while Dad packed up the bag.

Ignoring a distant shout of "WAIT!" from my father, I raced off on my own down our usual path. We went this way every Saturday and I knew it as well as I knew the well-trodden path from our house to the backyard toilet.

The drop into the bush was very steep and sometimes we grabbed onto branches and tree trunks on the way down to slow our descent. I swung down the path like a monkey, not looking where I was going, sure I could make it down with my eyes closed. Steam was rising off the trees as the sun dried out their rain-dampened leaves. The path was a little slushy in places – but that was nothing new, we often went for bushwalks in the mud and rain. That was part of the fun.

"Dad says you've gotta wait," Pete called out from above.

Not slowing down, I swung round and shouted back up the gully, "No you catch u –" Just as my last word was coming out, my right foot landed in air and my left foot obediently followed it out into the chasm. I didn't have much time to panic before I crashed through some saplings and landed in the mud. The momentum of my fall made me keep rolling down, further and further into the valley. With a resounding splash, my fall halted in the creek at the bottom of the gorge. I lay there in the water, stunned, waiting for the others to catch up.

Then Amy started to scream. It was a scream that would have made a bunyip proud. It was a scream that could have soured a cow's milk or make a cat howl in the night. It was a very Amy sort of scream.

I heard my father shouting, "Stop Peter. STOP!"

I looked up. Dimly through the trees, I made out the image of Pete about to follow my path all the way down through the trees, onto the muddy ground below and into the creek. He seemed to stop as if he was suspended in midair and then something dragged him back onto the path.

Amy's screaming changed into a maniacal sob that sounded like a kookaburra cackle. I lay back in the cool soothing water still too shaken to think.

A few minutes passed then I heard the sounds of rustling leaves and squishing mud. Then Amy started screaming again. In between her piercing screeches, I could just make out the words, "She's dead … she's dead … Suse is dead."

"No I'm not," I replied scattering gum leaves and mud everywhere as I sat up to reassure her.

"You can't be alive. No-one could have fallen from up there and survived," said Rick looking whiter than his baby brother's freshly laundered nappies.

"Well it sure looks like Suse did," said Pete almost admiringly, obviously not at all worried about my safety.

I looked up and saw my father's face. Puff the Magic Dragon was rapidly being replaced by Thor the God of Thunder. "Don't you EVER do that again," he was shaking all over and I flinched under his unblinking steely grey gaze.

I knew that I was in big trouble.

He stood there cursing in Swedish, trying to get a hold of his anger. After several seconds of strange utterances that sounded to our Aussie toned ears like, "Yeahvla, skeeter, leebar godt in heemill," he took a deep breath and said, "Are you hurt?"

"Nup," I said jumping up to prove my lack of damage. It was at that moment my left ankle decided to desert the side. I collapsed back into the creek in a wet muddy groaning mound.

"This ankle looks quite swollen," said Dad examining my foot. "We'd better get you home then."

He passed his bag to Pete and lifted me up as easily as he would lift the cat. There were certain advantages in having a tall strong Swede for a dad.

He carried me up the gorge, out of the bush, past the farm and all

the way back to the top of Killarney Street. While Mum cleaned me up and got me into my pyjamas, Dad called the doctor, who came straight over to assess the damage.

Several x-rays and a visit to the hospital later I returned home with my foot in plaster and an assortment of mercurochrome and bandaids on my various cuts and scratches.

After the dinner that night my father decided it was finally time for us to discuss the events of the day.

"When I say wait, Susanna, I mean wait. NOT ignore me. Do you understand ME?" Puff was fading. Thor had returned for his vengeance.

I nodded silently. There was nothing I could say I knew that my punishment was not going to be pleasant. Normally I could expect to be stood in the corner or maybe spanked, but this time I had crossed the line. This time the cane end of the feather duster was likely to make contact with my bottom.

Dad slowly pulled out the duster holding it by the fluffy end, bending back the cane towards himself. I shuddered at the sight, but tried to remain brave.

He just stood there, bending the cane and looking at me. And I just sat there looking back at him, stoic in my resolve, but terrified inside.

Suddenly I heard a loud crack followed by a roar of laughter. The cane had broken. Puff had returned.

"Did you really think I would cane you?" he asked wrapping me up in a giant dragon hug.

"Yes."

"That's good," he said. "Now you have a tiny idea of I felt when I saw you tumbling down that cliff. Don't ever scare me like that again."

"Okay," my reply was muffled by his embrace.

I couldn't believe my luck, this time I had escaped the wrath of Thor.

It took six weeks before the plaster came off my ankle, but every Saturday afternoon during those weeks, Dad drove us all down to the park so we still had our special time together.

By the turn of the decade, much had changed in Tipponglen.

Our street was paved and guttered and Sydney Road had become a three-lane highway. A service station had replaced the Richards' corner

store and the farm became a housing estate. Urban development consumed my gorge and the bush receded into the distance.

But some things remained the same.

Four wild children still ran bare foot between houses, ignoring fences and boundaries, shouting at the tops of their voices. Our park survived the brutal hammer of progress and Puff still weaved his magic every Saturday afternoon.

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