Tide Mark: Shame in Short Fiction

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Abstract

This thesis comprises two sections: a critical section analysing two works of short fiction by George Saunders and Kristen Roupenian respectively, and a collection of short stories entitled: *Tide Mark*. Both sections interrogate the presence of the affect of shame in the context of short fiction, taking the view that shame is an inevitable materialisation of the tension between content and form.

In the critical portion of the thesis I read "Puppy" by George Saunders and "Look at Your Game, Girl" by Kristen Roupenian. I discuss both these fictions in the context of narrative theory, looking to Adam Zachary Newton's *Narrative Ethics* for a model of reading as an ethical encounter. I interrogate the presence of shame in these fictions through affect theory, specifically as theorised by Timothy Bewes' *The Event of Postcolonial Shame* and Kaye Mitchell's feminist theorising of shame in *Writing Shame: Gender, Contemporary Literature and Negative Affect*. Both critics argue that the presence of shame in narrative is an event in which the ethical encounter of reading and writing is disrupted. My argument is that shame is the rupture between form and content, between ethics and aesthetics.

In the creative portion of my thesis, I have produced five short fictions organised around a specific location: the Channel Island of Jersey, one of the British Isles. Each situation in the collection demonstrates the ways in which shame disrupts the very stories it has prompted. "Dead House" explores the way place and shame interact through a character who returns to Jersey after a failed marriage. In "Recovery Position", the protagonist deals with infertility and shame at the ending of his marriage. "The Beast" takes up the story of the wife of a notorious sex attacker and her attempts to conceal her knowledge of his crimes. "Nightwalker" is a story of obsession and failure in the context of the offshore finance industry. "All of my friends were there" considers the roles of silence and storytelling in a

family dealing with the legacy of the occupation. The stories are an attempt to explore the ways in which shame and writing are, as Timothy Bewes states, “coterminous”.

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Chapter 1: Introduction - Considering Shame

What is shame? If I described a person with hunched shoulders, face downturned and blushing, arms pulled in protectively around their body and their insides flushed with simultaneous heat and cold, would the reader instantly recognise shame in action? Shame is a feeling we all instinctively know and experience, but how can it be defined conceptually: in biological terms, philosophical, psychological? All these disciplines (and more) have considered shame, and I will explore in "Tide Mark: Shame in Short Fiction" a selection of the works in these disciplines and others devoted to the exploration of this most difficult of human emotions. This thesis takes shame as its organising principle, both critically and creatively. I am interested in the operation of shame within fiction, exploring the way shame increases the emotional engagement of both writer and reader, and how it manifests in the text as a disruption or break in writing itself. I characterise this disruption as the "shame break". In my creative work I have come to understand that a flashpoint for me when writing is the mining of the uncomfortable sensation of shame[1]. When I write short fiction, shame points to the failures to connect between people, failures in understanding and between the idea of what I wanted to write, and what I have actually produced. In this chapter, I discuss how I will use narrative theory to conduct close readings of George Saunders' and Kristen Roupenian's short fictions. I look to Adam Zachary Newton's *Narrative Ethics* (1995) for a model of reading as an ethical encounter. I also interrogate the presence of shame in these fictions through affect theory, specifically as theorised by Timothy Bewes' *The Event of Postcolonial Shame* (2011) and Kaye Mitchell's feminist theorising of shame in *Writing Shame: Gender, Contemporary Literature and Negative Affect* (2020).

[1] In the context of this thesis, a flashpoint is a moment of crisis in which the creative and critical collide in a productive manner.

When considering shame in the context of a creative writing thesis, it becomes apparent that the need to define the concept is paramount. Elizabeth Guild, in her essay "Montaigne's Writing: "*Honteux Insolent*"?", characterises shame as "that searing sense of inescapable, mortifying overexposure and unacceptability, an affect used to humiliate or exclude"(33). More prosaically, *The Compact Oxford Dictionary* defines shame as "the painful emotion arising from the consciousness of something dishonouring, ridiculous, or indecorous in one's own conduct […] or in those of others" (1733). This definition provides a useful example of the many aspects to which shame makes a shadow: honour versus dishonour; proper behaviour versus improper; dignity versus the ridiculous. Interestingly, it is an emotion that contaminates oneself or another: shame is an emotion felt and caused in social relations. Nevertheless, the range of examples in this definition of shame suggests a slipperiness to our concept of the emotion. When talking about shame, how can two people be sure they are talking about the same feeling? What about the causes of shame? An experience that is deeply shameful to me may be something easily brushed off by another person. Should we consider shame as being something outside of history, innate to the human psyche, or can we take a more nuanced approach and consider changing social mores through history? Further, is shame "just" an emotion or feeling, a subject for psychoanalysts and poets, or is there something larger at play in its very function, in the way shame operates within society?

Considering shame is a task that has been undertaken by philosophers from Aristotle through to Jean-Paul Sartre and beyond; by the biologist Charles Darwin in his study on human emotions; by psychoanalysts, such as Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan or latterly Silvan Tomkins; by literary theorists, sociologists and by writers of literature. This thesis cannot cover all aspects of shame or the various methods by which understanding shame has been approached. However, I would like to set out some considerations for an understanding of the

concept of shame, with a view to approaching a working definition of my own, as it is relevant to the critical and creative work in this thesis.

1. *Towards a definition of shame: Aristotle to Tomkins*

When approaching the subject of shame, there can be found many variations on its construction. Shame is frequently read as an operation of the emotions on an individual. It is a uniquely human experience and one that, as Zlatan Filipovic (2017) considers, has been a concern since Aristotle's time:

> Indeed, since Aristotle, who, having set the terms of his inquiry, defined shame "as pain or disturbance in regard to bad things, whether present, past or future, which seem likely to involve us in discredit", […] shame has been considered as equivalent to trauma, an affective watershed that drains our agency and sinks us to the bottom of the world. (99)

In *Nicomachean Ethics* 4, Aristotle defines *aidôs*, or the sense of shame, in his discussion of virtues as a non-virtue: "it is not appropriate to speak about a sense of virtue, for it seems more like a feeling than an active condition" (2002 ed.). But he also claimed that its negative affect could be turned to use as a quasi-virtue. The prospect of shame, and the steps one takes to avoid feeling it, may be used to promote virtue: the stick of shame drives us towards the carrot of virtuous character. This construction of shame essentially is a personal one: it operates on the individual, prompting them to improve their interior life (their moral character).

Centuries later, Darwin's *The Expressions of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1890, 2009 ed.) would consider the expression of shame from a somewhat different perspective: he focused on the body's physical reaction as an expression of the inner turmoil experienced during a shame experience:

> Under a keen sense of shame there is a strong desire for concealment. We turn away the whole body, most especially the face, which we endeavour in some manner to hide. (340)

The physical body expresses the privacy of the experience: we attempt to hide, we avert our eyes, we want to be *not seen*. It is the bodily expression of what Leon Wurmser (1981) describes as "the triad of weakness, defectiveness and distress" in a classic shame situation (98). Aristotle's conception of shame as a pain or trauma to the self has been carried into modern thinking. Sartre (1943) would appear to agree with Aristotle and Darwin that the affective experience of shame is private:

> […] it is a shameful apprehension *of* something and this something is *me*. I am ashamed of what I *am*. Shame therefore realises an intimate relation of myself to myself. (245)

Shame, or the experience of being shamed, is an intensely personal event in which the focus of the individual is on the defective self. Yet part of the distress caused by shame is the shamed body's inability to hide from the shaming gaze: we want to evade the accusing looks of others, but within shame is also an awareness that we cannot hide from the gaze of our own accusing self.

It is not only philosophers who conceive of the individual, personal, nature of shame. The psychoanalyst Silvan Tomkins concurs with Aristotle and Wurmser in his hugely influential work on affect theory, *Affect, Imagery, Consciousness* (1963). Tomkins defines the human experience of shame, which is:

> […] felt as an inner torment, a sickness of the soul. […] he feels himself naked, defeated, alienated, lacking in dignity or worth. (118)

Affect theory focuses on human emotions, or what Tomkins describes as the mind's awareness of affects. An affect is a biological response to stimuli, which attaches meaning to the stimuli received by a person from the outside world. These affects enable an individual to make sense

of the world around them. An affect is therefore an inborn protocol of human behaviour to bring things to our attention and motivate behaviour. Affects work sometimes singly, or in conjunction, to create a myriad of emotional responses. Tomkins describes a range of affects, positive and negative, such as enjoyment-joy, interest-excitement, fear-terror and shame-humiliation. The latter is characterised as the self-protection signal, which is inherently punishing. These definitions focus on the inner life of the individual. In terms of the importance of shame as a human emotion, or affect, Tomkins is clear that it is integral to human self-conception:

> […] no claim which man makes upon himself and upon others […] matters more to him than his essential dignity. Man above all other animals insists on walking erect. In lowering his eyes and bowing his head, he is vulnerable in a quite unique way. […] How can loss of face be more intolerable than loss of life? How can hanging the head in shame so mortify the spirit? (132 – 133)

Tomkins goes on to explain that shame is precisely so traumatic because it attacks the sense of self. What I discuss as the "shame break" is the break between an individual and their sense of self, which I will consider in my analyses of Saunders and Roupenian. The break manifests in the texts as a disruption in the writing: shame and fiction write each other out, as selfhood becomes impossible to experience. In the second portion of this thesis, my creative work will explore how shame can be faced within a story. Does the writing of shame disrupt the writing process: must we always be "shamefaced" and avoid the critical gaze of the other (whether that be the writer, reader, or character)? Under Tomkins, a person experiencing shame becomes unable to distinguish themselves from the shameful thing:

> In contrast to all other affects, shame is an experience of the self by the self. At that moment when the self feels ashamed, it is felt as a sickness within the self […] the phenomenological distinction between the subject and object of shame is lost. (133)

In that loss lies the basis for considering shame as a traumatic event to the psyche; the individual's agency is lost in the confusion of subject and object, and in that moment of shame one becomes utterly debased, even potentially inhuman.

2. *The politics of shame*

Having begun to consider shame in philosophical and psychological terms, one might be inclined to think that shame is located solely in the person or the psyche. Such focus on the individual, however, does not mean that shame is only an interior experience. There is a substantial range of critical work considering the structure of shame, some of which I discuss in this section. Shame takes place both inside and outside of the mind of the individual. Tomkins' affects exist in order that human beings may make sense of the world around them. Indeed, Agnes Heller draws attention to externals in *The Power of Shame: a rational perspective* (1985) when she notes that "The expression 'losing face' aptly describes the visual character of shame" (4). Innate in the concept of shame is, therefore, a connection to the outside world. As Filipovic states, "Shame testifies to our being-in-the-world" (102).

There was a drive in critical thinking during the late twentieth century towards conceptualising shame by looking at the world in which it operates. Shame may be conceived as a political construct, as the enforcement by society of rules and norms from which the individual must not deviate. Crucial to identity construction is the awareness and maintenance of the self and one's self-image. As discussed by Sartre and Tomkins, the experience of shame attacks that very sense of self; it is "a sickness" or a break with the self. Focusing on the results of this affect, Michel Foucault and Judith Butler have both written on identity construction as a political tool, under the term "biopolitics".[2]

Biopolitics can be understood as a political rationale which takes the administration of life and human populations as its subject. Seeking to avoid shame allows the affect to be used

[2] See Rachel Adams on defining biopolitics in her article "Michel Foucault: Biopolitics and Power" (2017).

as a normative construct, a political tool. The personal literally becomes political when governments seek to control and administer the daily life of human beings, such as setting ages for sexual consent, parameters for consumption of alcohol, (de)criminalisation of sexual preferences, etc. As such, shame can be employed in societies at particular moments in time to define identity by identifying those outside the norm.

Foucault concentrates his attention on biopolitics in *Discipline and Punish* (1975). This work considers how punishment as a method of social control has developed through history; the workings of shame are key to this development. Foucault traces the way punishment changed from the violent imposition of physical pain (e.g. interrogation by torture) to one in which imprisonment is the predominant form of punishment in the modern world. Foucault conflates imprisonment and shame. Key to this argument is the construction of the panopticon as prison in the eighteenth century as the prime instrument of social control. Foucault's panopticon is the physical expression of Tomkins' shame-humiliation affect: it is inherently punishing. There is no privacy in the panopticon, it is the all-seeing eye from which no individual can hide.[3] The prisoner is seen at all times: he is not only physically observed, but his very presence in the panopticon means he is also seen to be lacking, whether that lack is in self-control, self-discipline, morals or agency. The resultant awareness of that lack by the observed prisoner results in shame. Imprisonment is conceived of as not only loss of liberty, but the inescapable, shaming, observation by power (or the representatives of power) of the individual.

In Foucauldian terms, we are all prisoners of power structures, conforming because it is shameful to us to do otherwise: the prison lives inside our minds. The panopticon has been

[3] The 18th century utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham originally designed the panopticon as an institution in which the inmates are under constant observation by a single guard. The principle could be applied to any kind of institution, but was mainly intended as a prison. The prisoners would know they were under observation, but not be able to tell at what moment they were being observed, encouraging self-regulation of their behaviour.

internalised to such an extent that, even when an individual has an awareness of the normative power structures at play, and rejects them, they are not released:

> Despite myself, I can feel ashamed for the arrogating power of my own gaze when it represents to normative panopticon. (Filipovic 103)

The shame break is not easily averted, even when the subject is conscious of its construction.

While shame can be read as an internalised power structure, the visual nature of shame should not be forgotten. Barry Shiels and Julie Walsh both note this in their introduction to Shame and Modern Writing (2018):

> […] shame is scenographic rather than, strictly speaking, psychological: it is a felt condition which also has to be *seen* to be felt, and therefore always elucidates something of the space in which it occurs. It is an internal feeling which actively founds the external background against which it can be witnessed. (5)

The scenographic nature of shame is something that feeds into Judith Butler's work on gender. In "Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity" (1990), she considers the construction of identity as a political effect in terms of its performance, that an "innate" characteristic such as gender should be read in terms of its relation to the outside world, to the scenes of gender creation:

> There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results.

Like shame, gender must be seen to exist. Society needs to see gender performed on the body in order to make sense of an individual's identity. Thus, gender only exists if it is seen by others. Butler situates gender identity, previously considered to be innate, outside of the body in the theatre of the world. Acknowledging that shame "elucidates something of the space in

which it occurs", allows us to read shame, like gender, in terms of its performance in the world. It also allows us to consider how shame and gender are formed within the power structures of that world.

Butler's identity politics foreground the idea that construction of gender identity will always be bound up with non-identity:

> Our notions of what a human being is problematically depend on there being two coherent genders. And if someone doesn't comply with either the masculine norm or the feminine norm, their very humanness is called into question. (Stauffer 2003)

The binary in/out of social norms are supported by shame as a construct which marks out those who are "not us", "not acceptable", or even "not people". Performing one's identity requires an accepted notion of what it means to be a person, and there will always be consequences for not being the right kind of person. As Filipovic notes:

> […] shame is what enables the reactivation of the institutional typologies of power by the subjects themselves. I am ashamed of who I am only in so far as I have internalised the power structure that articulates me as its constitutive outside […] abstract systems of power whose binaries are announced and effectively sustained by the burn of my shame. (102)

Sara Ahmed's *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004) expressly considers shame as a consequence of normative identity politics: "Shame can also be experienced as the affective cost of not following the scripts of normative existence" (107). In common with Butler, the affective cost is one that calls one's "very humanness" into question.

Giorgio Agamben, like Ahmed, reads shame in a political context. Agamben takes his interpretation of shame further, as it relates to witnesses to the Holocaust. How can one confront the horrors of Auschwitz and bear witness to them; what is the operation of shame in doing so (how can one bear to bear witness)? Shiels and Walsh, in their introduction to *Shame*

and Modern Writing, note that Agamben's construction of shame "marks a bearing witness to our own passivity when confronted with the inhuman reductions of political regimes" (14). Agamben confronts Auschwitz and the spectre of the shameful witness (again, the visual nature of shame is emphasised, shame must be *seen* to exist, signalled by the blushing cheek or the downturned face). Through the lens of the Holocaust, shame obliterates the individual at the same times as it constructs that individual again:

> In shame, the subject has no other content than its own disorder, its own oblivion as a subject. This double movement, which is both subjectification and desubjectification, is shame. (Agamben 106)

The weight of the power structure bears down impossibly hard on the shamed individual and "shame becomes a testimony to the presence of others whose rights and suppressed cries for recognition manifest the failure of our responsibilities" (Filipovic 107). The shamed are placed in an impossible position, made intolerable by its very construction. Filipovic defines it thus:

> In the act of shaming […] [m]y gaze becomes the expression of my community's deepest desires […] and I demand that you answer for your right to be, which you are powerless to do. You are the indiscretion of my history […] In the act of shaming, you no longer share the power of my history but are subject to it and your subjection affirms the prerogatives of my power. (105)

Filipovic here inherits Aristotle's internalised shame and accepts Foucault and Butler's political construction of the affect as a subjection to power. I am interested in how that subjection may be used, or subverted, within a fiction. In my analyses of Saunders and Roupenian's work, I will outline the shamed subjection of the protagonists of the story, but also describe the ways in which the text itself writes out the shame dynamic. In the creative portion, I produce short stories that respond to the central question of whether shame serves to enhance the relationship between writer and reader, creator and character. In my readings and my fiction,

the operation of shame is more than simple power dominance and I draw more on this from Filipovic in the section below.

3. *The ethics of shame*

Filipovic's essay, "Towards an Ethics of Shame", sets out an argument for considering the ethical significance of shame, which I believe is of critical importance to this thesis. Moving away from considering shame as purely a psychological trauma, or as an element of the power structures of the world, Filipovic contends that shame has an ethical component at its core:

> The fact is that we feel ashamed because we are not alone. […] the exposure and indignity of the self, the "inner torment" is, by the same token, the reflection of our humanity, the recognition of our indiscretions and the fact that the world is not first ours to appropriate. (101)

The shame break in operation is a trauma to the ego, which forces us to acknowledge that we are not alone, can never be alone. It is an experience that foregrounds our connectedness to the world and other people. Filipovic goes on to explain:

> Shame is an affect sustained by a conflict whereby the Ego becomes a burden unto itself, fatally consigned to what it cannot assume, shame appears to be a concern for my being alone and yet it is only by virtue of another that the intimacy of this concern is revealed to me. (111)

The experience of shame is doubled: when a person feels shame, they experience a break in their self-perception, their sense of who they are as a person. But the very fact that shame is being experienced, alerts us to the fact that there are others from whom we wish to hide our shame. Shame forces us to confront the fact that the world is not only ours to construct as we wish. Filipovic characterises shame as an ethical consideration:

> The experience of shame is the exposure of subjectivity in sincerity of an ethical relation where the traumatic passage *from the universe for-myself to my universe for-the-other* is painfully announced. […] What shame seems to reveal, then, is that I am for others before I am or I belong. […] shame manifests our frailty by revealing the absolute necessity of our faith in others, our dependence and our attachment, is, after all, also why we so desperately attempt to hide it, being ashamed of our shame. (111)

Firmly locating shame in an ethical discourse of faith and frailty, he states: "I am for others before I am or I belong". In this redemptive reading of shame, the individual is forced to confront their dependence on others, the human condition as one of good faith prior to the power structures of the world around us:

> There is a primary allegiance to Goodness that shame reveals before its obfuscation in the economies of rights and obligations. (109)

4. Ethics of narrative and readings of shame

I believe that Filipovic's construction of the experience of shame as an ethical event, in which the individual confronts their own dependence and attachment to others, can be expanded by a reading of narrative ethics, and extended again in turn by a reading of narrative ethics in creative writing theory. I will discuss the approach to creative writing theory in greater detail below. Newton, in *Narrative Ethics*, proposes that:

> […] narrative ethics implies simply narrative *as* ethics: the ethical consequences of narrating story and fictionalising person, and the reciprocal claims binding teller, listener, witness, and reader in that process. (10-11)

I propose that the language of ethics may elucidate a reading of the shame experience (the shame break) encountered, or enacted, within a narrative. Narrative ethics considers that the acts of writing, and reading, produce "reciprocal claims" between the writer and reader of a

text. Filipovic's construction of shame, based on Tomkins' affect theory, is that shame is an affect that binds communities in similar reciprocity:

> Just as contempt strengthens boundaries between individuals and groups and is the instrument par excellence for the preservation of hierarchical, caste and class relationships, so is shared [shame] a prime instrument for strengthening the sense of mutuality and community whether it be between parent and child, friend and friend, or citizen and citizen. (Tomkins 216)

By considering shame as an ethical relationship between the self and others, we can consider how this may be expressed in narrative. A narrative relationship itself rehearses ethical encounters between individuals, and in this thesis I explore the ways these ethical encounters may be transformed through the lens of shame.

When shame is encountered in a text, does it help or hinder Newton's conception that under narrative ethics:

> One faces a text as one might face a person, having to confront the claims raised by that very immediacy, an immediacy of contact, not of meaning? (11)

This is an approach which takes account of the proposition by Sheils and Walsh that they "identify shame in existing writing practices by acknowledging an economy of affective transfer between writer, reader and text, operating in excess of representation" (1). Sheils and Walsh describe the act of writing as a reconstitutive act, remaking the experience of shame into something redemptive:

> […] the writer seeks, through his or her capacity to communicate, nothing short of the surmounting of shame in its destructive affects. Such a surmounting is both the goal of love and creativity. (29)

While it may be the goal of creativity to defeat destruction, not all writers agree that the surmounting of shame is achievable. Timothy Bewes and Kaye Mitchell both take a more cynical view in their approach to shame and writing. Bewes' *The Event of Postcolonial Shame* (2011) argues that shame is not something that may be defeated by effective communication, because it is not distinct from the text itself. Rather, shame is performed within the writing itself and may be traced within a text:

> Shame is an entity that comes into being on the basis of a discrepancy, such as the gap between subject and object, or between available forms and the drive to expression. […] Shame and writing are coterminous. (23)

I concur with Bewes, taking this as the principal approach to both my creative work and literary analysis. I am also in alignment with Kaye Mitchell's similar consideration of shame in *Writing Shame: Gender, Contemporary Literature and Negative Affect* (2020), that writing and shame are inextricably bound together. Bewes and Mitchell's approaches chime with Butler's theorising of the gender binary and with both Butler's and Foucault's construction of power dynamics. For Mitchell, like Bewes, shame is more than a conceptual dragon to be defeated by the pen of righteousness. Shame actively operates on a text:

> The idea that shame exceeds representation – that it is not only a theme or topic that literary texts can deploy in their mimetic relation to the world (although it might also be this), but rather is something that motivates, infects and frequently distorts the literary endeavour itself […] (24)

The shame break is not merely a psychological trauma, but a break in writing itself. I will take Newton's construction of narrative ethics, nuanced by Bewes and Mitchell's approaches to shame, as the basis for my analysis of the short form fiction of George Saunders and Kristen Roupenian.

5. Readings of shame in this thesis

In the following chapters, I conduct detailed analyses of Saunders' short story "Puppy" and Roupenian's "Look at your game, girl". In both stories:

> Ethics signifies recursive, contingent, and interactive dramas of encounter and recognition, the sort which prose fiction both crystalizes and recirculates in acts of interpretative engagement. (Newton 12)

I will take Bewes as the guiding approach to my analysis of the "recursive, contingent and interactive dramas of encounter and recognition" in "Puppy", considering this statement as crucial to the argument:

> Shame is the shame of *being*. The substance of shame is fundamentally a gap, an absence, an impossibility. (Bewes 34)

In my consideration of "Look at your game, girl", Mitchell's theories are the principle influence. Kaye Mitchell's conception of shame, particularly female-centred shame, posits that shame is not something latent within a text, waiting to be discovered like Sleeping Beauty, but it is rather "pervasive and structural" (27), continually present and active within writing:

> […] consider the shame of the writer and the shame involved in writing – hence my title, which uses 'writing' as both verb and noun, to indicate both the writing of shame (shame as subject matter) and the shame of writing. (23)

For my writing practice I respond to Bewes' words:

> [Shame is] a complex that arises precisely with the writing itself. Shame arises from an incommensurability between my own experience and myself as reflected back to me in the eyes of another – an incommensurability that is materialised precisely in my writing. (41)

I believe that Filipovic comes closer to the truth of shame when he follows Emmanuel Levinas's construction of shame as an insoluble internal contradiction:

> […] it is a residue of love, that it reveals the miscarriage of love and our misery for having failed to keep it at bay, but the misery we feel only testifies to the gravity of its triumph. (111)

Shame is not something to be overcome by the judicious application of love to a story or writing practice; it is inescapable, an affect which fundamentally constitutes humanity in its love and failures to love. Like Bewes and Mitchell, I consider that shame in the text is equally inescapable: it is an emotional subsidence, a textual liquefaction breaking through the lines on the page, a condition of writing, one which I will attempt to demonstrate in the creative portion of this thesis.

Chapter 2: Reading Shame in "Puppy", by George Saunders

"What we've got here is a failure to communicate." Captain, *Cool Hand Luke* (1967)

> My goal has always been to write stories in which the beauty of life is fairly represented – the goodness in people and nature, and the love and the hope – but in which the other side is also fairly represented – the incredible cruelty of people and of the universe itself. It's all true! And all happening at once. Saunders (Saunders and Silveri 76)

"Puppy" is a short fiction that was first published in *The New Yorker* in 2007 and later included in the 2013 collection *Tenth of December*. The story concerns two women, Marie and Callie, who meet when Marie goes to buy a puppy from Callie. Marie abruptly changes her mind once she sees the condition Callie's son, Bo, is kept in. During their encounter at Callie's house, Bo is outside in the backyard of the house, chained to a tree like an animal. He can run as far as the chain allows; he drinks from a dog bowl. Marie is so shocked by this sight that she refuses the puppy and leaves, giving no clear explanation to Callie of the reason for her change of mind. The result of Marie's decision not to take the puppy after all is that Callie abandons the unwanted puppy in a nearby cornfield to die, so that her husband doesn't have to kill it himself. This is one of Saunders' shorter fictions and one which is not set in his typical near future alternative universe. "Puppy" is a realist literary fiction that could be happening now, in this world.

My critical approach in this chapter is indebted to Newton's *Narrative Ethics*, and I will apply his construction of the ethical encounter to my reading of "Puppy":

> Ethics refers to the radicality and uniqueness of the moral situation itself, a binding claim exercised upon the self by a concrete and singular other whose moral appeal precedes both decision and understanding. (264)

I find Newton's construction of the "binding claim" compelling, in particular the notion that the immediacy of the ethical encounter "precedes decision and understanding". I would argue that this can be taken further, by examining the effect of shame through an ethical lens. My reading of shame in "Puppy" is organised around Timothy Bewes' principle that the appearance of shame in narrative is an event during which the ethical encounter of reading and writing is disrupted. In *The Event of Postcolonial Shame* (2011), Bewes argues that:

> Shame is an entity that comes into being on the basis of a discrepancy, such as the gap between subject and object, or between available forms and the drive to expression. […] Shame and writing are coterminous. (23)

I will argue that, in "Puppy", Saunders enacts through the text the fundamental incommensurability of shame as an event that defies representation.

George Saunders has long been considered a satirist of modern America, skewering the unabashed capitalism of the country by focusing his attention on what David P. Rando (2012) describes as "the losers of American history – the dispossessed, the oppressed, or merely those whom history's winners have walked all over on their paths to glory, fame, or terrific wealth" (437). This is true of "Puppy". Callie and her family are classic Saunders subjects: they live on the poverty line and there seems to be no expectation that this will ever, or can ever, change.[4] Even Marie, self-signalling as solidly middle class, has a childhood more in keeping with Callie's current life than her own role as the "caretaker" of her "not spoiled, well loved" children. Layne Neeper (2016), writing on "Puppy", identifies Saunders as part of a post-postmodern movement of "practitioners of the so-called New Sincerity in American

[4] The typicality of the characters' situations can be seen in Saunders' wider writing: the lower middle management narrator of "The Semplica Girl Diaries"; Mikey, the returned veteran in "Home"; Min and Jade, minimum wage workers helplessly dealing with their zombie great aunt Bernice in "Sea Oak".

Fiction", adapting the detachment of satire into something warmer, which aims at connecting on an emotional level with its readers (283). Neeper takes the view that Saunders is "committed to a definable, cumulative effect on readers that is unmistakeably intended as moral, remedial, and salutary" (284). There is a general acknowledgement amongst those writing critically on Saunders that his works have an overarching drive towards empathy and compassion, encouraging the reader to consider alternative points of view through the operation of feelings. In their assessment, he is a profoundly ethical writer.[5] As Saunders himself puts it:

> That is to say, things matter to me, and should; and therefore I'm going to assume that things also matter to you, and they are (roughly) the same things that matter to me – and then proceed on that basis. (Miller and Saunders 31)

At this point I turn to Richard Lee's reading on Saunders' short fiction. His analysis of "Al Roosten" in "Narrative Point of View, Irony and Cultural Criticism in Selected Short Fiction by George Saunders" (2010) identifies its narrative similarity to "Puppy":

> The first person mode is often embedded even in what he has called the "more-mannered 3rd person stories," where monologue and interiority present the undervalued minds of his underground men and women. (81)

The reader engages with "Puppy" purely through the first person narration of the two main characters, Marie and Callie: they are autodiegetic narrators. Lee argues that this commitment to interiority and point of view "creates through fiction and creative nonfiction a functional implied reader who is willing to be persuaded of a point, not merely a choir member echoing back" (84). Lee is considering Saunders in the light of a debater, as an author who is committed

[5] Layne Neeper, David Rando, Alex Millen, Robert Cameron Wilson in "Third Person Ventriloquism: Microdialogues and Polyphony in George Saunders' "Victory Lap"" and Michael Basseler's "Narrative Empathy in George Saunders' Fiction", among many others, concur that Saunders' fiction thrusts towards the ethical, emotional connection made with readers of his fiction.

to pressing a point on the reader. This may be a valid approach; Saunders himself has stated that "being audience-aware […] to me, it feels like the path to intimate communication" (Saunders and Silveri 69). Yet by naming Saunders' narrative approach as that of a persuader, Lee's reading is less concerned with narrative ethics than with the function of irony within narrative: "we get a gentle piercing of our own narcissistic bubbles even as we are allowed the defensive, delusional, comforting safety that is story" (89). His focus here is the story "Al Roosten", but the study implies this carries across all Saunders' stories. Is the story Callie tells herself in "Puppy" about her treatment of her son Bo defensive, delusional and comforting? Perhaps, but my interpretation of Saunders, via the ethical encounter between the reader and the narrative, allows a reading that contradicts the notion of story itself as defensive or delusional.

Saunders himself refers to writing as an ethical project:

> Writing and reading and speaking with specificity and skill has never seemed more important to me than it does at this moment. It's what's between us and chaos. […] We have to move toward specificity, intelligence, facts, proof, and mutual affection. […] We really are large, and really do contain multitudes. But I think it all has to start with a kindly presence of mind, and the aspiration to affection for others. (qtd. in Domestico 2017)

Considering that Saunders expressly takes an ethical approach to his work, how does the ethical encounter occur in "Puppy", and how is that transformed by the affect of shame? Bewes ("Call to Intimacy", 2011) argues that:

> To feel shame is to feel implicated in, or condemned to, forms of representation and understanding that one does not recognise as one's own. (5)

As an ethical encounter, shame is a flashpoint of human interconnectivity, yet also of disconnection.[6] I argue that Saunders uses this emotional flashpoint to both create an ethical encounter between the text and the reader, but also to problematise any easy identification of one moral position over another. The shame encounters within the text deliberately function as a disruption of communication, as much as they provide an ethical encounter, as set out by Bewes in *Postcolonial Shame*:

> Shame is "a complex that arises precisely with the writing itself. Shame arises from an incommensurability between my own experience and myself as reflected back to me in the eyes of another – an incommensurability that is materialised precisely in my writing." (41)

Saunders' "Puppy" enacts Bewes' conundrum of the "forms of representation and understanding that one does not recognise as one's own" by ensuring that the two main characters fail to understand each other.

"Puppy" concerns itself with a failure to communicate and the structure of the text itself performs that failure between Marie and Callie. There are many crossed lines of communication in the text: multiple failures to connect between Marie and her children, between Callie and her husband, but most significantly between Marie and Callie. Jeff Turpentine (2013) asserts that the story's treatment of the failures of communication is a political choice: "in which the prism of class so distorts one woman's vision of another that empathy is out of the question." Neeper, whose essay ""To Soften the Heart": George Saunders, Postmodern Satire, and Empathy" (2016) also reads "Puppy" in a political framework, argues that:

[6] Dina Mendoca and Susana Cadilha refer to shame, following Bernard Williams's concept, as a "thick emotion", referring to its richness and complexity of affect, in "Bernard Williams and the concept of shame: What makes an emotion moral?" See the introduction to their essay on p99.

> "Puppy" […] is more decidedly about class antagonisms between the self-assurances of the middleclass and ostensibly lurid spectacle of the underclass as manifested in the story by an odious act of apparent parental neglect. (289)

Her reading of "Puppy" in the context of Saunders' body of work is that "Saunders's fiction only intends to place us in proper relation to our flawed fellow humans" (287). Neeper locates the ethical encounter in "Puppy":

> […] given Saunders's moral vision, [it] is for readers to strive to attain a beneficent receptivity that can somehow make allowances for the flawed but guileless acts that often motivate human behaviour. (291-292)

I take a slightly different view to Turpentine and Neeper. They emphasise the political nature of the story, while I am concerned with Saunders' use of shame as the focus of the ethical encounter. This is an endeavour which I believe is executed within the structure of the text, as an encounter between the reader and the story using shame as its locus, as well as within the narrative itself. I consider that Saunders creates such a close point of view for each narrator in the text that the reader not only observes these failures to connect, but to an extent also takes part in them. This interpretation has something in common with Alex Millen's reading of Saunders' fiction in his essay "Affective Fictions: George Saunders and the Wonderful-Sounding Words of Neoliberalism":

> In this kind of emotional exchange, not one of investment and return, the transaction is open-ended. It does not leave us feeling affirmed or satiated, but tenderized and naked. (139)

The reader experience is neither something closed off, nor contained within the confines of the narrative, but a dynamic encounter with the text itself which enables the reader to take part in the experience of the characters.

The story starts with Marie and her children travelling in the car to Callie's house, passing a cornfield and remarking on its perfect beauty, ending with Callie in that same cornfield, killing a puppy. Saunders structures the story in a deceptively simple four sections of

alternating points of view between Marie and Callie. As Saunders remarks on his own approach to storytelling:

> If you take one position and then run around the table and assume the other, the truth lies somehow in the juxtaposition of the two things. (Saunders and Miller 32)

The structural treatment of Callie and Marie in "Puppy" displays this approach exactly. Note that Saunders believes the truth lies in *juxtaposition*, not in some ideal 'median' point of view. The reader never experiences a moment where the women's points of view align, neither through their interior thoughts unconsciously matching, nor from an overarching narratorial function. The juxtaposition of their thoughts and experience is all the reader may use to judge (or otherwise) these women.

Failed communication, failed connection, from the very opening of the story, foreshadows the failure of Marie and Callie to connect. The story's structure supports this lack of connection: the reader is plunged into two very distinct minds which will never be formally merged within the text. Failures to connect also brings the theatre of the cornfield into play, as a gothic romantic scene imagined by Marie, yet also the actual arena for slaughter at the end of the story:

> "Whenever I see a field like that, guys?" she said. "I somehow think of a haunted house!"
> "Slicing knife! Slicing knife!" Josh shouted. ("Puppy")

The opening scene reinforces the failed communication between all the characters in the story. Marie attempts to communicate her romantic vision of the cornfield, only for her son Josh to continue playing his game, "Slicing knife!" and Abbie to totally ignore her. Marie's image of the haunted house belies her own aesthetics of the "perfect field of corn". The cornfield is not just a beautiful example of nature (ironically juxtaposed by Saunders with the highway and the remodelled McDonalds, rather than Marie's imagined haunted house), but it is the location where a helpless puppy will be killed by another mother. Marie's attempt to romanticize the experience is subverted by Callie's act.

As autodiegetic narrators, Marie and Callie never coincide in the text; their point of view is always their own (they self-narrate) and no overarching narrator functions to link their experiences, or to steer the reader to an interpretation or a preferred point of view. Without an external narrator to guide the reader in any direction when encountering Marie and Callie, Saunders relies on the reader's close identification with each character in turn. Such a strategy solicits a close connection between the reader and each character, but also allows Saunders to set up certain expectations for Marie and Callie, and then to subvert these as the story develops. It is a textual enactment of the assumptions Marie and Callie make regarding other characters within the story, involving the reader in the very misapprehensions made by the two narrators. When they fail to connect to each other's point of view, so does the reader.

To begin with, Marie imagines the trip to collect the puppy with her children "like friends, like college friends on a road trip, sans pot, ha ha ha!" The line sets up Marie as a potentially stereotypical middle-class mother who wants to be a friend to her children, encouraging the assumption that she is also one with insufficient boundaries. This is intensified by the later information that Josh is given to goosing her with his GameBoy and "they'd shared a good laugh when he'd accidentally knocked off her glasses." The text initially encourages the reader to consider Marie as a cosseted, cosseting, aspirant to a romanticised mode of living, which in turn proposes an ironic distance from Marie. Neeper's reading of Marie follows this point: "Marie is repulsed by the filth and disorder […] but smugly she also comforts herself by paternalistically judging "that what this really was, was deeply sad" (290). Neeper considers Marie smug and "paternalistic" at this point in the narration. However, I argue that Saunders has, prior to this, given the reader an insight into why Marie thinks this way, which encourages more sympathy for her. We see Marie's pretensions and her middle-class parenting angst and, if that were all that we could see, we would judge Marie more harshly than we do at the finish. But, towards the end of the first section, Saunders presents the reader with Marie's darker thoughts:

> At least she'd never left one of them standing in a blizzard for two hours after a junior-high dance. At least she'd never drunkenly snapped at one of them, "I hardly consider you college material." At least she'd never locked one of them in a closet (a closet!) while entertaining a literal ditchdigger in the parlor. ("Puppy")

The cutting remarks are Marie's memories of her own mother, allowing the reader to encounter a Marie whose background begins to explain her current romanticising of family life. Bewes has an appropriate remark for Marie at this point in the story: "[…] shame may be neither invoked nor transcended without incurring further shame" ("The Call to Intimacy" 8). Shame has followed Marie from her childhood into adulthood, despite her best efforts.

Marie's shame-tinged memories inform our understanding of her inability to connect with Callie in the following Callie-narrated section: Marie identifies Callie with her own mother, against whom she has unresolved anger and resultant feelings of shame. I see a Foucauldian structure to Marie's inability to connect with Callie. The story performs a making visible of Marie's inner motivations in a way that operates similarly to Foucault's function of the mirror in the painting *Las Meninas* as described in *The Order of Things* (1970):

> The mirror provides a metathesis of visibility that affects both the space represented in the picture and its nature as representation: it allows us to see, in the centre of the canvas, what in the painting is of necessity doubly invisible. (9)

Without our privileged position as readers able to experience Marie's thoughts, we might remain as judgemental of Marie as she is of Callie. It is an ironic position but, in "Puppy", one that also enacts for the reader the position that Marie and Callie find themselves in, unable to imagine the interior life of the other.

Newton formulates ethics in narrative "as relationship and human connectivity" (259). Yet Marie and Callie's positions are expressly opposite: Marie indulges her children, Callie chains hers up to a tree; Marie drives a "nice car" while Callie is proud of herself for having "sixty [dollars] hidden away"; Marie's husband is loving and genial ("Ho HO!" is the main

phrase by which the reader encounters him), while Callie's husband "when she got too smart-assed he would do this hard pinching thing on her arm while waltzing her around the bedroom"[7]. Their experiences are opposite, but Saunders privileges neither. Saunders takes a story in which the ethical encounter, the shame encounter, is complicated and subverted both for the characters and the reader.

The experience of shame in the story focuses on failures of connection. Conversely, Pamela Fox (1994), writes that the experience of shame is a connecting process:

> The dual experiences of exposure and vulnerability, which are part and parcel of the shame dynamic, not only wound; they aid in the production of self-knowledge, community, and social critique. (16)

To experience shame is to take part in a process that produces self-knowledge, community and social critique. "Puppy" uses the function of shame partly in alignment of Fox's analysis, but only in respect to social critique. The aspects of community and self-knowledge are expressly excluded in "Puppy". I return to Bewes' statement that "Shame and writing are coterminous" (23) as I argue that Saunders' enactment of shame creates gaps in the text. Shame in this story is not located where the reader might at first expect. Callie is in the politically structured role of the shamed: the bad housekeeper ("and one-two-three-four plucked up four *dog turds* from the rug"), the bad mother ("this muddy simple boy tethered like an animal"), the unspoken fact of her poverty exhibited by the chaotic house she lives in. Neeper's analysis of the discovery of Bo tethered in the backyard encourages a shame reading towards Callie:

> The scene appals surely. Saunders tempts readers to automatically condemn a character like Callie, who is so ruthless as to keep "this muddy simple boy tethered like an animal."

[7] All quotes are taken from George Saunders. "Puppy". *The New Yorker*, 28th May 2007. https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2007/05/28/puppy-2. Accessed 26 March 2020.

> […] The necessarily judgemental aspect of satire is evoked but then undermined [by the reader's awareness of Callie's inner motivations]. […] Clearly self-serving, Callie reasons, "there was plenty for him to do back there. A yard could be a whole world. Like her yard when she was a kid." (291)

Neeper rightly alludes to the shocking nature of Marie's discovery of Bo and allows that Saunders' use of Callie's first-person narration undermines the move to judgement of her as "ruthless". But Neeper then continues that judgement herself, by characterising Callie's rationale for her actions as "self-serving". I disagree with this interpretation of Callie's reasoning; I read it as genuinely flowing from Callie's concept of love, which she states at the end of the story: "Love was liking someone how he was and doing things to help him get better." I argue that Saunders' ethical encounter with Callie and the reader allows a much more generous interpretation of Callie's motivations than "self-serving". Saunders states he likes to "run around to the other side of the table" (Turpentine 2020) when presenting points of view and I contend that this approach invites acceptance of each point of view as ultimately sincere. Saunders is not framing an argument, in the light of a debater arguing the toss, but presenting a genuinely held position. In my argument, Callie thinks she is providing Bo with an equivalent to what she had as a child, a yard as a world, and I will discuss this in more detail below.

While I consider Neeper is at cross purposes with her analysis of "Puppy" here, she is following the text's invitation to take part in the failed emotional engagements of the characters. Within the story itself, communication is almost always at cross purposes, including the impulse of shame. When Marie decides not to take the puppy, it is during Callie's narration. Callie accepts Marie refusing the puppy: "one really shouldn't possess something if one wasn't up to properly caring for it", but completely fails to understand the implied rebuke. There is no indication she feels any shame before the shocked and judging gaze of Marie. Callie remains unaware that Marie thinks of her as "white trash" whose "cruelty and ignorance just

radiated from her fat face". Callie exhibits only confusion for a short while, but then turns her mind to the more pressing problem of what to do with the unwanted puppy. Given the apparent lack of shame event in the narrative, is it possible that shame has become something unable to be contained within this text? Bewes asks the same question in his essay "The Call to Intimacy and the Shame Effect" (2011):

> Given the non-instantiability of the shame event – its location in the interstices of experience and representation - how is it possible to write about shame in a work of literature? […] Is shame iterable? (9)

I argue that the iteration of shame is made through an absence or break within the story, as I explore in the following excerpts.

It is in Marie's memories that Saunders' story performs scenes of shame. The first such scene is slightly distanced: the childhood "memory" of Marie's parents' behaviour around grocery shopping is a fantasy based on her knowledge of her parents' characters. In the third section of the text, Marie returns to her memories of her mother's neglect, but this time the experience becomes much more immediate:

> She remembered coming out of the closet to find her mother's scattered lingerie and the ditchdigger's metal hanger full of orange flags. She remembered waiting outside the junior high in the bitter cold, the snow falling harder, as she counted over and over to two hundred, promising herself each time that when she reached two hundred she would begin the long walk back –
>
> God, she would have killed for just one righteous adult to confront her mother, shake her, and say, "You idiot, this is your child, your child, you're – " ("Puppy")

The anger rising in Marie determines the pace of the language: disparate memory sentences begin to lengthen, ending with an unfinished run-on sentence in which Marie's rage chokes her voice. The reader is no longer presented with a judgemental middle-class mom, but dives

down into the childhood of a neglected girl. At this point, Newton's question regarding narrative ethics becomes relevant:

> How is reading characters in a book like reading persons in life? or conversely, how is "facing" outside fiction like its counterpart within? – should [a text] set before us two separate modes of intersubjective access, which is either solicited or denied. (284)

Saunders solicits intersubjective expectations with his autodiegetic narrators, Marie and Callie: in the passage above the text invites us to experience Marie's neglect and to connect it to both Bo and to Callie. But the wider structure of the story and the narrative within it, disrupt and deny the characters' experience of human connection (Newton's "intersubjective access"). Marie's anger at her own mother is directed to the mother immediately in front of her; it is to *Callie* Marie wants to say "You idiot, this is your child, your child, you're – ". The break in the sentence brings the reader back to the affective shame break Marie experienced. Bewes asserts that "Shame is the shame of *being*" (*Postcolonial Shame* 24). The substance of shame is fundamentally a gap, an absence, an impossibility (39). Marie can never understand Callie while Callie represents Marie's own mother. Callie, meanwhile, will never understand Marie's motivations but is nonetheless profoundly affected by them. The shame encounter expresses the possibility, via the stripping bare of the ego, to reveal that we rely on others. Self-knowledge comes at the cost of knowing that, in the ethical encounter with another, we are for the other before we are for ourselves.[8] Saunders turns this encounter into something darker: by refusing the puppy, Marie pushes Callie into the act of killing. Zlatan Filipovic writes that "shame appears to be a concern for my being alone and yet it is only by virtue of another that the intimacy of this concern is revealed to me" (111). In the text, shame functions to

[8] Filipovic follows Emmanuel Levinas' construction of shame as shame as an ethical event, in which the individual confronts their own dependence and attachment to others. See "Towards an Ethics of Shame" (2017).

intimately connect Marie and Callie in the death of the puppy, but they can never make that intimate connection of understanding each other.

Saunders embeds the lack of connection, and an ironic awareness of the reader's potential yearning for connection, through Callie's son Bo. The role of Bo is to personify failure to connect, most clearly with Marie as she leaves the house:

> The boy came to the fence. If only she could have said to him, with a single look, *Life will not necessarily always be like this. Your life could suddenly blossom into something wonderful. It can happen. It happened to me.*
> But secret looks, looks that conveyed a world of meaning in which subtle blah blah blah – that was all bullshit. ("Puppy")

A look, a moment of communication imagined by Marie in a romantic literary construction, is immediately undercut by her second thought: it's bullshit. This is the only swearing in the whole story: it is more shocking for it coming from the consciously bowdlerising Marie. Saunders draws awareness to the limits of the ethical encounter of shame. Marie's "look" at Bo ends her part in the story and it is "all bullshit". Rejecting the proposed ethical encounter, Marie chooses instead practical action: a call to a social worker. Marie provides Bo with something she never had: intervention by an adult in her chaotic childhood. Marie has given Bo what *she* wanted, but can the reader be entirely sure that it is what *he* needs? Marie is connecting with her younger self, not Bo.

In the closing paragraphs of the story, Saunders again subverts Marie's choice, that reaction to an ethical encounter. He ends the story with Callie's point of view, thinking about how the solution she had found for Bo was perfect. Saunders uses a touching, even uplifting, rhetorical device to end the story:

> Who was it thought up that idea, the idea that had made today better than yesterday? Who loved him enough to think that up? Who loved him more than anyone else in the world loved him?
>
> Her. (“Puppy”)

The thrice repetition of Who, calls for the answer: “Her”. This “fat mother” with her “thick head” believes that she has made Bo’s life better, just as Marie believes calling the social worker will make Bo’s life better. By ending with “Her.”, Saunders leaves the emotional weight with Callie, calling into question Marie’s practical stance that connection is “blah blah bullshit”. The two stances are presented side by side, one potato, two potato, and if the reader is seeking a guide as to which is better, Saunders will not comply. The separation of Marie and Callie, highlighted through their interactions with Bo, lead us back to Newton:

> The profoundest meaning of narrative ethics, then, may be just this sheer fact of limit, of separateness, of boundary. It engages us, it places claims upon us, not exactly as life and persons do, but similarly, and with similar ethical consequences. (284)

Ultimately, in “Puppy”, the reader is presented with the impossibility of truly encountering another person. Shame, in this fiction, makes material the tension between content and form. This story is about boundaries and separateness and it executes these within the structure of the text. Relating stories enacts relationships between writer and reader, between reader and character. Saunders pushes the limits of human connectivity: the failure of connection is the failure of one person to fully understand another. This is the limit of the ethical encounter and “Puppy”, in its structure and its narrative, performs that limit.

Chapter 3: Reading Shame in "Look At Your Game, Girl" by Kristen Roupenian

"Look At Your Game, Girl", published in 2019, is included in *You Know You Want This*, the first collection of short stories by Kristen Roupenian. In 2018, Roupenian found a wide audience with the publication of her short story "Cat Person" in The *New Yorker*, a story about a brief, unsatisfactory, sexual relationship. As a story it "went viral"[9], cementing her association in the public consciousness with the "Me Too" movement. The collection title, *You Know You Want This*, plays on that association, one which, in poet Kathryn Maris's opinion on Roupenian's work, is "saturated with irony and poignancy" (*TLS* 2019). As noted by Maris:

> Bizarre role reversals and episodes of boundary-crossing seem symptomatic not only of an outer world gone haywire but of a nuanced, shadowy human condition. (*TLS* 2019)

Reviewing the collection in the *New Statesman*, Sarah Ditum describes Roupenian as:

> […] a horror writer, bone-deep and red-blooded. Her horrors, like the horrors of Shirley Jackson or Janet Frame, are grounded in sharp emotional veracity, but there is no shame or squirming about her genetic inheritance. (43)

Nevertheless, "Look At Your Game, Girl" plays with aspects of shame in an interesting way. My analysis considers the intersubjective and structural considerations of shame as encountered in this story. In short, do the ethics of shame and the ethics of narrative converge in short stories and, if so, how is that enacted in this particular text?

[9] Anon, "Who is Cat Person?", *The Sunday Times*. 13 May 2018, pp18 – 20.

In framing this enquiry I draw from the recent works of Kaye Mitchell: *Writing Shame* (2019), and Bewes' *The Event of Postcolonial Shame* (2011), both of which take shame as a useful tool to interrogate the act of writing and reading narratives. Following my analysis of shame in Saunders, in which shame performs a disruptive break in the narrative, here I take as my particular point of reference Mitchell's construction of shame:

> Shame's slipperiness is such that it frequently eludes and foxes attempts to represent it; its contagious quality means that the reader cannot help but be affected/infected by it; its persistence, and the very important roles that it plays in subjectivation, socialisation, civilisation and individuation, mean that it is not so easily dispelled. (28)

The persistence of shame and its role in "subjectivation, socialisation, civilisation and individuation" is what I analyse in "Look At Your Game, Girl".

Mitchell's work is expressly focused on gendered shame: "even successful performances of femininity involve and invite shame, for femininity is (in a way that masculinity is not) a shamed state to start with" (247). This definition is particularly useful in the consideration of Roupenian's work, who herself frequently centres her short fiction around women experiencing or encountering shame.[10] For both Mitchell and Roupenian shame and sexuality, shame and being female, shame and growing up interrelate in a complex which amounts to shame being identified as female, and to be female is to be shame(d). Bewes' reading of shame in postcolonial narratives allies with Mitchell in respect of the "othering" of shame. His interpretation is that:

> A work that affects us with shame is a work that cannot be contained in a mere reading; something else, some event is taking place that is not reducible to the personality writing,

[10] Roupenian's characters frequently allude to shame or shameful experiences, such as the narrator of "Cat Person", the narrator of "Bad Boy", her boyfriend and their friend-turned-sex-slave, all of whom remain significantly anonymous. Anonymity is conflated with shame in the confessional "Death Wish" in which the unnamed narrator describes a sexual encounter during which his partner asks to be kicked and beaten and he complies.

> nor to the personality reading, nor to the historical circumstances in which the text was composed, nor the events it depicts, nor to any combination of these. (22)

The consideration of shame by both Mitchell and Bewes productively engages with the way in which shame is not simply something that happens within a narrative, or to a reader of that text, but is itself part of the construction of writing.

"Look at Your Game, Girl" centres around a twelve-year-old girl called Jessica and her encounter with a man at the skateboard park where she hangs out after school. The man attempts to persuade Jessica to meet him at midnight one night, but Jessica resists and later finds out that, on the night they were to meet, a girl her age has been abducted and killed. It is later discovered that this man is not the murderer, but the story ends on Jessica's inability, throughout her life, to fall asleep before midnight has passed. As fiction writer Tony Tulathimutte notes in his review, "In 'Look at Your Game, Girl', a preteen girl is approached by a threatening drifter; the violence we anticipate does occur, but not to the person we think it would" (56). I disagree. Jessica is subjected to a psychic violence embedded in the construction of the narrative world around her. In reading this story, I bear in mind Roupenian's own account in "The Uneasy Uplift of The Testaments", of reaching adolescence in the 1990s:

> When I first read *The Handmaid's Tale*, the world was in the midst of a huge social experiment: If we just *told* girls that sexism was over, would it somehow turn out to be true? Growing up as a (rich, white) girl in the 1980s and '90s was to be the target of a mind-blowing amount of propaganda related to girlhood: Being a girl was great and fun and sparkly and magic and a superpower and also completely ordinary and normal and nothing to worry about at all. In my experience, this method was fantastically effective up until I hit adolescence, at which point the gap between these stories and the reality I was living came pretty close to driving me insane. (2019)

"Look At Your Game, Girl" raises interesting questions about the socialisation of young women simultaneously as sexual objects and as victims while addressing the "insanity" of living under

such conditions. The structure of "Look At Your Game, Girl" mirrors this socialisation by concurrently particularising Jessica's encounter and drawing attention to the universality of the experience. In my analysis, the affect/effects of shame as part of that socialisation to sexual-victimhood are problematised through the narrative structure, as I shall consider below.

In considering Roupenian's writing of shame, I draw on Mitchell's explicit connection between ethics and both shame and literary criticism:

> It suggests that the writing of shame does both the work of exposure and (automatically, necessarily) the work of critique – indeed, on this understanding, exposure just is critique, and the writing of shame just is an admirable ethical and political act, whether or not it is presented as such. (27)

Mitchell remains sceptical about the easy conflation here of "admirable" with "ethical and political" and I concur. Shame, for Mitchell and for Bewes, is not something that is easily assimilated into a political or redemptive narrative. For Bewes, "shame is an event of writing, which means that it is never contained or exhausted by interpretation, nor even by its representation in the work" (15). Bewes and Mitchell encounter shame both as an affect and as an ethical encounter which disrupts the very act of writing. To write about shame, or with shame, is to disrupt or destroy the writing itself. I agree with Bewes' claim that "the ethical appears as a permanent *rendering inadequate* of form" (19) and my reading of "Look At Your Game, Girl" will attempt to elucidate that position. Taking Mitchell's view my reading of this short fiction will attempt:

> a more nuanced understanding of the complex relations between shame and gendered subjectivity. It is alert to the pleasures as well as the pitfalls of writing shame, and to *the way that shame might infect the writing itself, might be in the writing, rather than simply what the writing is about.* [my emphasis] (29)

I will consider the use of popular romantic tropes within the text and analyse how Roupenian problematises these in order to disrupt the reader's expectations of the story and implicate the reader in the shame "infection" Mitchell identifies.

The title of the story, "Look At Your Game, Girl", establishes from the start that this is a narrative concerned with framing female experience. The girl of the title is Jessica but, throughout the story, the drifter "Charlie" never asks her name; he refers to her only as "girl", while Jessica never asks for his name either. The removal of the primary characters' proper names from the narrative suggests that there is a universality to their relationship: the reader is invited to consider that their relationship stands in for all male-female relationships. The title is either an exhortation or an admonition to Jessica (and by implication to all women) to look at y*our* game. The framing of the narrative suggests it is both. Responsibility is being assigned to Jessica by the title of the story, although it is unclear, initially, what this responsibility might be and to whom. What is this "game"? Is this the game of male-female relationships, or is it rather the great game of life, and why is it Jessica's responsibility to maintain? The narratorial and implied authorial voices remain silent on this question, a silence which suggests that the responsibility is a given, a fact of life, rather than something particular to this narrative. During Charlie and Jessica's first meeting it is revealed that the title of the story is also the title of a song written by the mass-murderer Charles Manson (which results in "Charlie" being assigned this name by Jessica). In this context the title of the story takes on a sinister aspect, as does the framing of the admonition as a fact of life. The world of the story is named, and thus to an extent created, from the imagination of a mass murderer. Knowing that it is Charles Manson telling Jessica (and the reader) to "look at your game", makes the exhortation-admonition sinister. Responsibility for one's actions is being imposed by a notorious killer, taking a position of adult authority in relation to the child protagonist of the story.

Time in the story is used to contextualise, connect, and dissociate. The story begins with a list of events relating Jessica's experience to acts of violence:

> Jessica was twelve years old in September 1993 – twenty-four years after the Manson murders, five years after Hillel Slovak died of a heroin overdose, seven months before Kurt Cobain shot himself in the head, and three weeks before a man with a knife kidnapped Polly Klass at a sleepover in Petaluna, California. (13)

Jessica's age, on the cusp of puberty, is contextualised in relation to a mass murder (which is later revealed as the hinge on which Jessica's experience in the story swings), a drug overdose, a suicide and an abduction-murder. The litany is both specific and universal. To live in this world, implies the narrator, is to live in a time of violent death.

The narration of the story is in the past tense, with moments in which Jessica's thoughts are narrated in the present, most notably during her midnight vigil over her family. The story's structure presents itself as a narration of past events told with simple introductions to sections: "The first time"; "Another week went by"; "After dinner"; "Forty-eight hours later"; "Months went by"; "After she went away to college"; "And yet, long after she had married". There is a dispassionate tone to this framing of the events; by placing events in the past (once upon a time), the narrative works to remove some of the immediacy of Jessica's dangerous position. The story becomes a coming of age story, one in which narrowly avoiding a possibly violent sexual encounter is treated as a rite of passage. I will return to the tone of the story, but at this point I will consider the presentation of Jessica's relationship with "Charlie" in the context of this rite of passage.

The centre of this story is the relationship between Jessica and the young man in the skate park, whom she calls "Charlie", although his real name is never revealed. I have suggested that the tone and temporal framing of the narrative suggest a ritual, emblematic

nature to Jessica's experience. When considering the presentation of Jessica's relationship to Charlie, I take Mitchell's note that:

> […] the formal challenges and disruptions of presenting shame in literature and attends to the functions and effects of shame within and beyond particular texts. […] the shame that attends – inhabits, is associated with, is provoked by and sometimes inhibits – writing itself. (24)

Rites of passage are intensely bound in shame: the shame of being a child when it is time to become an adult, the fear of shame in failing to become that adult, to fail the passage, and the shame of shame itself. Rites of passage traditionally have an element of violence to them, strictly controlled by ceremony. In this narrative, the threat of violence is an integral part of the rite, but there is no outside authority to control that violence. Their first meeting embeds the possibility of violence into Jessica's relationship to Charlie, a violence foreshadowed by the music she takes to the park, *Blood Sugar Sex Magic*[11], and several references to blood or bleeding by the skateboarders as they fall:

> She caught him staring at her from the other side of the playground. […] When he saw her looking at him, he winked, pointed his thumb and finger at her like a gun, and fired. (14)

On the surface the story presents a type of "meet cute" or trope of romance in which eyes meet across a crowded room, but the gaze of both characters here is problematic. Jessica notes his "stare", a potentially aggressive construction of "gaze"; he responds by emphasising his gaze (the wink) and at the same time increases the stakes by making a quasi-phallic gesture. I connect this initial encounter to Mitchell's gloss on Giorgio Agamben:

[11] Jessica's music choices ground the story in a specific point in time but they also enhance the aura of violence around her: The Red Hot Chilli Peppers CD she carries expressly refers to blood and sex, both present in the narrative; Guns and Roses' *Use Your Illusion* suggests deception and secrecy; and *Nevermind* again reminds the reader that suicide haunts the music of Nirvana.

> we are subjects only in relation to others, whose recognition grants us status as subjects, to whose gaze we are *subjected*; we achieve what 'sovereignty' we have only through that relationality, recognition and subjection." (5)

At the start of their relationship (and the relating of their relationship via the narrative), Jessica is not only subjected to the gaze of Charlie but shot at. This assumption by Charlie of her availability for penetration, whether sexually or violently, is consistent with his repeated refusal of Jessica's assertions or world view:

> "Don't be mad," he said.
> "I'm not mad."
> "I think you are. I think you're mad at me." (16)
> […]
> "Don't do that," she said. "Don't bring me anything."
> He laughed. His eyes were very, very blue. "I'll bring it to you tomorrow," he said. (17)

At each point, Jessica's opinions are invalidated as Charlie repeatedly asserts his agency over hers. It demonstrates the Roupenian world construction, which is calculated to drive adolescent girls "mad". I connect this invalidation of Jessica's agency to the effect of shame, as it obliterates the individual while at the same time constructing that individual again in a new light:

> In shame, the subject has no other content than its own disorder, its own oblivion as a subject. This double movement, which is both subjectification and desubjectification, is shame. (Agamben 106)

Charlie overrides (overwrites) Jessica, consigning her subjectivity to oblivion. He is transferring the shame experience onto Jessica while manipulating that experience to his own ends. Again, Roupenian introduces a queasy element of romance into their exchanges, as Charlie's grooming of Jessica escalates:

> "I'm not coming here at midnight. I'm twelve! Are you crazy?"
> "Midnight it is, then," he said, chucking her under the chin. (21)

The narrative heavily implicates the reader at this point in the story, assuming an adult reader who has the experience and emotional distance (a distance mirrored in the narratorial voice) to observe Charlie's manipulation of Jessica, his taking advantage of her inexperience. Natalie Edwards, writing in *The Female Face of Shame*, explains this unnerving implication of the reader into the shame experience when discussing Annie Ernaux and Christine Angot's autofictional[12] documenting of the shameful and shameless. It is relevant to this moment in Roupenian's narrative, as Edwards asks:

> [w]hy put this out there to be read? Why try to shock, embarrass or disturb one's reader, repeatedly and relentlessly? The shame becomes the negotiation between reader and writer [. . .]. Each implicates the reader as an other in their story of shame, as the reader is the other who makes the shame exist: the spectator who enables the shaming mechanism. (70)

Earlier in the text, the narrative plays out Edwards' reading of shame as implicating the reader. When watching Charlie listen to her CD, Jessica notes:

> It was embarrassing, how intensely he got into the music, and after a while, she found she couldn't look at his face, so she looked at his feet. (16)

The narrator appears to be setting out Jessica's thoughts but, with so little distance between narrator and subject at this point, it is also the narrator who comments: "it was embarrassing". Jessica becomes the spectator enabling the shaming mechanism. Shame classically rejects 'facing' the other, but here comically averts Jessica's gaze to Charlie's bare feet.

[12] "Autofictional" is the term used by Edwards and Mitchell to describe creative works written in the first person which cross the boundaries of autobiography, memoir, essay and fiction to create a work which is all of these, and yet something different.

The use of the narratorial voice implicates shame in the narrative. The story uses a third person narrator who has knowledge of Jessica's inner thoughts but of no other character in the story. This suggests that it may be Jessica's voice as an adult, removed in time and affect from the events of the past: "Over the weekend, she went to her mean friend Courtney's house and drank for the first time" (17). The "mean friend" is a description of a child by a child. At other points the narrator may be simply a distinct entity who has knowledge of Jessica's thoughts: "The skateboarders at the park were older than she was, thirteen or fourteen maybe" (14). The uncertainty of "maybe" could belong to Jessica or a third person. In either event, Jessica herself remains somewhat mysterious:

> She opened her mouth to say something like, *Aren't you too old to be talking to me*, or, *Don't you know this place is for kids?* but instead she heard herself say, "There's a secret track on it." (15)

The narrator does not explain Jessica's change of tack and the reader is left to infer their own interpretation. Unable to articulate her desires, Jessica's character is mysterious even to herself. This is another trope of the rite of passage, in which the coming of age is a route to self-knowledge. At points the emotional distance between the narrator and Jessica is notable:

> She thought about him swaying to the song she'd played for him […] She thought about the cassette tape, still buried deep in her bag[..] She thought about what would happen if she did go out to the park. (23)

Here the narrator flatly sets out Jessica's thoughts, creating a play of distance and intimacy in the text. The matter of fact tone of the narrator establishes an environment in which the horror and violence of the world is accepted, even expected.

Shame is present in the story through the implied violence of the world view: the reader is presented with the beginnings of an underage relationship at best and, at worst, the

potential for rape and death, both shame experiences in modern culture. The text repeatedly uses imagery of violence and sexuality, creating a world in which sex and violence irrupt into normal life. On the first page, Jessica thinks of her "mean friends" in almost sexual terms:

> She could spend time with the mean friends only in short, thrilling bursts before she'd start feeling exhausted and sore, and then she'd have to retreat into the comfort of her band friends to recover. (13)

The narrator remains silent on whether Charlie is grooming Jessica, while the narrative plays out its trope of romance in which the romantic hero wins the girl by never taking no for an answer. The presence of the shame function complicates the text, as Jessica's private thoughts suggest that the sexual desire implied in Charlie, is also in her. She tells Charlie she likes *Guns and Roses*:

> The man's eyes were flat and blue and they disappeared into the folds of his face when he laughed. "Yeah," he said. "I bet you do."
>
> The way he said this made her think maybe he did know – not the way she felt about the band, but how she felt about Axl: about the way his ripped T-shirts clung to his shoulders, and his silky sheet of reddish-gold hair. (15)

Following this exchange, Charlie puts his dirty thumb into her mouth. It is a physical enactment of the silencing Charlie imposes on Jessica and she speaks around it rather than recoiling in disgust. Roupenian herself has commented on this approach as part of her writing practice:

> When I used to introduce myself as a writer, I'd say I write horror stories. The push and pull of revulsion and attraction is what the book revolves around.[13]

The text implicates Jessica in her own shameful desires, creating a space in which romance, shame, rites of passage and sexual desire converge on the page. The text attempts to hold

[13] Anon, "Who is Cat Person?", *The Sunday Times*. 13 May 2018, pp18 – 20.

these competing elements on the same emotional level, an attempt which causes unease in the implicated reader, escalating to a possible shame break. If Jessica can feel desire (possibly unwittingly), then the reader may experience the double shame of simultaneously desiring an underage sexual experience and disgust at recognizing that desire. As with Saunders, Roupenian's fiction creates a condition in which shame is an inevitable materialisation of the tension between content and form.

The narratorial voice makes no comment on Charlie's technique for persuading (coercing) Jessica into meeting him, yet I read a sense of unease pervading the text. In an escalation of Jessica's negation by Charlie, he literally overwrites her every utterance, creating a condition of inevitability, certain that Jessica will indeed make the midnight rendezvous as he tells her to. Mitchell's note that shame sometimes inhibits writing itself plays out here, as the narrative strains to contain both elements of the story. Jessica's awareness of her desires and the danger presented by Charlie is not just that of physical violence, but the violence of negating her agency and the shame of that negation. The narrative distance implicates the reader as a passive bystander, enabling the shaming mechanism to play out in the story.

The shame encounter established in the narrative, however, is disrupted. Jessica's internal monologue that evening sets up a rhythm in which the inevitability of the meeting seems clear, made ironically concrete by her constant denial:

> She was safe. She was fine. No way was she going out to meet Charlie in the park at midnight and she was absolutely fine. (22)

The reader is invited to negate, like Charlie, Jessica's internal utterances and to believe that her denial is inauthentic. Yet the narrative breaks with the horror tradition it has been establishing at the moment in which Jessica looks at her sleeping family. Seeing their vulnerability allows Jessica to indirectly accept her own vulnerability to danger:

> She looked at her mom, with her ridiculous feathery haircut that made her look like a scared old bird, and her dad, snoring through his mustache, and her brother in his Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles pajamas. What would they think if they knew she'd been approached by some nasty-looking guy, a guy who'd shoved his filthy thumb in her mouth and thought the Manson murders were the best thing ever? Her mom and dad would be so upset. They would be *so scared.* (23)

Jessica's concern for her family allows her to reject and reframe her romanticised encounter with Charlie into a more realistic assessment of danger. Accessing her fear by imagining her parents' fear unlocks the anger Jessica feels, anger which reacts to the madness-making of the world around her. The most authentic emotion expressed in the story is Jessica's anger as she sits up until midnight in her vigil over her sleeping family (they are indirectly contrasted with the murderous Manson family). Jessica believes the vigil is protecting her family, but it is her anger which protects her: "*Fuck you, Charlie, fuck you, fuck you, fuck you*" (23). According to Tomkins, the affect of anger defeats the affect of shame.[14] Jessica's anger is correctly used to motivate her against the shame construction of the world, one which is designed to push her into accepting an inevitable meeting with Charlie. Jessica's anger is the No! to the assumption that a girl will do what a man tells her to do; she refuses the madness that would accept his construction of the world.

Jessica stays at home that night and wakes to the news story of the abduction of Polly Klaas. The narrative briskly sets out the chain of events that unfold: parental confusion, reporting to the police, interview and eventual ruling out of Charlie as a suspect. The heart of the relationship in the story turns out not to be Charlie and Jessica's relationship, but something wider:

[14] See The Tomkins Institute for a summary of the affects and their operation: "Nine affects present at birth combine to form emotion mood and personality". http://www.tomkins.org.

> Nevertheless, she continued to believe, for the rest of what remained of her childhood, that what happened to Polly and what had happened to her must somehow be connected – if not as a matter of practical fact, then by some gravitational pull that flowed deep under the surface of things. (25)

Jessica reads the separate experiences of Polly and herself in terms of a relationship: the relationship of the world to young women. The gravitational pull of the narrative drags Jessica and Polly into the same experience, despite their different endings. However, by the end of the story the young adult Jessica tells herself that her reaction to Polly's abduction was one of childish narcissism:

> After she went away to college, Jessica came to believe that this early impulse to link her own experience to Polly's had arisen from a childish self-absorption, the impulse to see herself as the center-point around which the rest of the universe revolved. (25)

The trauma is repackaged by Jessica in a moment of self-deflection as an expression of her immaturity. Unspoken by the narrator, or Jessica, lies the shame of being self-involved, of being selfish (another characteristic that women are strongly socialised against). Jessica framing her insight as narcissism is a way of avoiding the reality that the world is a dangerous place for women and girls. As Bewes states, "Shame is the shame of *being*" (34). For a woman this is doubly complicated, the shame of being irrupting into the text as a denial by the adult Jessica of the child's insight. Jessica is being self-absorbed, but she is also shamed for her very being. Older Jessica attempts to rationalise her anger as narcissism, but this itself is a turning away from the reality of the world. The lyricism of the final sentence gives emotional weight to the younger Jessica's understanding of the world:

> As her twin daughters slept peacefully in the bedroom next to hers, she would stand at her window, peering out at the vast, terrible, light-punctured night, and catch herself wondering if Charlie was still out there at the park, waiting for her to arrive. (26)

Older Jessica's inability to sleep is an acknowledgement of the vast, terrible reality in which Charlie, or men like him, are part of the condition of life for women. The terrifying narrative world of "Look At Your Game, Girl" is one in which girls and women are constantly vulnerable to being rewritten (Charlie's refusal to accept Jessica's 'no'), or entirely written over and erased (Polly's abduction and murder) by men. Roupenian has skilfully constructed a world in which the madness-making of female socialisation is evoked through the push-pull of the shame dynamic, in a story in which the text strains to contain its characters' (and its readers') desire, revulsion, and their resulting shame.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

In my opening chapter I outlined the project for this thesis: I would interrogate the presence of the affect of shame in the context of short fiction, taking the view that shame is an inevitable materialisation of the tension between content and form. In the critical portion of the thesis I read "Puppy" by George Saunders and "Look at Your Game, Girl" by Kristen Roupenian. I discussed both these works in the context of narrative theory, looking to Newton's *Narrative Ethics* for a model of reading as an ethical encounter. In my analyses of Saunders' and Roupenian's work, I outlined the shamed subjection of the protagonists of the story, but also described the ways in which the text itself writes out the shame dynamic. The shame break, characterised by Tomkins as the break between an individual and their sense of self, manifests in the texts as a disruption in the writing. In my discussion of shame and fiction, the individual and their sense of self write each other out in the work, as selfhood becomes impossible to experience.

My reading of shame in "Puppy" organised itself around Bewes' principle that the appearance of shame in narrative is an event during which the ethical encounter of reading and writing is disrupted. I argued that, in the text, shame functions to intimately connect the main protagonists, Marie and Callie, in the death of the puppy, but also disrupts their relationship, so that they never make the intimate connection of understanding each other. I established that "Puppy" concerns itself with a failure to communicate: the structure of the text itself performs that failure between Marie and Callie. During the story the reader never experiences a moment where the women's points of view align; their thoughts never unconsciously match, nor is there an overarching narratorial function. Saunders' creation of the break of shame is woven throughout the text, rendered in the structure of the work as well as described in the thoughts of the characters.

In my chapter on Roupenian I addressed the questions: do the ethics of shame and the ethics of narrative converge in short stories and, if so, how is that created in this particular text? In this chapter I take the construction of shame, as theorised by both Mitchell and Bewes, as something which productively engages with a narrative, or with a reader of that text, and conclude that the shame event, or break, is itself part of the construction of writing. I argue in this chapter that to write about shame, or with shame, is to disrupt or potentially destroy the work itself. In "Look At Your Game, Girl" I argued that the relationship between the characters of Jessica and Charlie is a performance of the wider relationship of men to women, or women to the world. Jessica is subjected to a continual negation by Charlie. In every encounter he literally overwrites her every word, a textual process that negates her autonomy as a character. Jessica's awareness of her desires and the danger presented by Charlie is not just that of physical violence, but the violence of negating her agency and the shame of that negation. In this chapter I concurred with Mitchell that shame may inhibit writing itself. That is played out in the text: the narrative strains to contain both Jessica's growing sense of agency (allowing her to defy his instructions) and the world around her which conspires to crush that agency (Charlie is a stand-in for all men). I conclude that the horrifying world of "Look At Your Game, Girl" is one in which girls and women are constantly vulnerable to the textual murder of being rewritten, reduced or negated.

In writing this thesis, I have explored a number of questions in both the critical and creative component of my work. How does shame operate in writing and how does it manifest? In my critical writing I have observed that Saunders and Roupenian's use of shame in their fiction is disruptive and dislocating. As Sheils and Walsh identify the effect of shame: it is "dislocation, displacement and dispossession, shame enacts an undoing or a becoming undone" (6). This study considers that the function of shame in writing is to create an introspective space within the text, through its disruption of form and content, opening imaginative and interpretative possibilities for the work. Saunders refers to a need to "see

human beings at or near their breaking points" in his writing (Miller 24). The function of shame within narrative acts out those breaking points in textual terms, cracking open the text to expose an imaginative space in which we are "for others before we are for ourselves" (Filipovic 111). In respect of creative writing studies, the thesis contributes a study of the ways in which the affect of shame, through the operation of the shame break in writing, can open up a space in which complex emotions collide, acknowledging the ambiguity of writing with and about shame. I consider that further analysis of shame's materialisation of the tension between content and form could extend beyond the discipline of short fiction. Bewes' work on the novels of J M Coetzee has demonstrated that the shame break can be applied to long-form fiction. A further consideration of how this process irrupts into a text could be extended to poetic forms, or to creative non-fiction, such as biography. By extending the examination of the shame break to other creative forms, my argument could lay the ground for further research into the way a text can itself write out the shame dynamic.

Shame need not be fought against or defeated, but acknowledged as a fundamental aspect of creation. In this thesis, shame is a condition of writing. I consider that shame in any text is as inescapable as the breaks between Marie and Callie in "Puppy", as inevitable as the over-writing of Jessica by Charlie in "Look at Your Game, Girl". Shame is an emotional subsidence, a textual eruption, breaking through the lines on the page to perform the break between the individual and their sense of self, between a reader, a writer and a character.

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Bridging statement: Tide Mark

"I am shattered and out of place." (Sheils and Walsh, 6)

The story which inspired this collection was told to me by my father when I was a child. I am from Jersey, one of the Channel Islands sitting just off the coast of France. It is a tiny place: nine miles by five – a speck in the ocean. This speck was occupied by German forces during World War II, the Channel Islands being the only part of the British Isles successfully invaded. Even today, German-built bunkers sit right on the edge of the coast; some are placed down on the beaches, some perch on the cliff tops of the northern coast. During WWII they were manned and equipped with anti-aircraft or tank guns. Many of these bunkers are set proud of the land they sit on, though some are buried within hillsides or cliffs. They are concrete grey, brutalist pieces of architecture and you can tell the width of the walls from the outside, several feet deep.

My father was 12 in 1960. By that time, all the German fortifications had been stripped of functional weaponry, but never sealed. One day a boy went missing on the island, a boy roughly the same age as my father. After a frantic search, his body was eventually found inside one of these bunkers. It seemed that he had slipped on the rusting ladder inside and fallen, breaking his skull. The States of Jersey finally used this as the impetus to seal up all the fortifications. Each one that remains is now inaccessible, except on particular heritage days, when the public can pay £2 to go inside. Children go free. For some time now I have wanted to write this boy's story, but each time I try, I find that I cannot. The lack of his story has become a shameful fracture in my collection, testimony to my inability to claim, or to reframe, the stories I heard growing up.

I spent many years running away from the claustrophobia of home, living in different countries and pretending that I didn't need to go back ever. But when I came to write the stories that make up the creative component of this thesis, I was settled back in Jersey and

surprised to find that this was the location I needed to write about. It is the arena for both my critical interest in shame and the place around which my creative work hinges. Jersey is an island in which the past is always present, both for myself in my own childhood memories, and also for our island society. As a tourist destination, Jersey puts great importance on history and remembrance of times past. There is a regular piece in the local newspaper, *The Jersey Evening Post*, called "*Temps Passé*", in which local photographs and newspaper reports of the past two centuries are reproduced. In the town bay sits Elizabeth Castle, a focal point for artists and tourists alike, the supposed site of Saint Helier's hermitage in 550AD and the seat of the Governor, Sir Walter Raleigh, from 1600. At the bus station, Art House Jersey has created a memorial of the 75th anniversary of the end of the Occupation. The "Face of Liberation" is a composite portrait of Barbara Jouanny, now 92, as a child in 1945 – her face is made up of photographs of the faces of contemporary islanders. My own photograph is in there somewhere, among the other thousands. Past and present continually intermingle and, in my creative enterprise, I find that adds an extra dimension to my interest in the affect of shame.

In my creative project I find that I am obsessed with the consideration that remembrance is complicated – to bring a memory to life is in some sense to recreate it, but also, necessarily, to create it anew. The past can be brought to life, but it is never the same past that was experienced. My creative project includes a working out of the idea that memory is unreliable, particularly when those memories cause shame. I ask something of Giorgio Agamben's question in relation to the same war: how can we bear to bear witness to the memory of our island's shamed subjection? The "Face of Jersey" was defaced within weeks of installation, and there was speculation as to whether this was mindless vandalism, or a symptom of something darker in the island's response to the anniversary.

The shame of the Occupation can still be read on the landscape of the island, and heard in the stories told through the generations. I grew up in a family of raconteurs, listening to stories mostly from my maternal grandmother and her sister about life under enemy rule. In

many ways, the stories in this project are a testimony to the stories I grew up with, which are located everywhere across the island. This period of history is still current in Jersey, through living memory, through museum practice and through official memorialisation. At primary school we learned how to make potato flour in memory of war time food shortages; the Jersey War Tunnels is a visitor attraction which memorialises the forced workers who died on the island, worked to death in the construction of a never-completed German underground base. There is a barn on my school friend's farm that is haunted by the ghost of a man who hanged himself before being deported to Bergen-Belsen for making a crystal radio set. Knowing and seeing are characterised as two of shame's constituent components, both of which are present in this project (Sheils and Walsh, 1).

In the creative portion of my thesis, I collect five short fictions organised around the location of Jersey. Each situation in the collection arises from the shame experience and I explore the ways in which that shame disrupts the very stories it has prompted. The first story, "Dead House", is an examination of the way place and shame interact through the character of a woman who returns to Jersey after a failed marriage. In "Recovery Position" the protagonist deals with the results of his wife's infertility and his own shame at the ending of their relationship. "The Beast" fictionalises the story of the wife of a notorious sex attacker on the island and her attempts to conceal, even from herself, knowledge of his crimes. "Nightwalker" is a story of obsession and failure in the context of the offshore finance industry. "All of my friends were there" considers the roles of silence and storytelling in a family dealing with the legacy of the Occupation. These fictions are an attempt to explore the ways in which shame and writing are coterminous.

Initially I wanted to write these stories smoothly, to tell them in the way I remember being told family tales. But there are silences to be told also. There remains an absence at the heart of this collection, a silence which articulates my own relationship to shame and to the creation of a text. I have not been able to let go of the image of that boy dying inside the

bunker, a concrete manifestation of the shame of Jersey's wartime experience, for some years now. It is the core of the story I am trying to write, time and again. A young boy, lying on his back in the dim light of the bunker, ferns crushed under his summer shoes, feeling the sea air blow in through the gun slits in the concrete and listening to the creaking bones of his skull, waiting to die.

Tide Mark – A Collection of Short Fiction

Dead House

Beaches never changed, that was what Cordelia liked about them. La Pulente looked the same now as it had when she was a child: soft pale sand, the Martello tower sitting a short swim out, Corbière lighthouse erect in the distance and the sand dunes arching at her back. The tide came in and the tide went out, repeated to the end of days. Cordelia didn't swim now. Since they came back to Jersey she'd been too busy arranging school places, finding somewhere to live, trying to find work. She kept seeing people on the streets in town that she half remembered – did she know them, or did they just look a bit like someone she used to go to school with? It was disorientating, frightening. Cordelia felt hunted.

She loved being back near the water though, even if she couldn't quite bring herself to get in it anymore. As a child Cordelia had always been the first of the family to jump in the waves, casting her clout as early as the end of April. The shock of cold water zinged through her each time she raced in and she'd loved the tingling feel on her skin afterwards, licking dried salt off her arms in the car on the way home. The beach might not have changed, but Cordelia thought maybe she had. Last time she swam at La Pulente, just the once, Cordelia couldn't shake the feeling that there was a shark lurking in the water behind her. Each black rock she swam over gave her a fright, even when she could see it clearly through the water. She knew it was silly, she knew there were no aggressive sharks in Jersey waters. But she still felt like prey when she swam out of her depth.

The tide was down. Walking the dog was the highlight of her day now. Cordelia bent down to scoop the poop Hercules had left in his wake, grunting slightly on the way back up. Hercules was skittering up to the boys, running around them in circles desperate for the next throw of the ball. She watched them: three boys and her father's dog. Ollie hunched his newly wide shoulders down into his hoodie, right hand clearly at a loose end with no phone in

it. Probably pining for whatever shoot 'em up game he'd left on at her dad's. Or was he missing his father? The younger two ran around in circles with the dog, taking turns to throw the ball. If they had tails they'd be wagging them too.

Cordelia had brought the boys back with her when her marriage broke down. Caught in the energising anger of divorce she'd promised to devote herself to her children, to bring them home and make them better. They would get through this. The boys would settle and Cordelia would be there for them. She would always be their mum. Full of kitchen table plans fuelled by pinot noir and her best friend, Cordelia decided the new start was exactly what they all needed. No more London grind, no more shoring up the wreck of her relationship, no more fighting. She wasn't going to hang around and watch James move in with that girl, that *child*. She would up sticks and start again: mature, alone but content.

The house in Ealing was being sold as part of the divorce – the lawyers wanted her to take the majority of the equity in return for leaving James' enormous pension alone. Cordelia knew it was a bad deal, but she didn't want to fight any more. Besides, she had wanted to leave London and she'd needed James to let her take the boys. She had braced herself for yet another drawn out battle, engaged in hisses and whispered insults on the stairs, in slammed doors and half-smoked cigarettes in the garden after dark. She waited for James to roar that she couldn't take his children away from him, she expected him to react like *she* would at the thought of losing her babies. But in the end there had been no fight. She told him she was going back to Jersey and taking the boys with her, and he said nothing. Nothing. The marriage was done, their family home had become a dead house, empty of love. Cordelia booked the flights that night, hands shaking on the laptop.

The boys walked past a couple of teenage girls sat on the sand, slick as seals in their shorts and crop tops, despite the slight chill in the autumn air. Cordelia watched them watching her eldest, saw Ollie pretending not to notice them watching him. It was all a display – the hair flicks, the turn of a thigh or raising of a chin, all part of the dance. Dear god, the hormones, you could smell them from here. He was too young for all that, surely? Just a little boy.

Mind you, she'd recently experienced a resurge in that department herself. Since the divorce she'd never expected to even think about sex ever again. But her body had other ideas. Or was it just her mind all along, fooled by being back in her childhood home, sleeping in her old bedroom? Teenage crushes had reasserted themselves. She found herself hunting down old movies on Netflix and watching the idols of her youth parade themselves once more in front of her. So young, so cocky, so full of – *stuff*, potential, whatever. Most of them were older than her in real life, she was now older than their on-screen selves. Did that make her a dirty old woman or not? Was this how men felt all the time? She felt an unexpected pang of sympathy for James, then drowned it beneath the surface.

They'd huddled together, the four of them, waiting at the gate at Gatwick for their flight. She promised the boys they could see their father anytime they liked: there was Skype, they could have smart phones, the flight was only forty minutes, it was nothing, quicker than the Central line across the city – please be ok, please be ok with this.

The boys were fine, surprisingly. They'd started new schools, made some friends. They enjoyed seeing more of their cousins. It was enough, for now. But was all she had to look forward to creping skin, creaking bones and a wardrobe sourced from garden centre clothes rails? Cordelia routinely turned her face from the racks of home and garden magazines showing middle-aged women 'loving their lives!' God, was this a hot flush coming on or just the usual divorce rage? Fuck off with your 'how to hide your belly/bingo wings/sagging arse'

dressing, fuck the lot of them *and* their control knickers. She'd do this on her own. Cordelia had been going to sail through the coming menopause and coast into old age like a fashionista Buddha. She would be serene – more serene than any of her other divorced friends, their emotional wounds gaping like zombies', spilling their ugly guts all over barstools or therapists' chairs. Not Cordelia: she was going to be more serene than Oprah, if only she could stop being afraid all the time. At least the air off the sea cooled her down, soothed her prickling, constant fear.

There'd been another lawyer's letter this morning. James might not have fought them leaving London, but he was making her pay for it now. Contact, access, arrangements to see the children in the holidays. The money. James wanted her to 'stop hiding from reality' and accept his legal team's 'extremely reasonable' settlement offer. Every letter on the doormat was a rip tide waiting to drag Cordelia under. She didn't have time for this. Cordelia was trying desperately to get their lives here settled, sorted, hanging on to the fact that she had done this before, she should be able to do it again now. It was all going – wrong, somehow. This wasn't a new start, it was the stale end of her old life.

It was time to get back to her father's house. Her cousin Anna was coming over with cake and family gossip – two of Anna's favourite things, as Cordelia remembered. She hadn't seen Anna in over eight years; Anna had gone through an entire relationship and had a child in that time. By the end of the afternoon Cordelia would be caught up on all the news, all the family dramas. Anna had news about Carl, the oldest of the cousins – apparently he was thinking about moving to Singapore. He'd been headhunted by a big private bank, or so Anna had told Dad. Carl had always been the success in the family; he had the drive to go after what he wanted with no hesitation, that useful touch of ruthlessness. James reminded her of Carl a bit. James had felt a little familiar to her right from the start of their relationship, though she hadn't realised what it was in him she'd been responding to until much later.

"Boys!" Cordelia called ahead, "Time to head back up the dunes!"

The boys turned and looked back at her, Hercules at Ollie's heels. For an instant, Cordelia had a sense of them as a pack – mildly hostile, ready to move together on their own terms, not hers.

"Come on! This way."

Cordelia turned up the beach to the steps leading on to the road and then the dune tracks. As long as she acted like there was no other option than to do what she said, she'd be ok. Weakness was what they sensed and reacted to. Her youngest followed first, running up to Mum with the sandy ball in his small hand, his big brother chasing after him. Ollie and Hercules stayed behind just long enough to show their independence, then raced together up the steps, overtaking the rest of the family to be the first across the road.

From high on the sandy ridge of the dunes Cordelia could see a new housing development down below. Diggers sat at angles to each other, scaffolding was up around the concrete shells of new houses. They looked smaller than she expected, but that was the way of the world now. Take a plot that had one normal sized house on it and fit two new ones into the same space. Maybe when the financial settlement was agreed she could have a look at them, assuming they hadn't been sold off-plan already. The Jersey housing market remained a bit of a mystery to her even now. Cordelia looked again across the womb-shaped bowl of the dunes. Wasn't that development where the murder house used to stand – had some developer finally razed the place to the ground? She wondered what brave souls would want to purchase that legacy. No-one who believed in ghosts, at any rate. Hadn't she and Anna been down there when they were kids, Carl too? It was the kind of stupid thing they used to do. A bit of light trespassing, hanging out in scary places. Cordelia looked across at her boys. She hoped they had more sense.

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The three cousins biked along the coast road at La Pulente, heading out to the far corner of the bay where the road rose up again to the northern cliffs. There were few houses along this part of the beach and those were mostly one storey beach houses or cottages. Anna was weaving her bike in and out of the white lines in the middle of the road. Cordelia wanted to copy her, but was too afraid of cars, so clung to the edge of the road, falling further behind.

"Carl! Let's go to the dead house."

Anna speeded up to ride alongside her brother. Carl had his rubber wolf mask hanging round his neck; Cordelia saw it catch on his chin as he looked across at Anna, her face eager. She pointed at the turning ahead and he nodded.

"OK then."

He signalled right carefully, like Cordelia had learned in cycling proficiency, and took them up one of the long lanes that bit into the scrublands. They bounced down the rutted track to a small close surrounded by trees. At the end three low houses stood, evenly spaced, all empty. The dead house was on the left, more neglected and abandoned-looking than the others. Dropping the bikes, the three stepped cautiously along its gravel drive, pitted and muddy, with deep grooves where heavy vehicles had left their tracks. Half-expecting to be caught, they waited for the shout of "Oi you, get on out of it!" that never came. The place was quiet. Nothing there but the shadows under the trees.

Carl went first, with Anna close behind him. The house looked a bit like Cordelia's home – a small bungalow – but dirtier, with black-spotted windows and chipped white stucco on the walls. Green mould crept up the stucco and the three cement steps to the front door had cracked in half top to bottom. Carl and Anna climbed the steps each side of the crack and

peered in the front room window, hands shading the sides of their faces against the glass. Cordelia stayed well back in the garden. There was just an overgrown lawn, rough and trailing hedges hemming it, and the odd bush near the house. An apple tree sat lop-sided in the middle of the lawn, the buds of apples clustering on the branches. In a month fruit would be falling off the tree and onto the ground to rot or be eaten by rats. Cordelia turned her seashells over in her pocket and looked over her shoulder, feet slowly dragging her backwards towards the bikes.

"Well?" Anna said.

They looked over at Cordelia – she didn't mind what they did, she was fine right here.

"Come on, Cordelia," Carl called, "we're going inside the dead house."

"She hasn't been here before," said Anna. "She doesn't know why it's called the dead house."

"We'll tell you inside."

Cordelia shifted her weight back and forth on her feet, humming nervously.

"Why don't we go for a swim instead?"

"The tide's out. Hurry up, will you?"

If she left, she'd have to cycle home on her own and it was a long way. And Carl and Anna would never let her come out with them again, she'd have to play with the babies forever. A ripple ran through her, cold water across sand.

"It's okay, Cordelia, we'll look after you," Anna said. She smiled at her cousin. "Really, it'll be fun."

Cordelia put her bike on the dirt and followed the others as they circled the house looking for a way in.

All the windows were closed, but the back door was black with mould and warped at the top. When Carl pulled at the handle, the door juddered open against the slats of the decking. Anna squeezed round the gap and slipped inside.

"Wow, it's filthy in here. Cool. Come and see."

Carl pulled the door a bit wider and he and Cordelia went in. The smell of the interior reached out and wrapped around their heads: mould and gloom, old air that hadn't moved in years, dirty walls specked with brown. It was the kitchen, or it had been once. Black and white square lino peeled up at different points across the floor.

Anna was already at the kitchen door, looking down the corridor. It was like she was the leader now and not Carl. Cordelia sneezed. The dust had got up her nose. Anna went on further into the house and Carl followed. Cordelia stayed as close as she could to Carl without stepping on his heels. There were no windows in the passage and it was dark and smelly. They were going to get into trouble.

"Here, this is it. The murder room."

Cordelia stopped dead. Anna and Carl looked back at her, their grinning faces identical in the half light.

"We said we'd tell you the story."

"Why it's called the dead house."

Cordelia's heart made one large thump in her chest.

"Don't. I don't care."

She glanced sideways at the dirty walls, scared to look Carl in the face in case he kept talking.

"There was a murder here," Carl said, "before you were born. A man killed his wife in here, in the sitting room. Go and have a look."

Cordelia stood very still. She wasn't going to move, she couldn't. She imagined the body of the woman still lying on the floor, dead, and waiting for Cordelia to come in.

"I don't believe you," the words came out thready and weak.

Carl and Anna chanted in unison "It's true, it's true!", then both disappeared into the murder room, leaving Cordelia alone in the corridor. She followed them as far as the door.

The room was the same one Carl and Anna had peered into from the outside. There was a large low window opposite the door and a tiled fireplace on the right-hand wall. More stains bloomed on the walls here and the remains of a carpet stuck to the floor. On the opposite wall was a door. Anna opened it and found a narrow cupboard space with fallen shelves.

"He cut her throat," said Carl.

"In front of the fire," said Anna. "Here," she pointed at a dark stain on the wall and floor. "That's her blood."

"Stop it. You're lying."

Carl and Anna laughed and laughed, the sound strange in her ears.

"And now her ghost walks…"

"I'm telling! I will!"

"Woo-ooo!"

"Woo-*ooo*-ooh! I'm a ghostie, gonna get ya!"

Waving their arms around ridiculously, Carl and Anna collapsed on the dirty floor, grinning up at Cordelia. The blank spaces at the corners of the world closed over and everything went back to normal. Cordelia smiled uncertainly, blinking back the tears that had been ready to fall.

"Just kidding. Right?"

"Yeah, just kidding," Anna answered from the floor. "It's just an empty old house."

Cordelia felt brave enough to look around properly now. The fireplace was small and had bits of burnt stuff in it, some broken bottles were lying on the tiles. On the wall behind someone had drawn obscene graffiti – pictures of dicks spraying and girls' names next to them. Teenagers must have been here. Carl spent some time looking at the graffiti, turning his wolf mask round in his hands, sticking his fingers through the eye holes. Cordelia looked out the window at the three bikes in a heap by the track leading back to the beach road. Maybe the tide had turned.

"Can we go now? I'm bored."

Cordelia wasn't bored so much as nervous. Being in this place with her cousins was unsettling, though she couldn't have explained exactly why.

"We can play hide and seek," Carl said. "I'll seek and you two hide."

It wasn't like Carl to play little kid games, but maybe he thought it would be more fun in a spooky house. Anna was already heading into the other rooms, looking for somewhere to hide. Carl hid his eyes and started counting loudly.

"One. Two. Three. Four…"

Cordelia scooted out into the corridor and looked for a hiding place. She went into the first room she came to, only to find Anna behind the door already.

"Go away! This is my place!"

Cordelia ran back out and into the old bathroom opposite. There was only the toilet and the dusty tub in here, no hiding places.

"Coming, ready or not!"

Carl had got bored of counting and was on the hunt. Cordelia peeped out from behind the door and spied Carl walking into Anna's room. He'd put his wolf mask on again. Cordelia slipped out while he was catching Anna and went back into the front room. She hid in the cupboard, pulling the door behind her.

She listened to Anna's shrieks as Carl found her, and then to Carl's wolf howls as he triumphed over his sister. She waited. She could hear them both going in and out of rooms, neither of them coming back to hers. After a while, Carl started calling out for her.

"Cordelia! Come out, come out, wherever you are!" He howled.

She kept quiet, smiling in the damp dark. She was actually *winning* this game. Cordelia held on. Carl grew less patient with every minute.

"*Cordelia*!" he howled. "The wolf's going to get you if you don't come out!"

She stayed still, silent as a rabbit in its burrow.

"Cordelia! Aroo-oo! *Aroo-ooo*!"

She could hear Carl was angry now and she stifled a little giggle. She wriggled on the spot, enjoying her win.

Bang!

The cupboard door slammed open and rebounded on the wall. Carl was there in the doorway, wolf mask over his face. He didn't say anything, he just stood there. Cordelia giggled and said, "I won, didn't I?" She went to move out of the cupboard, but the way was blocked.

The wolf stood there. It growled.

"Stay. In. There."

Cordelia tried to push past but the wolf grabbed her by the arms and forced her back inside. She struggled to get loose, but she wasn't strong enough and he slid her back into the dark. The door closed on her with a click.

"Let me out, let me out!"

It was completely black. She couldn't see her hands or feet, she could just hear her breathing raggedy and fast in the darkness, the blood thumping hard in her ears. She banged on the door with both hands, feeling the murdered ghost behind her prickling fingers down her back. Her arms hurt where Carl had gripped them.

Aroo-oo!

Cordelia pushed hard at the door and it opened a fraction. The wolf looked through the gap, Carl's grey eyes peering out from the holes in its face.

"The wolf's going to get you, Cordelia!"

She screamed. Strong with fright, Cordelia shoved at the door and managed to get Carl off balance. She ran as he staggered back on the uneven carpet and grabbed at her t-shirt as she skimmed past him.

She ran up the corridor and into the kitchen, breath coming hard and short. Carl was behind, the mask making it harder to see where he was going. She headed straight out the door –

"Hey, there you are."

Anna sat on the roof of the shed, a lean-to set against the back of the house. She dangled one leg over the edge.

"Where were you? I gave up looking."

"Help. He's after me," Cordelia gasped.

Anna leaned over and let down an unconcerned hand to Cordelia, who grasped it just as the wolf burst from the house, howling. Anna hauled Cordelia up in one movement. She fell against the roof's edge, her stomach cut along the felt, legs hanging. She screamed as suddenly a hand was clawing at her calves. She kicked out, hard, and scrambled up properly. The wolf climbed up after her, growling.

"Stop it, Carl, you're scaring her. Don't be a dick."

He kept coming. Cordelia stood up.

"I'm telling. I'm *telling* on you."

"Carl-a, stop it!"

The wolf whirled round with his first raised and growled at Anna. She looked down at her shoes and said nothing more. He turned back to Cordelia and came closer still; she backed away as far as she could, right to the roof's edge. She could hear his breath whistle through the holes in the mask, see his chest rise and fall beneath the brown and white stripes of his t-shirt.

"*Aroo-ooo-ooo*!"

"Stop it!"

He raised his hands like claws towards her and she felt a trickle of wee slip down the inside of her leg. There was nowhere to go and he kept moving closer. Sobbing, Cordelia ran at the wolf and pushed hard at his chest as she barged past.

Carl's new white trainers tripped over each other, then skidded along the roof's felt edge. For a second, he balanced at an impossible angle over the garden, arms waving, then slipped straight down off the side. The girls heard a crash of leaves and a whump. Silence.

They knelt down together and crept to the edge of the roof. They peered over. Carl was face down on the grass next to a large bush. He wasn't moving. The mask was still on, but wonky now; Cordelia could see his ear and the side of his face under the strap.

"Is he dead?" Anna whispered.

The wind blew through the trees and a couple of vagrant seagulls cawed overhead. Carl lay still. After a few seconds Cordelia realised it wasn't because he was dead – it was the kind of still you stay when you're trying not to cry. She watched as he slowly rolled over onto his back. He took off the wolf mask. Underneath, Carl's face was bloody, his nose streaming bright red. He winced as he wiped his face; he had scratches all down his arms. The girls pulled back from the edge of the roof and climbed down. Carl had sat up with his back to them. He was shaking, his hands over his face.

"Are you crying?"

"Shut up, Anna."

Carl stayed where he was for a second, the girls hanging back. Then he got up in a rush and ran to his bike, dragging it out from under the others. He pushed off away from them, blood still dripping from his nose, wolf mask hanging on his chest.

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Cordelia and her boys roamed up and down the sand paths on their way back home, trudging up steep inclines and running down again whooping, Hercules barking at their heels like the unheroic loon he was. The boys rolled down the great slope of sand where grass never grows, getting sand in their eyes, in their hair, up their noses. Ollie forgot his teenage

cool for a while and howled with Hercules so loudly that they startled the rabbits out of their burrows. Swallows careened up above in the clear sky as the family drew closer to home.

Falling behind her children, Cordelia looked back at the sea in the distance. Its surface was grey and glittering. The tides pulled out and then back again, stretching out the beach then consuming it, over and over. Always and forever the same and different, day on day, year after year. Cordelia remembered that her grandfather had swum with a basking shark across Ann Port bay once. He'd been scared at first, not realising what the long dark shape swimming behind him was, only seeing the dorsal fin and panicking. But then he saw its wide-open mouth, scooping up tiny food in the water – plankton, fish eggs, other detritus – and realised he was in no danger. The shark simply continued its inevitable course through the water, unconcerned. They'd swum the length of the bay together, her grandfather resting one grateful hand on its rough broad back, pulled along in silence from one side to the other.

I wish people would pay attention when the tour leader is talking. I mean, you've paid for the experience, why not get your money's worth? There's only ten people here, and Bob the tour guide, but there's so much chatting going on that nobody can hear him. I can't hear a thing – selfish bastards – can't see a thing, either. Adrian Inkerman family motto: people are stupid. I haven't been in here since I was a kid; not since Mum brought us, back in the days when it was free entry. Always one for the freebies, Mum. Mind you, she needed to be, with the four of us to look after. I wonder if I can push through to the front again?

"*If you can follow me now into the chamber – don't forget to duck down, the clearance is about 4 foot 6 in the first passage. One at a time, please ladies and gentlemen*."

Of course, everyone's just stampeding to the front, bloody stupid – there's no point being first inside. The sun will come up when the sun comes up, we'll all be inside by then.

I'll admit it's a bit of a squeeze in the first tunnel, especially when you're bent in half with your face shoved up next to the bum of the stranger in front of you. And at sparrow fart o'clock. Don't think of farting, Adrian. This ceiling feels a hell of a lot lower than it used to; I hope

the structure's still sound. I suppose I'm a lot bigger now than I was then, and my knees were less creaky. I remember the fun we had, crunching up wet gravel through the long tunnel and trying not to brain yourself on the extra low bits. Then the excitement of getting into the main room and exploring all the little nooks on the sides, our Secret Chamber at the back, looking for any skeletons we might have missed the last time. This is what the iPad generation are missing out on, I tell you.

Water drop down the back of the neck. Ugh. I'd forgotten about the condensation inside too; probably going to be worse when the place is filled up with heavy breathers. I hope the lights aren't too dim. It used to be fun playing in the half dark, but I don't fancy concussion at my age. Actually, it seems a bit brighter than I remember; they've run small lights along the ceiling and in the side nooks, that's new. There's something a bit Christmassy about yellow light on pink granite; quite festive really, makes the place look warmer than it feels.

"*Ladies and gentleman, you are now standing inside one of the ten oldest man-made structures in the world. This passage grave dates from around six thousand years ago–"*

I think I'll stop where I am on the edge of the main chamber; it feels pretty crowded and I don't want to end up sitting in a puddle. At least the ceiling's high enough to stand up in here when the pins and needles kick in. I had planned to go right to the back and sit in the Secret Chamber off the end, for old times' sake, but I see now that the first lot to rush in have colonised it. I wonder if they've brought towels to mark their spots, like Germans on holiday? Bastards; I knew I should have pushed to the front. I suppose calling it a secret chamber's a bit daft now I'm an adult. It's hardly secret, just a standing stone angled off the raised end of the main chamber, like a half-open door. What would Angie say: Grow up, Adrian; what did you expect, Narnia?

"… the excavated stones in the hillside around the entrance were exposed during the archaeological dig in 1991…"

I remember that dig. We were doing our A levels at the time; I was doing the three sciences, Angie was doing history and Eng. lit.. School sent her class on the dig for a day. I have to admit I

was nettled when she came back talking about how *clever* and how *interesting* the archaeologists were. I'm sure she fancied one of them. They probably fancied her back. She never noticed me at the time, of course; I had to wait for university to get her attention. And even that was because we were the only two from school at Edinburgh; I'm not sure if it was attraction or homesickness that got her for me in the end. Angie was so gorgeous: dark soft hair down to her shoulders; her energetic walk, always going somewhere; the turn of her wrist when she poured cheap wine… Hum. Water long since passed under that bridge.

This group's a mixed bunch. There's a few Alpine walking stick types dotted about, sitting on their pac-a-macs, but a lot more tie dye and sandals in here than I was expecting. I don't like the look of that guy with the leather waistcoat and tattoos. Since when did tattooed necks become a thing? Put a wig on a bulldog and that's exactly what you'd get, bandy legs and all.

I'll try to get comfortable while Bob's describing the structure to everyone. Seems a bit pointless, really, we can see it all for ourselves: main chamber, two small raised chambers on each side, and the back (secret, best) chamber at the far end. Most people in here will have been before, it's hardly a surprise. I suppose he's got to justify the entrance fee somehow, make us feel we're getting the full experience, ha.

"*It's tempting to look at this cruciform layout in the same way we would a medieval cathedral, with transepts and a sacristy, anachronistic though that may be*."

It looks like Bulldog's with one of the hippies – the floaty-scarf-and-bangles wearer. Are they in a competition to see who can grow their hair the longest? And go without brushing it. Why do these types of women always go for thugs?

"*We believe that these side chambers were graves or ossuaries for the most important people in the area: chieftains, their families, possibly priests…"*

Still, I could never work out what Angie was getting from being with me. She should have married someone important – slicker, more successful. I suppose she did in the end. The Replacement

was always her type, after all. *Richard* would be a candidate for a side chamber, no questions asked – as long as he could park his Mercedes in there too. Uh oh, here comes Hippy Woman.

"Excuse me, sorry, can I just squeeze through? Thanks, love." She squeezes past me. She smells of joss sticks.

"No problem, help yourself, don't mind me." I was squashed up against the wall anyway, what's a little more crumple to my jacket, eh? I can feel the damp getting in my hair, or is it *her* hair, trailing over my shoulder while she sits down?

"Thanks. It's wonderful to be here, isn't it? So *spiritual*. You can just feel the presence of all those souls that worshipped here – feel the weight of all the thousands of years gone by."

"Or the thousand tons of granite over our heads."

"Or that, yes."

She's smiling. Oh God, she wants a conversation. Hell on earth. Under earth.

"In April 1925 the site was opened to the public, who could explore its mysteries for the princely sum of sixpence. We like to think we're still giving value for money today, ha, ha."

Thanks, Bob. Pretty sure we've paid more than triple the modern equivalent to squat here listening to you this morning.

"I've been meaning to do this for years, you know. Never got around to it until now. My partner, Paul, booked it for me as a surprise. That's him over there, sitting on his jacket at the back."

"Oh. That's nice."

"It is, isn't it? He's so good to me."

Those jeans are so tight, I reckon he'll need a winch to get him upright. She keeps staring at me; is there something wrong with my face? Or is it the dark? Perhaps she's short-sighted too. She looks kind, actually. Sort of accepting. You forget how to be around people in the end.

"I'm Sylvia, by the way. What's brought you here this morning?"

"Adrian, and a Fiat 500. No, sorry. Sorry. It was just an impulse, really. I don't know why. Saw the advert in the *Evening Post* and thought I'd give it a try. I haven't been here for years. Used to come when I was a kid, with my mum. Seemed like the right time to come back."

"Is that so? Well, it's good you've come back for something special. I'm so looking forward to the sun coming up. I want to see first dawn hit the chamber, experience it just like the ancients would have. Worship in the old way. This place is on a ley line, you know."

"A ley line?"

"A line of energy running through the earth; it connects the earthly world with the spiritual realm. We are standing in a place of power."

Oh God, now I'm going to have to pretend to be interested. Where's Angie when you need her? She'd be able to talk new age bollocks with this woman all day.

"You're not convinced, I know, but that's okay. You'll get the benefit, even if you don't believe."

"And you do?"

"Oh yes. Yes, definitely. Ley lines attract all kinds of activity, you know. Spiritual, paranormal, even demonic sometimes."

"Really."

Back away, back away now. Shit, there's nowhere to go; everyone else has bagged their spots. I'm trapped in here in the dark with a hippy lunatic. So much for being friendly.

"*…and today, the mound at La Hougue Bie is one of the largest of its kind in existence...*"

Perhaps if I just keep quiet she'll shut up; or is that too much to hope for? This isn't quite how I envisaged this morning going.

"Nothing demonic in here, though, don't worry. This is a peaceful place. It can bring you peace, if you let it."

"Do I have to?"

"Not if you don't want to, love. No-one's forcing you. But it's worth opening yourself up, spiritually, while you're in here. Just ground yourself and open your third eye."

"Aren't we grounded enough, sitting underneath a hill?"

"You are a one! Not like that; concentrate on your feet. Just reach down with your mind and feel your feet connected to the earth, feel down into the ground, feel yourself of the earth, here in the earthly realm. Paul's doing it now, have a look at him."

Paul's got his eyes closed, feet planted flat on the ground, legs wide apart, seams straining. I don't think he could put his knees together if he tried. I hope nothing bursts.

"Paul's been a believer for years. It was him introduced me to spiritual grounding, you know. In his spare time he makes fairy doors."

"I'm sorry?"

"Fairy doors. Little wooden doors. You fix them to trees, encourage the little folk to congregate there."

"You mean children?"

"No; well of course, they like them too, but I was talking about fairies. Elementals? Magical creatures. You know."

"Right. Paul makes fairy doors for magic creatures."

"Yes, though he's taking a break from that for now. There was some unpleasantness at Milbrook Park; something to do with permissions, conservation I think?"

"Oh dear, really?"

"Yes. There were complaints, apparently. Not everyone is a friend of the shining folk."

I can just imagine how the park keepers feel about middle-aged men encouraging children to hang around under the trees with them. What would Angie say about that: *will nobody think of the children*? Perhaps she wouldn't find it funny anymore.

Bob's looking a bit pale there. Perhaps he finds it as close in here as I do. Is he sweating, or is he just being dripped on? Sylvia the Hippy's noticed too; she nudges me.

"Does Bob seem alright to you? He looks a bit – shiny."

"Maybe he's a fairy?"

I wonder if her third eye spotted it. I never know what to do in these situations.

"Do you think we should check on him, Adrian?"

"I don't think we should interrupt. He'll say if he needs a break. This is his job, after all."

I always left dealing with people to Angie. I left everything to her, come to think about it – I was always happy to go along with whatever new idea she got in her head, be it holiday destination, house move, job change. In the end it was a habit too hard to break. Until the babies.

As soon as we hit our thirties, it was like an alarm had gone off in Angie's head, but I couldn't hear it. She'd goggle endlessly at babies in pushchairs, or in those papoose things people strap to their chests; she'd excitedly point out yet another one to me, like she'd seen a unicorn or something. I knew what she needed. And I couldn't help her.

Three unexplained miscarriages, three lost babies. Each one a stone crashing down on our marriage. We kept trying, or Angie did, rather. But no matter how hard she tried, no matter what vitamins she took, what doctors she saw, Angie couldn't keep a baby to term. I'd have been happy to leave it after the first failure, if I'm honest, but Angie was never one for half measures. She wanted a baby, come what may, and I was needed along for the ride. I left Angie to read all the books, join all the mum websites. She tracked her fertile cycle, she organised the date nights, she instigated the dreary bouts of baby-making sex that failed to make babies. Me? I was there too, though you might have trouble picking me out of the background.

My job, such as it was, was to keep us keeping on. I decided to be strong for her; I thought I could manage that. I would be the voice of reason: I'm good at facts; I don't get caught up by fads, or excess emotions. I looked up all the statistics, calculated our chances each time; I helped Angie prepare, told her not to get her hopes up too high. There's no point wishing for the moon, I told her, especially when we got to our forties, when you know the odds are stacked

against you. But with each miscarriage, it was like Angie got coated in another layer of glass – you couldn't see it, except in certain lights, but it was there – a cold shell separating her from the rest of the world. Occasionally I'd think about breaking through, trying to touch the warmth of her again, but –

"*Although originally referred to as a tomb – the site would probably have served a much more complex purpose – with a number of ritual and – ceremonial functions."*

Sometimes I thought I could imagine a child in our lives. You'd think one of the three, maybe, could have made it through. Still, no point moping, Adrian – if wishes were horses, etc. I couldn't change things. I couldn't *do* anything. It was inside her body, all hidden inside the dark chamber of her womb. How could I fix it – I'm not God. I couldn't make them stick, those tiny scraps of blood and bone, our children.

I'll admit, the day our marriage ended came as a surprise to me. I thought we'd been rubbing along alright; Angie was a bit quieter than usual, maybe, but then she was sometimes. The dishwasher had broken so we were doing the dishes together. Angie washed, I dried. She hated drying and I preferred it, so that worked out well for us. I was rubbing a spot off a wine glass with the tea towel – god forbid I hand it back to Angie for a second rinse – when she started talking about a christening we'd been invited to the next day, the baby of a friend of hers from work.

"I don't think I can face it, Adrian, not at the moment. It's just too painful. Watching them all with their perfect children and their perfect lives while we celebrate their fucking perfectness."

"Perfection."

"Jesus. Perfection, yes. I just can't sit there in church and smile and hold the baby and wish them well when all the while I'm bleeding inside. I can't do it."

I put the wine glass back in the cupboard and picked the colander off the draining rack, swirling the tea towel round inside to dry it thoroughly.

"Alright, if that's how you feel. I mean, we have already bought the present, though. It's wrapped up on the sideboard. Seems a shame not to take it."

"I can give it to Fran at work next week. She'll understand."

"Are you sure she will? This is a big thing for her; it's her first child."

"I know that! You think I don't *know*?"

She grabbed a saucepan and shoved it into the washing up bowl, viciously scrubbing and splashing spots of greasy water onto my trousers. I stepped back a bit, out of range.

"Well, I just mean it's different for us, isn't it? We wish it wasn't, but there it is. Are you sure you don't want to go? I hate to think of you spoiling your life with these sour grapes about us not having children."

"Sour grapes? *Sour grapes*? What the fuck, Adrian? What the actual *fuck*? What do you think this is? Jesus, I hate – you know what, forget it. Forget it."

She left the dishes half done, so I finished off and did the drying too. When I went into the living room, Angie was sitting on the sofa.

"Angie, I think you owe me an apology."

She looked at me blankly.

"I know this is hard for you, but you can't keep on attacking me for no reason, just because you don't like the way the world is."

Angie drew a deep breath; I thought she was going to say something, but then she didn't.

"It's not fair, Angie. This isn't my fault, you know."

"And it is mine? Is that what you're saying?"

"Well, no, not exactly. Well, I just mean, I can't help it, can I? They didn't find anything wrong with me."

I knew this last bit was a mistake even as I said it, but I couldn't stop myself. No, scratch that: I didn't want to stop myself. I saw the pain those words caused; I watched the thin blade of it slide into Angie's stomach and I felt the satisfaction of a job well done. It was like lancing a boil,

I told myself. The truth hurts. But then Angie started to speak and I knew I'd done exactly, completely and utterly, the wrong thing.

"Who are you, telling me this? There's this godawful fucking hole inside me and it's bleeding and it hurts and the one person who knows that pain, that hole, as intimately as I do – what does he tell me? It's not his fault? I'm the defective one, so suck it up, sweetheart, is that right? Is that what you wanted to say?"

I couldn't answer her. It was a catastrophe. She looked at me like I was someone else, some stranger off the street – someone unloved. Her face was so hard and white I didn't recognise her, either. The planes of her face were wrong; it was a different wife's face. Not a wife at all, anymore; she wouldn't be keeping on with me any longer. That was the end of our marriage.

"A raised platform – small end chamber – this – this area was probably, the most sacred – sacred, area..."

Bob's looking really unwell now; he keeps panting and he's leaning against the standing stones. Even Paul's getting up to have a closer look, creaking himself up off the floor. I really think someone should say something to Bob. His hat's askew, pushed off kilter by the granite slab he's up against and his booted feet look ready to slip on that gravel… Oh shit, Bob's crumpled on the floor! Everyone's crowding round, who has a mobile, who can help? Bob's practically getting trodden on in the fuss. We're milling about him like a bunch of useless sheep. Suddenly Sylvia's pushing past me, politely but firmly moving me and others out of her way.

"Excuse me, excuse me, let me through. He's having a heart attack. Can somebody call an ambulance please?"

She gets down on her knees next to Bob, talking to him softly. Even in this light I can see he's a ghastly grey-green colour and horribly still. Sylvia rolls him on to his back and cradles his head, stretching his neck out and his chin up. She's leaning over with her ear to his mouth. Is he dead?

No, she's kneeling up now, her clenched hands pumping down on his chest in a quick series of beats. Paul comes and kneels next to her. Is he *singing*?

"Staying alive, staying alive. Ah, ah, ah, ah, staying alive,"

"Christ man, show some respect!"

"No. Adrian. He's helping me – keep my – rhythm. Staying alive. Come on, Bob!"

A couple of the others – Alpine walkers – have crawled out of the tunnel to call an ambulance. I can't look away: Bob, laid out in this place like some kind of sacrifice. I don't think this is the Neolithic experience he was planning on giving us.

The chamber closes in around us as we gather around the tableau of Sylvia, Bob and Paul. The lamps strung in the corners fade and flicker like torchlight. The air feels heavy in here – at this moment it seems we're standing inside a giant bell, waiting for the clapper to strike. Everyone is silent apart from Paul, who's still singing quietly while Sylvia pants in rhythm, pumping away at Bob's chest with her bangles jangling, then breathing into his mouth. It takes forever. I can hear birds tweeting outside. It must be nearly dawn.

After an age, we hear the sound of a siren approaching. A minute or two later, gravel crunches outside and two paramedics stoop their way through the passage, carrying their equipment. In seconds, Sylvia has handed over to them and she and Paul, and I, retreat backwards and sit down in a row on the edge of the stone platform. The three of us watch as the paramedics intubate Bob, then manoeuvre him onto a stretcher and back out of the tunnel. The chamber empties out, people crawling or staggering back up through the tunnel in the grey light of almost-dawn. It all seems totally unreal once they've gone.

"He never got to the bit about the sunrise hitting the back chamber at dawn."

"I think we all knew that bit anyway, Adrian."

"Sorry, Sylvia. I think I might be in shock."

"*You* might be!" She laughs and I'm close enough to feel the shake of it through my arm.

I look down to my right at Paul's hand resting on his knee. He has a skull ring on his little finger; it actually suits him.

"Paul, I'm sorry about before. I didn't realise."

"No problem, man. My job is just to help Sylvia out. She's the angel."

"You're right. Fairy doors, eh?"

I nudge him with my elbow, giddy with relief at not having witnessed an untimely death. He looks at me briefly and shakes his head, looking down at his grounded feet.

"Yeah, fairy doors. Doors to another world, man. Just like this place."

"Indeed. It nearly was for Bob, anyway."

Paul gets up with a small grunt and makes his way out of the passage grave. I think I may have offended him. Sylvia's still sitting next to me. I can hear the ambulance moving off outside, gravel crunching again, people chatting near the entrance. But it's quiet in here. The crystalline glow of the pink granite makes me feel warm and protected, like we're cocooned from the outside world. I wonder if Sylvia feels the same.

"Sylvia, where did you learn CPR?"

"I went on a course with the St John Ambulance, years ago. It was after my daughter, Callie, died. She was sick for a long while; most of her life, really. They did everything they could, the doctors, give them their due. She was eleven. We always called her Callie, but her full name was Callisto, for the stars. After Callie went I just wanted to … I couldn't save her, but I couldn't stand the thought that one day, one day there might be someone who *could* be saved but wasn't, just for a simple thing like that. I couldn't be that person; a person who let somebody die."

"I'm so sorry, Sylvia. I mean, really – "

"It's alright, Adrian. I'm alright. Besides, she's still with me, you know. I see her all the time, in spirit. Being in places like this helps, where the veil between this world and the next is drawn thinner."

"You see her? Like a ghost?"

"Like herself. She was a lovely girl, full of mischief. She's still like that now. She comes to me when I need her, or even if she just wants to check up on me. Callie's here now, in fact."

"Right now?"

I find myself looking around the chamber, half expecting to see a little girl peeping at us from between the stones.

"Yes, she's here now. She likes you. She thinks you're funny."

"Funny? That's not something I'm often accused of."

"See. You're doing it again. She's laughing."

Sylvia's smiling. I can almost believe her; I can just picture Callie, a miniature version of her mum, sitting on the chamber floor watching us talk. I'd like to believe her. Sylvia takes my hand in hers. Her palm is soft and warm; she rubs the back of my hand with her thumb.

"Look, Adrian. The sun's coming up."

We watch as the light of the sun suddenly pierces the entrance. It strikes the standing stones behind us, above our heads. Golden light floods the chamber, blinding me with its brightness. I squint and look away, dark blue flashes squirreling around my eyeballs. In the corner of the chamber opposite us, I think I see movement. Then my eyes have adjusted and it's gone. Sylvia and I sit quietly, our eyes following the ribbon of sunlight from the chamber to the entrance way. There's nowhere else to go and nothing more to do and, actually – that's just right.

The Beast

The tide is up. A cool wind drags at her hair, a fresh blue sky rises overhead. Seagulls and crows circle the fields, yellow green leaves unfurl on the trees. The narrow hills – the *cotils* – overlooking her small house are being ploughed for potato planting. Too steep for the tractor, the farmer and his men stop the vehicle at the lip of the field, on the flat, and lower the plough by winch to the bottom. She watches brown runnels gouge from the earth as the tractor engine pulls its plough back up to the peak of the hill. Farm workers follow the plough, hand-planting seed potatoes; when she was a child they would have been speaking French, now it is Portuguese, the language of the Madeirans.

She fills her day with jobs; she has a To Do list which she updates religiously every day. On it are the tasks of her life:

Buy food

Clean kitchen

Replace lightbulb

Change sheets

Dust sideboard

Weed vegetable patch

Light candle in church (Mother's birthday).

When each task is complete, she scores it through with a careful line and adds a new To Do at the bottom. When she reaches the end of the paper, she starts a fresh sheet. This list will never end. She picks up her coffee mug and turns to the back door, ready to go inside. A crow shadows overhead: brief, black. The telephone rings in the hallway.

"Mrs Pallot? Jeanette Pallot? It's Geoffrey Wyatt. Do you remember me? I reported on your husband's trial for *The Mirror*."

"I'm Miss Godel now."

Her voice croaks from lack of use.

"Of course, of course. I know it's been years, but I have a little proposal for you, if you're interested."

A pause that turns to silence, just the buzzing of the line between them.

"Mrs – Miss Godel? A proposal. Your husband –"

"Ex-husband."

"Yes, ex-husband. Well. I'm sure you're aware it's been twenty years since his conviction; a sort of anniversary, you see. That makes it a rather interesting time for reflection; interesting to go back to it, you know?"

More silence.

The trial had made the national newspapers, every front page telling the story of The Beast: Leslie Pallot, sentenced to life imprisonment in June 1973. Jeanette had attended each day of the trial, sitting impassively as her husband was charged with sexually attacking three young girls and three boys between 1965 and 1972. He chose to have no jury at the trial. That had been typical; Leslie would never have borne his peers sitting in judgement on him. During all those years he had never been suspected. It had almost been absurd how he was caught, so stupid, Jeanette had thought. Leslie had been arrested for drunk driving, a foolish impulsive decision that ended in a police chase, eventually crashing his car through a hedge into a tomato field. Jeanette listened as the lawyers said that Leslie, when searched, was found to be wearing an overcoat and elastic wristbands both studded with nails. In his pockets were a sacking face mask, a wig, two pieces of rope and skin-coloured sticking plaster. Jeanette plucked at her newly bought skirt suit while Leslie told the judge he'd been on his way to a "sex party".

"Jeanette, I work for a true crimes publisher these days – true crime is very fashionable now, everybody's interested – topping the charts in the book world, you know."

She didn't know.

"I think people would be very interested to read your side of the story. You could write about what happened, put your side of it. Your story about living with The Beast. If we time things right, it could be out in time for his release."

"I don't think so. Thank you, but –"

"Oh, but I think it would sell well, coming from the horse's mouth, as it were. I'd help you, of course; be a sort of ghost writer, help you along the way."

"No. I'm not sure. I'm not –"

"*I* think this is an ideal opportunity for you; think about it, you can put the record straight. Show the world you were just another innocent victim in all of this, take back your life. What do you say?"

"I –"

"You always seemed so brave in the courtroom: head held high, never cried, never spoke. I always thought you had courage, back then."

"I – I'll think about it. Maybe."

"There'll be some money in it, of course. Not much, perhaps, but I'm sure it wouldn't be unwelcome."

"Maybe. Perhaps I could make some notes?"

"Good girl! We'll make a writer of you yet. I'll be in touch once I've spoken to my publisher." The line goes dead.

Good girl. Turn over. Leg up, more, yes. Like that.

In church she lights the candle for her mother's birthday and thinks about Geoffrey Wyatt. She remembers him. Narrow pockmarked face below a Brylcreemed parting,

ingratiating and predatory. He pressed her for an interview and she was too polite to send him away, too numb and horrified to resist his imprecations. She shudders and lights a second candle, kneels before the altar in the cool incense-smelling air.

Only now matters. At home she replaces the lightbulb, crosses it off her list, adds a new task at the bottom. While Jeanette changes the bedsheets Wyatt's words nudge at her thoughts, her face half turned away from remembrance.

Clean fireplace

Extra pint of milk – rice pudding

Sweep stairs

Buy notepaper

The pen blots, black ink smears her hand and obscures the lines ahead.

Down in the bay the tide is at its farthest point from the shore. A gaggle of geese has taken up residence on the beach, waddling self-importantly between the moored boats. Jeanette walks the stony shoreline and peers into pools left in the black rocks, waiting for tiny shrimp or minnows to dart from beneath the seaweed, stabbing swift. She has scrubbed the ink from her fingers, but there remains a shadow on her skin as she picks up smooth stones in grey and pink and turns them over in her palm. She has run out of paper, but she could score lines into the slate she carries, or use a sea-smoothed piece of old brick to write in red on the rocks. Dog walkers arrive to harass the geese. She leaves the stones on the beach and turns back up the valley.

If I had known… Cross out, start again. The pen hovers over the page until Jeanette throws it down and it rolls into a shadow on the floor. Each night, before bed, she paces the house: stopping at every window, turning the locks and shutting out the dark. This evening she

goes round twice, checking every lock, pulling every curtain tight against the skulking moon. Fresh notepaper: cheap blue lined sheets as thin as tracing paper. *I met Leslie when I was thirteen. We married when I was sixteen.* The nib gouges the surface, leaves little rips among the trail of ink. She settles herself down into her chair, turns the paper to a better angle, and writes some more.

It was Leslie's job to trap crows, kill them, and raise their corpses on sticks around the edges of the fields. A gruesome boundary, it kept the birds away from the crops. Leslie had been dependable, her father said. A man you could trust to get a hard job done. Fifteen years her senior, he was strong and squat. He had worked in construction and had the solid muscles of a working man. Jeanette liked him. She watched him working from the farm windows; when he was in the farmyard she walked taller, brushed her hair more thoroughly, changed her clothes often enough for her mother to complain. When Jeanette went out to hang the washing, she could tell if he was near: she would feel a pleasurable prickle on the back of her neck as she pegged out the vests. Their engagement lasted for as long as it took the banns to be read. When she stood on the steps of the church, a married woman, her parents threw rice over their heads and her heart flew, tumbling joyfully with the swifts in the sky.

Dust windowsills
Turn mattress
Ironing

Jeanette couldn't say with any certainty if the change in her marriage had happened instantly or over time. A frown where she expected a smile; silence where she had expected thanks, or a compliment. He had his realm, she had hers and they didn't seem to coincide the way she had expected when they stood together on the church steps. Leslie kept things from her, she knew that. It was as though the image she had of him was being painted over, stroke

by stroke, into an unrecognisable face. Or, perhaps, the paint was being stripped away, to show the face which had always been hiding there beneath the jovial layers. Her mother advised her to let him have his privacy: a man doesn't need his wife in all his business. He'll come home to you if you make a cheerful welcome. Keep yourself nice and stay busy. Their house was old and unmodernised; Jeanette had enough on her hands keeping the fire lit in the stove and water pumped up from the well. She started to make lists to keep up with all the tasks a housewife needs to master. The shed in the scruffy yard had tools stacked in it; a part had been walled off into a storeroom. Jeanette avoided the shed; Leslie kept it locked.

Clean oven

Hoover sitting room

Scrub –

The chores drag at Jeanette. The To Dos had always made a structure to stretch her life around, taut as skin on a drum, the tension perfect in every direction. But now the soothing rhythm of her life is off balance. Jeanette sweeps up half the crumbs from the bench and leaves the rest on the floor. She listlessly flicks a duster over the ornaments, avoiding Gog and Magog's bulging twin gaze. Geoffrey Wyatt has left a message on her answering machine; he would like to meet her to go over her notes, talk about a structure for the memoir. Jeanette leaves the message unanswered.

Clean bins

Weed path

Answer police questions.

Where does Leslie go?

Who does he see?

Where does he go at night?

He was her husband; of course she didn't keep watch over him. But she did. Jeanette remembers Leslie's night-time absences, the mounting tension in the house in the days leading up to them. Fear rose through the air with the smell of breakfast's sizzling bacon, pervading the house. It could be months between those nights, but by then Jeanette was an expert in Leslie. She could read his moods in the kink of an elbow, the hitch of a neck. She could tell which way the tide was turning, and she knew better than to ask where he was going, what he was doing. From the fireplace Jeanette sees the dangerous set of Leslie's shoulders in his tweed overcoat, hair curling over his collar as he shuts and locks the front door behind him.

Wyatt wants to write about the victims of The Beast – to set out the attacks, give readers the full, shocking, gory picture. Jeanette tries to oblige him. She recalls every detail of the trial, she knows each name. Jeanette slows the pen. She has knots in her fingers, arthritis tangling her joints like rope. She can't face this part of her task.

Scrub toilet

Flowers for church

Maureen Brightbody

Anne de la Haye

Brian Powell

Jeanette covers her eyes before their names. But now the words won't leave her alone. Telling the story begins to consume Jeanette. She writes at odd times of day – breaking off from her cup of tea to scribble down remembered words. A mop stands in a bucket of cooling water,

the floor unwashed while she scratches out some more notes. Jeanette grows a fat callus on her middle finger where the pen rubs against it.

The Beast. The whole island knew about the beast. How he raped girls in bushes while they waited for the bus; how he snatched children from their beds at night and carried them away into the dark. Nobody knew who he was. He was tall, he was short, he had an Irish accent, a French accent, he was local, he was scruffy, he was smartly dressed. He was everywhere and nowhere, a beast roaming the wilds of the island after dark. There were rumours, of course. A French cowman was harried off the island after whispers picked him up and tried The Beast mask on him for size. Nobody would serve him in the pubs, the corner shop refused to sell him cigarettes – he could live with that. But then came the shoves as he walked down the street; anonymous notes under his door detailing the fiery punishments of hell; a beating late one night in the dark lanes near his lodging, which left him half-dead. He fled home to Brittany and the islanders breathed a self-righteous sigh of relief, but then came another attack. Anne de la Haye, ten years old, taken on her way home from school. She was found in the early hours of the morning, tied under a tree, her uniform ripped and bloody. Women stayed inside at night; cautioned their daughters to stay close, don't talk to strangers, trust no man you don't know. If you don't behave yourself, The Beast will come and get you.

Notes appear around the house. While sweeping, she picks up a scrap caught beneath a chair leg: "tied her wrists and ankles together then left her on the floor. She tried to break free but he came back and…" Opening the bread bin, a note flies out with the loaf: "he held the boy down with the weight of his body, tore the waistband of his shorts…" She begins to dread the housework.

Bleach drains

Wax sideboard

Lock windows

Lock doors

They edge her room at night: Maureen Brightbody, Anne de la Haye, Brian Powell. They lean in from the corners, brush their bruised wrists along the sides of her bed. They breathe on her face when she closes her eyes. Jeanette comes to an accommodation with them. They stay in the skirting board, or sit on the curtain rods, and she will sleep where they can watch her. It's not them she fears. *He* tugs and pulls at Jeanette from the dark, through the window, reaching in, tearing her out, the windowsill dragging at her thighs, her knees clinging to the edge, to her life.

Spring continues, ripening into summer as the crops grow and the potatoes are lifted from the fields. The hedgerow stalls are filling up: bags of potatoes, bunches of greens, rhubarb sticks and eggs appear on the painted shelves set at farmyard gates, or tucked into the roadside entrance of a field. Jeanette picks up some green beans on her daily walk, dropping coins into the padlocked honesty box. On an impulse, she picks the box up, hefts its weight and rattles the coins inside. It feels heavy. Heavy enough to stun a man, if you caught him unawares. She puts the box back precisely, lining it up square with the shelf, and carries her beans home to the names on the list.

More than twenty years ago, police constables searched the house and the outbuildings while a detective sat down with Jeanette in the living room. He was soft-spoken, kindly even, but relentless. What were her movements on 11th July? What were Leslie's? Did Jeanette notice anything strange about her husband? Did he ever bring anything home that

she couldn't account for? Anything; clothes, perhaps, that she hadn't seen before, a handkerchief or pocket watch she didn't recognise. Was he a good husband? Has he got a temper? Does he hurt you? A shout went up from the yard outside. The detective stood, looked out of the window and saw a young constable waving from the shed door. Jeanette was left sitting on the prickly sofa, rolling up the edges of her pinafore into a tight curl.

Set mousetraps

Buy lye

In the height of summer the sky is so blue and hot that it turns Jeanette's sight to black when she looks upwards. The beaches are crowded now with sunbathers, swimmers, netters in pools and builders of sandcastles. Geoffrey Wyatt leaves more messages on her answering machine, all of which she deletes without reply. Jeanette adds to the weight of the honesty box for sweet strawberries and tart raspberries, bleeding through their paper bags. Her pens have run dry, parching in the heat.

Gut fish

Clean windows

Sharpen knives

With the lock broken open, the police discovered Leslie's secret: The Beast lived in his shed. Inside lay Maureen's printed scarf; Brian's wristwatch, a present from his father; Anne's torn and muddy knickers, all ranged neatly on a packing box, inside which were stored nails and ropes. Other items were photographed and recorded; any scrap was taken that might add to the evidence. Jeanette watched from the doorway as the police emptied out the shed. With each trip to load the police van, the yard grew quieter. The young constable appointed to watch Jeanette moved further away, as if the air around her magnetically repelled. She felt

silence form in the space between them like frost thickening the grass. When they were ready to leave, the detective shook her hand and thanked her for her co-operation. She stared blankly into his face, looking for condemnation and finding pity. She shut the door on him and turned the key.

By late summer, Jeanette is not undefended from The Beast. Anne strolls beside Jeanette as she walks to church, her summer uniform open to the waist, buttons ripped off. Jeanette swats her away and Anne flies up into a tree, roosting among the branches. Brian is guarding the house when she gets home, hanging by one foot from the gutter in the shade of the afternoon. Maureen tsks from the bedroom window, watching the lane behind Jeanette, keeping her eyes peeled for The Beast. Jeanette sheds her cardigan and sits down to write against Leslie, to keep his hands off her. Her pen is a sword. She writes so heavily that her pen inks the table below. She feels Anne at her back, a small hand on her shoulder; a comfort.

Make chutney

Mend Anne's buttons

Buy matches

Leslie had gone into town for paraffin and some matches, even though a full box of Swan Vesta sat on the mantlepiece above the range. Checking, Jeanette shook the box and a dry rattle echoed through the empty kitchen. They had been married four years that autumn, with no sign of a baby to come. Recently, Jeanette had noticed that at night Leslie went straight to sleep; he hardly ever put his hand on her shoulder in bed, turned her over and lifted up her nightgown. The marriage bed was stale, no matter how clean she kept the sheets.

Earlier that day Jeanette had hung up the washing and now a beef pie sat on the table ready for cooking later. Aimlessly, she wandered out of the house and into the yard. A strong breeze had got up and the door to the shed knocked untidily against its frame. Jeanette crossed the yard, which needed weeding again she noticed, another item for the list. She went to push the door shut and click the latch. Her hand on the door, she paused at the smell of damp wood and dirt in the dark. For the first time since she moved in, Jeanette went inside the shed. It was more than a shed, really, it was an outbuilding scratched up from old bricks and timbers, patched up over the years and upright more through force of Leslie's will than sound construction. Inside, Jeanette stepped carefully past the hoes and rakes, the wheelbarrow and ancient hand plough, chains hanging off the beams above her head. She could see another door at the back of the shed and moved towards it. It had a bar across the latch, but that was hanging open. Jeanette put her hand against the rough wood and pushed.

It was a room inside a room; there were no windows and little furniture, some shelves at the back held a range of objects. The room was a secret cabinet. There was a storage box on the floor, with a ladies' scarf folded neatly on top. Jeanette moved forward. Inside the room hung several items of old clothing, a blue tracksuit suspended from a beam and an old fawn nail-studded raincoat. There was a camera hanging on a hook and photographs of different houses scattered beneath it, none their own. Scanning the shelves, Jeanette found home-made wigs and hats; she picked up something flat and crumpled from the pile. It was a sack made into a mask: there were crudely cut eye holes and a slit mouth; a black wig had been sewn to the top as hair. Repelled by its scarecrow face, she dropped it back down with a shudder. The dark crept in around Jeanette and she jumped as the wind slammed the shed door back against the frame. Making sure she touched nothing more, Jeanette crept back outside through the musty gloom. She pulled the shed door behind her and waited until she heard the latch click. Back in the kitchen Jeanette lit the oven to bake her

pie for dinner and waited for her husband to come home. Jeanette had nothing to say. Her mouth was as slack and empty as the mask she had held.

Put out bins

Close curtains

Wait

Where is the Beast? Roaming the island cliffs and fields. Maureen and Anne scent the Beast in the air. Where is the Beast? Lurking under park benches, lying fallow beneath the grassy fields. The Beast whispers through keyholes and breathes down your neck, shudders into the tender skin behind your ear. Brian trembles in his hiding space on top of the wardrobe. Where is the Beast? On the page, in the ink, under cover. Jeanette has no more use for pens and paper. She sweeps her lists into the bin and Maureen and that little slut Anne fly out of the window, wailing. She unlocks the door and throws it wide open, waiting for the padding of his footsteps over the threshold. Brian fades into the shadow of the wall, huddled limbs merging with the damp spot on the bedroom ceiling until no boy is left. As the seagulls cry in the evening light, Jeanette sits at the table to wait for the Beast. She is ready. His mask settles over her face with the trembling softness of a lover.

Nightwalker

So now I'm going for walks at night: got to get out of the house, away from the sainted Fiona and her unreproachful acceptance of our fall. Talk about coals of fire. Each night I head towards the sea front, on my usual route straight through the Waterfront Plaza wasteland. I go past the chain bars, past teenagers outside KFC and Pizza Hut, scuff popcorn under my feet by the cinema, then on to the beach front to walk the long curved promenade out of town and towards First Tower, or Saint Aubin if I've got the energy. I threw my phone over the sea wall last night. It had run out of battery; no one was returning my calls; for the first time in months there were no voicemails, no messages. I held it in my hand and looked at how smooth and dead and pointless it was: then I chucked it. Good overarm throw out into the water – reminded me of my First Eleven days – it barely made a splash. Bit stupid of me, I suppose. It was a brand new iPhone, I'd only had it a couple of months. But it made me feel better for a few minutes. For everything else, there's Mastercard.

I need to pick up the pace a bit tonight, outwalk this rising feeling of panic. Every time it surges, I walk a little bit faster, build up a bit of a sweat. It's easier than sitting at home festering, watching my wife silently pack our life into cardboard boxes. Walking at night works off some of the dread. It's more peaceful at night, too: fewer people around, not so many cars. I can't see much beyond the roadside until I get onto the front, and then I have the strings of lights along the promenade to light my way. And I can hear the sea, even if I can't see it, dark and deep and forgiving. If I can hear the sea, I don't feel so bad. I can drown out the sound of Mr V's voice.

It was a bad decision, what I did. I knew it, too; just before everything kicked off I could feel that part of me stuck at the back of my mind, waving to get my attention. You know what I mean: the little prig that sits in your brain and says *Are you sure about this?* when you're about

to get into something you probably shouldn't. But of course I ignored it. I always do; things usually have a way of working out for me in the end. If only – well, it is what it is, as they say. But it was a bad decision, no two ways about it.

I had always been so good at compartmentalising. Work was work: time consuming, but not worth sweating the small stuff. I never lost sleep in the early hours of the morning over impossible deadlines, or beneficiary disputes, not even a regulator visit. I'd say to myself: Christopher, you're better than that; not like the others, bricking it every time the regulator asks you a tricky question. *What are your systems and processes to maintain the currency of your Business Risk Assessment? What is your percentage of outstanding compliance review points at the end of each quarter?* Didn't even raise a sweat. Cleverest man in offshore, me. But then Mr V came along. Mr blasted, bloody V. The Singapore job is going away now, I know that. If I could just get to Maurice at Sino Trust and explain to him – I would never have got involved if I'd known. If I'd known. Of course, it was my job to know, yes I understand that, but really, how could I be blamed?

I'm not alone out here. There are other walkers at night; I've even begun to recognize a few of them. Some of them are shift workers on their way home, some drunks. The occasional bike whizzes past on the cycle path – who on earth rides a bike at two in the morning? I'm fairly sure some of these walkers are cruising: I've been followed a couple of times by men who keep pace with me for ten minutes or so; thanks but no thanks, matey. They give up when I doggedly trudge a straight line with my head down. I keep to the sea front under the lights.

White lights string along the entire stretch of front between town and Saint Aubin, lighting my way in a three mile curve. They mark the line between land and sea, the dark all the deeper for their spots of brightness. When I was a kid the bulbs were a cheerful red, yellow and blue, tackily lighting up the tourists in hotels and guest houses on the main road. It's a long

time since they've gone. The tourists are mostly gone too, anyway. It's less stick of rock and sandcastles round here, more Ferraris and financial management. I check the time on my Breitling Navitimer, squinting at the dial in the dim light. Wish I'd kept my phone now; without my reading glasses, it's all a blur. If I can just keep walking, I can burn off some of this nervous energy. I need to walk until I'm exhausted, until I can convince myself that this rapid, stuttering heartbeat of mine is the result of exercise. I just want some sleep, for god's sake. Mr V haunts my dreams, waking me in the night with his request for a "small favour".

Zurich. That damned conference. I thought I was being clever, going back to an industry conference in old Europe when the rest of the directors at work were heading to Asia, Africa or the Middle East. I was sure there were still relationships to be exploited in Switzerland; plenty of one-man-band fiduciaries couldn't handle the new Swiss rules on trust management. They needed a safe pair of hands to steer them into harbour and that could be me, Captain Christopher at your service. Besides, I had plenty of existing relationships in Zurich that could do with some attention. I was going to make the conference, glad-hand some clients, visit a select few bankers and tax advisors and be home in four days without breaking a sweat.

The conference itself was the usual mix of fake bonhomie and casual cynicism: a whiff of desperation rising up over the mingles and pre-panel drinks. Who has the money, who has the access? I passed out business cards to new faces, slapped the backs of old friends and promised to catch up for drinks with at least five more contacts than I had time for. Business as usual. By the last afternoon of the conference I was done. I was just contemplating skipping the last panel debate (trustee duties to vulnerable beneficiaries) when a small dapper man in a dark Brioni suit approached.

"Excuse me. Forgive the interruption, but are you Christopher Vénal?"

"Yes, for my sins. What can I do for you?"

"It is not I who needs your assistance; however, I have a client whom I think would be very interested to meet with you. He needs some advice, possibly a new structure." He tipped his head to one side, looking up at me with shrewd eyes.

"He is unhappy with his current trustees – you know the old story. They get comfortable with a client, they forget to provide the correct service, they treat him badly – you understand?"

"Indeed I do and I always think it's terribly short sighted. A happy client makes for a long lasting relationship – and we all like those, don't we?"

"Naturally; I have heard of your reputation, Mr Vénal, and I believe you and my client would deal extremely well together. There is a pleasing coincidence in your names, also. He too is a 'Mr V'."

I laughed, though I don't know why particularly; I'd never been called Mr V in my life. We agreed to meet at the office of Herr Gruber the following afternoon, just before my flight back to Jersey.

Herr Gruber's client was an ultra-high net worth individual: very old money freshened with a new investment twist. I liked Gruber's estimate of this Mr V's total worth – in the hundreds of millions of Euros, possibly a billion, all in. I agreed that my trust company could very likely help Mr V, subject to the usual due diligence process, which I was sure would be a very straightforward matter. It wouldn't be, of course, but you always had to say that – smooth the way ahead. We could establish a new trust to hold all of Mr V's many assets and investment opportunities: the numbered bank accounts, the private companies holding luxury cars, houses and apartments around the world, the limited partnership running a fund in Luxembourg. I promised that the trustees would work closely with Mr V to ensure his wealth was securely and discreetly preserved for future generations, for an appropriate fee, of course. Herr Gruber promised to arrange an introduction to Mr V, as soon as he was back from finalising a casino purchase in Macau; another long-term investment for his many millions.

Herr Gruber sent me all the documents the compliance team asked for: a neatly completed application form, signed in a subtle mauve ink, a notarised passport copy (Swiss passport, not Mr V's original nationality), and two proofs of address showing a residence on Lac Léman just outside of Lausanne. It was an uncannily perfect application and for once I saw plain sailing ahead. Then bloody compliance came back asking why there was no social media profile on Mr V and so little reporting? There had been no criminal prosecutions or investigations against him, but why was such a rich and powerful man so hard to find on Google? I mean, really, compliance complaining that it *couldn't* find any bad news about a client? Don't they know when to count their blessings? We could bill at least two hundred grand a year on this trust, probably more to come if we looked after him right. A man that rich can buy as much privacy as he likes. I agreed to call Herr Gruber and deal with all the issues. And I had, in a way. An hour after leaving a message for Herr Gruber, Kenneth in compliance came back with print-outs of several innocuous media references to Mr V.

"They appeared. Just like that, when I ran the search again."

"Did you spell his name wrong the first time?"

"Funny Chris, you should have been a comedian." Ken leaned his lugubrious face over my desktop monitor and lowered his voice. "Something smells off."

"You're just jealous."

"Don't give up the day job, Chris. See you at the new business committee meeting." This is what it means to be powerful – to reveal and conceal at the click of a mouse. I'd smiled at the prospect: I wanted some of that.

I met Mr V just the once, which seems strange when I feel I know him so well. But my memories of that day are slightly foggy, as misty as the Geneva weather when I arrived. Whisked up to Mr V's house by the lake in a private car, I met my new client standing on the stone terrace looking out across the water.

"My apologies, Mr Vénal – may I call you Christopher? Our weather has not made you welcome. Usually we would be looking out across the lake to the mountains, but today we just get damp hair."

He was unassuming in appearance, matching me in height and build, his voice mild and oddly flavourless. Somehow the misty day made it hard to focus on Mr V's face. Droplets glittered on our heads and shoulders, gleaming in the occasional spur of light shining through the gloom. My hands were wet and runnels of water dripped down my fingers and onto my Bottega Veneta briefcase. We spoke at length but, when I looked at my meeting notes, I didn't recall any of the conversation I had recorded. I took off from Geneva airport under the general impression that Mr V was an ideal client, one who perfectly understood the hoops a modern trustee had to go through to accept his business. The details are lost in the fog. One thing I was sure of: I didn't want to disappoint my new client. And yet here we are. I can feel the wind getting up as I walk the sea wall. The tide is coming in and I smell rotting seaweed on the wet sand.

Back in the office, the trustee machine churned on. I was already holding funds for Mr V in a client account, ready to settle into the trust and begin to invest. Astonishingly, as soon as the trust deed was signed, again in mauve ink, everything went without a hitch. Bank accounts opened without delay; shares were issued to the trustee, almost before they were asked for; lists of art works held in vaults, or loaned to museums, arrived in my in-tray with assurances from the holders that they would only act under my instruction from now on. One morning I received a parcel of gold cloisonné fountain pens, Chinese antiques, for putting into a bank safe deposit. They arrived in the same courier as the bespoke shoes I had on order from Italy. In the same box. I wondered how, briefly, before filling one of the pens with ink. It would be fitting to sign the trustee minutes with this. I looked down at the strands of ownership and control across the structure and found myself at the top, an apex predator in handmade shoes.

After that, all my time was taken up with Mr V. I expected it: he was a huge client, the biggest our small company had ever taken on. He would call me first thing in the morning, setting out his requirements for the day's transactions; he would call me at night while I was eating dinner, or sitting on the sofa watching *Britain's Got Talent* with Fiona. He'd speak for an hour at a time, but afterwards I could never quite remember the details. Fiona waited for me on the couch for a while, cup of tea getting colder as I listened and listened to Mr V's quiet instructions. She must have left at some point; I didn't notice her go until I got into bed that night and found a cold space where my wife should be. Fiona started making plans with friends most nights, after that. That worked better for me. I could concentrate when I was alone, listening to Mr V's soft, almost accentless voice, knowing that I would do anything to keep him happy. The blue light of the phone shone each night in our darkened bedroom.

As the weeks passed I felt as though Mr V and I were getting closer, so close as to almost be the same: we had the same goals, the same drive, the same attitude. Or so I thought. I've always been driven. In my final year my tutor suggested a PhD, he'd be willing to supervise me if I stayed on. I wasn't interested.

"What do you want, Christopher?" he asked me.

"I want everything. I want to win."

Late for dinner, I left Dr Rix and raced towards hall. "Mr Vénal!" The porter shouted indignantly, as I walked unauthorised across the sodden quad grass, "Mr Vénal!" and I sauntered into formal hall to read grace with the pale streak of a worm squashed beneath the sole of my shoe.

I built the business around Mr V's structure, like an oyster encompassing a pearl. We had the resources now: I had a dedicated team just for this work, we were an office inside an office, largely autonomous from the rest of the business. I fed on the life of the transactions, each one a glittering, dancing joy to control and complete. Here came the portfolios, the

currency accounts, there went the art, the whole galleries. Structure after structure built into a dazzling web of ownership with me holding the strings, pulling on the strands to make each part dance. I sucked the life out of them; each completed task gave me a greater sense of power. Pull a thread in Jersey, a toe in Bermuda twitches, a pulse beats in Luxembourg; pull a thread in Nevis and an eyelid flickers, a tongue jerks – the whole thing was coming to life. I was dancing, I was the best, I was the cleverest man in offshore and I had the control to prove it. This was the life I chose. I was the centre of the web, the world. I win.

Just a small favour, he said. Just a small thing, in the grand scheme of what we had already achieved together. Mr V had a tip for a high risk investment, but worth it for the returns, he said. He'd been working on this deal for the last two years, it was nearly ready. Mining. Diamond mining in the East African Congo: activity risk piled on country risk piled on sanctions and war. What a combination. The trustees were going to find this one a hard ask, I knew. Mr V relied on me to make it right; he *knew* he could rely on me, his right hand man – his right hand. I looked at the proposal – the returns looked spectacular, the deadline to invest: two days' time. This was impossible: we needed a full board meeting of the trustee for this, compliance needed to sign off on the proposal. We had no documents on the investment, just Mr V's word. God, that conversation with Ken was humiliating.

"Sorry, Chris, you said what? Diamond mining in the Congo? Are you having a laugh?"

"Come on Ken, look at the proposal. There's millions to be made from a measly five hundred thousand investment."

"Is this Mr V of yours a Nigerian prince?"

"Ha, ha. Come on. You said yourself, compliance don't approve business, that's down to the directors."

"Yes, and the directors would be insane to go with this. It's a classic: high risk, ridiculous time frame. You know we're in Suspicious Activity Report territory here, right?"

"Look, I'll talk to the other directors; I can make them see sense."

"Just so you know, my official recommendation is that we don't touch this with a ten foot barge pole wearing haz mat suits."

"Get lost, Ken."

"If this goes ahead I'll be expecting SARs from you and all your team, understand?"

"I'm not suspicious!"

"You should be."

Ken had been right, of course, the bastard. Nobody would consider it, not even Dudley, who was usually the most malleable member of the board, our walking example of nice but dim.

"Sorry, Chris, just not my cup of tea, you know. This high risk stuff. Leave it all to you, don't we?"

""Exactly! This is my area; leave it to me, you can trust me to sort it all out." Dudley looked at me oddly.

"Can we, Chris?"

He moved away, mobile phone in hand. Probably off to make another 'coffee' meeting down the pub with his mates at the Commission. Really, what was the point of him? Useless fucker in a horrible suit, I was worth ten of him. I knew I'd need to do something more to get this transaction off the ground.

I hear the sea getting closer, whispering in my ear. Or is it the sea? Despite these walks, I haunt myself. Different Christophers loom out of the dark at me, springing up out of the sea into my path. I remember the last day of my first term at university. I'd spent most of it friendless, the proverbial fish out of water. Everyone else seemed to arrive with plenty of school friends; I'd been the first Oxbridge student my school had ever had. Wandering round in a daze, I'd look at my cohort and think: these are the weirdest bunch of people I've ever met. That night it was dark by four o'clock and the indigo sky was clear. Before dinner in hall I bought a bottle of the cheapest red I could find on the bottom shelf of Oddbins, then

wandered out and across into Trinity. The college lamps were lit and the warm sand of the stones framed brightly lit rooms, the dark rectangle of grass was perfectly mowed. I could hear an organ scholar practising for the Michaelmas service inside the chapel. As I headed onto the backs, the evening star appeared overhead and I was suddenly filled with a sense of righteousness, even exultation. This was *my* place, these were my people. Greatness was coming. I was both the teller and the tale: I have never come close to that feeling again. I disappointed Dr Rix, I know that. Back then I didn't care. Now I'm disappointing everyone: my wife, my MD, colleagues. The regulator, oh Christ, the regulator. My thoughts veer away from the memory of that call from the Financial Services Commission. Focus on the walk, keep your heart rate up. Keep walking and eventually the sun will come up.

The favour. I was blocked everywhere and time was running out. I couldn't let this happen, I wasn't going to let this perfect opportunity pass us by. *I* was in control of this structure, it was my baby and I was going to make damn sure we didn't fail Mr V. I considered the options. Nothing official was going to happen, and I wasn't going to get away with making a distribution up to Mr V to make the investment himself. That wasn't his style. The whole point of this structure was so he didn't have to do anything; it's not his signature on the agreements, he didn't transfer the funds. I did that for him, it was my call. And then it came to me. It felt like the most obvious thing in the world: do this and everything will be alright; Mr V will get what he wants, the trust will have a guaranteed investment return. I would pull the strings and jerk the legs of this structure all the way to the bank. I *could* send the cash. I had bank access and I just needed a second authorisation to release the funds. It wasn't even a huge amount, I could use a B signatory as the second authorisation, no need to involve any of the other directors. The decision was so simple that it was almost as though it wasn't really a decision at all – I just saw the way the world needed to be. I would prepare the online bank instruction, make the first approval, and then use the bank token and password from the

Senior Manager on my team for the second. She's a nice enough girl, Michelle, competent to a certain level but simply not that bright. School leaver into the job, one of the rank and file. She kept her bank tokens in her desk drawer inside a Power Rangers lunchbox, relic of one her kids, I think. It was easy enough to come back to the office that evening and find the right one. She didn't even lock her desk – it was like she was offering it up to me. Michelle had helpfully left her passwords inside the lunchbox in a little notebook. Tut, tut, Michelle, I'll have to have a word with you about that at your next appraisal. But thank you; makes my life much easier.

After I sent the cash across I signed the investment memorandum with my gold pen and scanned a copy across to Mr V, with confirmation that funds were on the way. He called to thank me and that was the last time we ever spoke. My triumph didn't last long; looking back, I'm amazed I didn't see how this would go. It was the bookkeepers that did for me in the end, hived off in some dark corner of the office, going through the bank statements. Julie couldn't reconcile the five hundred grand against any trustee minutes or agreements – could Michelle help? I felt the change in the office that morning as I came in late, I could feel the twang in the webs surrounding me – something was up. And then there was Ken, with our MD, and there was Dudley half-hiding behind him, the little coward, and there was Michelle sitting in his office with tissues crumpled in her hands, looking pale and betrayed. This was it. The end.

From home, on 'gardening leave', I made frantic calls to Mr V, trying to get him to confirm that the transaction was authorised, that he would indemnify us against everything I had done on his behalf, at his request. But my calls went unanswered; even Herr Gruber was unavailable each time I rang. Mr V abandoned me, after everything I did for him, after we had achieved so much together, by his design. I was alone with this. Suddenly there I was, stuck in the spotlight. Those assets were in my control, those transactions were made by me. Those crimes were mine. That signature on the investment document might as well have been signed in my own blood. The inevitability of it hit me: to all intents and purposes I *was* Mr V; perhaps that's why my face in the mirror looked so strange.

The wind is whipping up and the tide has reached the sea wall; I approach the Catholic church at Saint Aubin, its front looming high and dark next to the white-painted houses alongside. Looking back along the route I see waves splashing up over the wall and on to the pavement. I've gone almost as far as it's possible to go, but my heart still races, my shoulders are still hunched tight to my ears. The marina. I can walk around the marina before turning back. I walk on. I see Fiona's face wet with tears; I walk on. I see Herr Gruber's dapper shoes tapping on the floor as he waits for me; I keep walking. I see all the papers I signed, the deeds, the payments; I walk on. The letter from the Commission appears in front of me, the notice of investigation, the search warrant; I start to run.

The marina at St Aubin – the clattering of rigging against mast, the rattling of bones. I lean over the railings, looking down at my unfamiliar face reflected in the water. Mr V rises from the shadows of the sea.

"Ah, Christopher, you're here at last."

All of my friends were there

Bouley Bay

You can do it, Penny. Just get your toes in and see how it goes. Come on. I stepped gingerly over the stones to the water's edge. The sea looked cold all of a sudden, the glitter on the surface not as inviting as it had seemed when I parked the car. I'd decided to be a bit brave and do the hospice fund raiser this year, one year on from Edgar's death. The Thirty Bays Challenge: swim in a different bay around the island each day for thirty days in July. Thirty swims! That was more than I'd done in the last ten years, I think.

You had to cheat a bit, to get to thirty bays – several were just different stretches of the same long beach, split along the slips. But I didn't mind that, I've always been a nervous swimmer. I thought it was comforting that I could go back to a place I knew. No surprises. I'd printed off the list of bays from the computer, reciting them like a mantra. Anne Port, Archirondel, Belcroute, Belval Cove, Bouley Bay, Grève de Lecq... I did the same with the lists of Ed's medication, the dates of his chemo, the list of hymns and readings for his funeral. Abide With Me, Rock of Ages, Make Me A Channel of Your Peace. I still can't sing the last verse of that one. The hospice was so good to him at the end there; everything was peaceful, finally. It was like being at the top of a mountain: there was nowhere to go and nothing to do except be there. But only I made the journey back down to sea level.

I chose Bouley Bay for my first swim: a rocky beach with a steep shelf, it would be easy to get into at high tide. Two steps into the water and you're already up to your waist in sea – no chickening out. And no dithering: Ed always hated ditherers. I could just hear him: *Come along, Penny, best foot forward!* But the rocks were more unforgiving than they used to be. Shoving up at the tender soles of my feet, they pushed me off balance as I teetered down the slope to the shore line. I hoped I wasn't going to end up turning an ankle, or worse, breaking

my hip if I fell. Another embarrassing old lady getting chairlifted into an ambulance. I just don't trust my extremities anymore – they're distressingly prone to letting me down at inopportune moments – and there were no other swimmers on the beach that morning. I could hear the diving instructors organising their kit on the slip above me, but nobody was close enough to catch me if I fell. Get a move on, Penny, as Edgar would say. Time and tide wait for no man. Or woman.

I pushed off into the chill clear water, gasping at the shock of cold on my skin. It might have been summer, but the water has its own seasons. I huffed and puffed as I breast-stroked my way along the length of the bay, trying to keep within my depth. I've never liked not being able to put my feet down when I want to. Cool water slipped over my skin and the waves lifted me up in that regular rhythm of the push back to shore. It was surprisingly peaceful, once I got into it. The dark green depths of the bay were a channel, calming my nerves, consoling me.

Later, still slightly post-swim chilly, I parked close to the front doors of the care home. There weren't many nuns left at the Little Sisters of the Poor. Most had been recalled to the mother house in France, I can't remember where exactly, but there were still a few left. Some of them were older than the residents they cared for, doddering around the place in their sensible grey skirts and veils. I walked down the wide corridors, past the dining room smelling of recent lunch, through the double doors to the wing Aunty Blanche lived in.

Shalimar and cigarette smoke; all my life I've known that mingled smell of perfume and smoke as the essence of Blanche. Even now I sometimes sniff the lid of a perfume bottle on the pharmacy shelves, just to get a whiff of her again. When I was a child, there was a delicious danger to spending time with my aunt. Blanche could be kind and gentle, showing me how to make crochet stitches, or teaching me to feed her green budgie Chico from my lips. But Blanche could also be capricious. One day I might be encouraged to pick up her jewellery and try it on; the next day would come "Ah, ah! *Touche pas*!" There was no telling which aunty I

would get; it was a bit of a lottery, as they say. I could never be completely sure I was wanted: either by her, or at home. I was too young to remember the first time I stayed with Blanche. I used to go every weekend, to "give Mum a rest". I was a late baby, large and weighing heavy on my mum's tiny frame – or so Blanche told me. Mum needed a break from me, she said, more than other mothers did.

Blanche was nearly ten years older than Mum, not that it seemed that way to me. Even by six years old, I had a clear idea that Blanche was infinitely more glamorous than my Mum, who lived in a pinny and swiped on a dash of pink lipstick for special occasions. Blanche had a drawerful of cosmetics in her vanity table. "War paint, poppet," she'd tell me. Sometimes I'd be allowed to sit in front of the wide circular mirror and open the shell-shaped powder compact, pull open the gold ridged sticks of red lipstick (she had five!) or take the solid block of mascara and pretend to spit on it, like Blanche did, to wet the colour with a tiny brush. In my teenage years it became a habit with me to ask myself "Would Blanche like it?" before I bought any item of clothing, or make up, or perfume. I never raided Mum's wardrobe; I had a far more compelling model to follow in Blanche's silk scarves and velour trousers, glittering costume jewellery always round her neck or hanging from her ears. I tried my best to look like Aunty Blanche, to copy her style, her dashing aura of devil-may-care. I wore blouses in cerise and sky blue, I tied patterned scarves jauntily around my neck, I piled on necklaces and bangles – I even tried smoking for a bit, not that it agreed with me. But no matter what colourful get up I wore, it was always just dressing up. I could never be her, I knew that. Plain old, timid old Penny, that was me.

It wasn't only the glamour that fascinated me. Blanche would confide in me; she treated me like a miniature adult, really. Not something I'd ever do to a child myself, but I loved it at the time. By the time I was ten, Blanche would sit me down on the sofa next to her with a glass of "martini" – lemonade with a dash of Cinzano Bianco – and tell me her stories.

"Your mum was always following us older ones around, she was such a little pest." I'd giggle at the thought. "We'd tie her to the bedposts so she couldn't come with us when we went out." She'd tell me stories from the occupation of Jersey; they were my favourites, told with all the relish of a ripping adventure yarn – better than any book and I loved books. I heard all about forbidden crystal radio sets hidden under floorboards, or making coffee from dried carrots and flour from potatoes. Stories about how islanders would put one over on the German forces by hiding supplies in barns, buried in fields or, once, even hid pork chops beneath the mattress of a baby's pram while the Unteroffizier chucked the infant under its chin. I always felt a pang for my own pet rabbit, Pootle, when Aunty Blanche intoned: "There were no pets left by the end of the Occupation. No food." I was twelve before I realised that meant the pets had been eaten, rather than died of starvation.

Blanche would talk about how she used to slip out at night to see her friends and go out drinking, making me laugh at the tale of how Granny had waited up one night during the blackout to catch Blanche on the way in.

"She hid by the stairs and when I crept up in the dark she reached through the bannisters and grabbed me by the ankle! I thought it was a ghost! I had such a fright I screamed and woke the whole house up. She could be wicked, your grandmother."
I could never imagine my own mum doing that to me; I couldn't imagine being brave enough to defy my own father, not that Dad was ever the sort who needed defying.

A running theme was Blanche's engagements. There seemed to have been more than I could count, each one ended by Blanche after a row, or when she discovered some unbearable flaw in her lover. "I threw the ring into the sea! I was so angry with him, I just took it off and threw it into the sea at St Catherine's. He never got that one back," she chuckled and I would grin too, imagining the unsatisfactory fiancé looking on glumly as the ring sank down into the depths of the bay. Sometimes I'd ask Mum about Aunty Blanche's fiancés, but she never had much to say about them. "Oh yes," she'd say, indifferently, "I remember him. Poor old

Leonard," and carry on hoovering. Another fiancé became a bit of a catchphrase for me when dealing with my own boyfriends: "I couldn't marry him: he had fingers like sausages." Ed had nice elegant hands; it was one of the first things I noticed about him. When I brought him home to meet the family, it was Blanche I looked to for approval. When they shook hands she gave me the nod, a wink flashing so quickly across her face I almost missed it.

Edgar and Blanche got on like a house on fire at the outset – they both loved having a new person to tell their stories to, or their opinions, in Ed's case. The honeymoon didn't last all that long, despite my efforts. Whether it was politics or home décor, they seemed to enjoy taking opposite tacks, then looking to me – identical expressions on their indignant faces – to judge who was right. I couldn't understand why they wouldn't get on.

"They each want to be your favourite person," Mum said. She stacked the plates on the kitchen side, watching me carefully.

"Well they are! Both of them. How silly," I smiled to myself, the centre of my world for the first time, the happiest I might ever have been. I took the plates and whirled them into the dresser while Mum looked on.

That afternoon, after my swim, when I looked through the open door to Blanche's room I could see her – tiny as a child – sitting in her chair looking blankly out of the windows. It had been the same the last week, and in the months before. It was always a jolt to see her this way. When I was away from her, she reverted back to the bright, loud woman of my childhood; then I'd visit and she'd be sat there, shrunken, silent, leached of colour and vim.

"Hello, Aunty." No response. She looked tired today, her breath louder and a little raspy, wispy hair clouding around her head. I could see through to her white scalp, shocking and tender beneath the sparse curls.

"Did you have your lunch today? I'm having fish tonight. Shall I get us a cup of tea?" No answer. Once I'd run through my sparse list of news we would both sit in silence. I'd put off

going some weeks, guiltily telling myself she wouldn't notice. Sometimes, not every week, there were moments when Aunty Blanche would turn and look at me, really *look* at me, with a fierceness that was almost threatening, as though she was saying: "Why don't you come and see me more often, you horrible child?"

After I'd told Blanche about my first swim, we sat for a while, then Sister Maria Theresa stopped at the doorway; a tall, spare woman, she was the nun I knew best. She looked like a character in a film; I couldn't help but think of the habit as a dressing up outfit, for some reason, not a thing a real person would wear. I think it reminded me of when I used to play in Blanche's old communion dress, and Blanche would pretend to be the priest, feeding me a host made from crumbled ice cream cone. Just as well Sister Maria didn't know that story.

"Hello, Penny. I should tell you that we had the doctor out for your aunt last night. She's fine now, but she was having difficulty breathing." The gold cross at Sister Maria's neck gleamed. "This will happen more often, I'm afraid. It's the next stage. I know you're familiar with it, but you should prepare yourself. One day her lungs simply won't be able to manage. At her age it can happen quickly."

I looked out at the garden briefly, then gave Sister Maria my brightest, most forgiving smile.

"Thank you, Sister. I understand."

It wasn't her fault, after all. Why shoot the messenger? I stared at Blanche's knotted fingers: she had been sent away to convent school in France at sixteen, because she'd failed her end of year exams after contracting scarlet fever.

"That's what stays with you: the injustice," Blanche had struck herself hard in the chest with her fist, "right here, the unfairness of it, it still burns."

Belcroute Beach

One week on and I tried the little beach at Belcroute. I took the bus and walked down the steep hill to avoid having to park. It had been such a long time since I last went down

there. I've never forgotten that dreadful summer day with Ed when the children were little. We had driven down the winding narrow lane to the beach, only to find no spaces left to park. Cars lined the lane nose to tail all the way down to the slip. There was no room to turn and Ed reversed back up the entire hill, cursing as more cars came down with the same idea as we had. The children thought it was terribly funny: "Here comes another car, Dad! That's six behind us now! Are they all going backwards?" I could see Ed's face getting redder and the veins standing out on his arms as he battled with the corners – no power steering back then. He wrenched at the wheel, stomping his foot down on the accelerator as we revved around each bend. I didn't dare say a word, just left him to get on with it, until we finally edged out backwards onto the main road, horns tooting all around us and the children rioting in the back.

"Shall we do down to Portelet instead?" I suggested. "There's lots of parking at the top and the steps aren't too bad really."

Ed didn't look at me but flicked the indicator to the opposite direction, towards home. He hated that kind of situation, hated making a scene. It was the headmaster in him; he couldn't stand being in the wrong. Not that it was wrong, really, but – it was a shame; it had been such a lovely hot day, it would have done us all good to have a swim.

This time, all was calm. Hardly anyone was around: only an elderly sunbathing couple and a chap getting into a dinghy. As he paddled off, I left my towel and bag on the slip, took off my glasses and walked to the water's edge. The tide was on the turn, but the water was smooth; there were several little boats moored nearby and I could look directly across the curve of coast to town. You don't often see town from a distance like this, unless you're on the ferry. Everything's too close in, you can't get a perspective. I was feeling more confident than the first week, so I kept walking into the sea until I was deep enough to swim, pushing off from the sandy seabed and striking out for deep water. Once I got level with the first boat, I stopped and floated on my back for a while. There was a slight breeze, but I could feel the sun on my

closed eyelids as I bobbed along with the moving tide. It was quiet. All I could hear were the seagulls and the soft splash of waves rippling on the shoreline.

I had been with Blanche earlier that day; another half hour sat in silence, the rasping of her breath the only noise above the chink of cup on saucer. It was always strange to be so quiet with her. I wished I could think of more to say, but I've never been the storyteller in the family. Words don't come so easily to me: they never do quite what I think they're going to. I start a sentence going in one direction and then by the end I find myself back where I started, all muddled up. Best to stay quiet, I think. Edgar was a talker, his low voice rumbling on in the background while I cooked, or folded laundry, or simply sat there and pretended to agree with his opinion on the news or the idiocy of the current affairs radio presenter. Blanche instilled in me the habit of listening. Floating on the tide, I could hear Blanche's voice mingled with the cry of the gulls:

"It was a few nights after they bombed Coventry, and I was at a bar, and all of my friends were there, and a German officer turned to me and said 'You won't be getting Coventry on your crystal radios this evening' and I slapped his face! He put his hand on his gun, he would have shot me. But my friends dragged me away. I would have slapped him again if I could!"
I was stung by the sudden memory, as if by a jellyfish. I turned over and breast-stroked back to shore, then trudged back up the hill. My mood improved as my hair dried.

Grève de Lecq

In no time at all the month was half way through; only fifteen more swims to complete the challenge. I had swum at Saint Ouens twice (two different slips), and at Gorey, basking on my back and looking up at the castle sitting above the bay. I'd swum a couple of times at Rozel among the fishing boats, cheating a bit, I know, then I'd tried the south east coast. Wading through the black rocks at La Rocque at low tide, I finally understood why it was such a treacherous harbour for boats. It took half a mile to get out to knee depth water, and even

then I scraped my knees on the sand while I got a few strokes done. I took a moment to compliment myself on my commitment, despite everything. Edgar would have done, if he had been there, I think. Or maybe he would have teased me about my swimming skills. They were improving, though. I wondered sometimes if Ed was watching me from heaven. No doubt he'd be shouting down tips on my swimming technique from his perch on a celestial cloud – always room for improvement, Penny! He never stopped being a teacher, even with me. Today I'd picked Grève de Lecq for my swim, for the first time. The bay was small, edged on both sides by granite cliffs. Children loved to climb and jump off the large rocks, my own included, back in the days when I'd hover on the shore anxiously waiting for them to resurface, wondering if I could send Ed into the water to drag them out. The day was blowy, hot but fierce with fat clouds scudding around in front of the sun and making me shiver. I could feel a storm brewing.

I sat myself down on the rough sand in front of the lifeguard's hut and took note of the red and yellow flags marking the safe swim areas. The tide was low, but on the way up; I could see waves coming in from two angles, meeting with a crash in the middle. A middle-aged man in a wetsuit was at the shoreline. As I wriggled awkwardly out of my beach dress, I saw him run into the water and dive through a large wave as it crested, emerging from the water like a dolphin as the wave sunk back into the sea.

Once in the water myself, I realised that this was a much rougher swim than it looked from the shore. Although the tide was coming in, the backwards pull of the swell was hard to fight. This one would be a thirty strokes only swim; even that left me panting and mildly panicked. On the way back to shore, I stopped for a minute to catch my breath, standing at hip height in the water. The tide surged around me and I could feel the coarse pink sand sucking out from beneath my feet as the water pulled back. It tickled. Ed would certainly be proud of me for doing this swim, he'd never seen me do more than a doggy paddle at waist depth. To my side the middle-aged man shouted something to me, waving his arms. As I turned, an enormous wave crested behind me, higher than my head. I tried to jump it, but I mistimed my

leap and the water engulfed me. I was upside down, shoulder scraping on the sand, water up my nose and in my eyes, feet kicking and arms flailing for the surface.

Our first car. The Datsun Sunny: white paint, brown plastic seats and a boot large enough to fit a pram. We argued in that car on the way home from Christmas lunch at Mum and Dad's house. A six-month-old Michael had been in his carry cot on the back seat, cooing away at the roof. I'd rather thought lunch had gone well. Mum and Dad both cooked: Dad in charge of the crab starters then Mum's turkey, with pudding to follow. Aunty Blanche had brought her usual contribution of chocolate and multiple bottles of wine, we had brought our first born for general admiration.

After a few glasses of wine, Blanche started reminiscing with Mum, telling the old stories. I half listened, concentrating more on settling Michael after his bottle, rubbing his back gently to bring the wind up. Mum cleared the pudding plates while Ed and Dad lit cigarettes. Blanche carried on talking, topping up her glass with sticky sweet Sauternes.

"I took some sand from the beach, when I was sent to France, so I'd always carry a little bit of home with me."

Ed was talking to Dad, ignoring Blanche's soliloquy at the corner of the table. I smiled; there was no need to join in, the stories were always the same. Michael was dozing off, so I took him into the hallway to lay him in his carry cot. I could hear the clatter of dishes in the kitchen, the murmuring of Ed's voice. Blanche was in full flow:

"… and all of my friends were there… 'You won't be getting Coventry on your radios this evening'… he would have *shot* me…"

It was warm inside and I felt like Michael – full up, content and sleepy with my family around me. But when I came back into the dining room, Ed was standing up. He'd finished his coffee and he looked restless. He clapped Dad on his shoulder and said, "Time we were off, I think." I

said my quick goodbyes, kisses on the cheek and a hug for Dad, then hurried after Ed, who was already on the drive and setting Michael's carry cot on the back seat.

"Ed?"

"I'm fine. Get in."

He drove off, with me looking uncertainly at the side of his face, stern in the light of the headlamps.

"Don't you ever get sick of it, Penny?"

Startled, I asked what he meant.

"Blanche. All that talking, all those stories. She never shuts up! And she's got nothing worth saying. It's maddening. You'd do better asking your father about his time in the army. At least he *did* something with his life."

"You know Dad doesn't like talking about the war. I don't think I've ever heard him talk about it."

"But you sit there listening to that woman going on and on about *her* life quite happily."

"Why wouldn't I listen? What's got you so angry?"

"Penny. You're not a stupid girl, when you put your mind to it. Has it never once occurred to you to ask *why* Blanche was in a German bar in the first place? During the Occupation? You think the Germans were in every pub in town? It wasn't like that, Penny. Have a think about it, and wonder why I don't want to hear her pointless, pathetic stories."

We drove back home in silence, staring through the windscreen into darkness.

Just as I thought my lungs would burst, the wave deposited me back at the shore on my hands and knees. I choked up sea water as the middle-aged man ran over and helped me back to my bags. With shaky knees, under the pale vault of the sky, I picked up my towel and

scrubbed myself all over: twice, three times, until I was dry and raw, scraping the gritty sand across my legs, arms, breasts.

Anne Port

I had company for this swim; my friend Jean met me at the beach, already changed and wearing a yellow Thirty Bays promotional swimming cap. She's in her early seventies, a serious swimmer, not like me. Jean swims in the sea year round, so the challenge was really just business as usual as far as she was concerned. We swam out together, aiming to swim the wide mouth of the bay while the tide was coming in. Anne Port is a popular choice of bay and I recognised a few other Thirty Bays swimmers tiptoeing over the stones.

"How are you holding up, Penny? Your aunt: you said her lungs were failing. Is it serious?"

"It is serious. She's very short of breath these days. Sister Maria Theresa did say it might happen quickly. The doctor's been out a few times now."

"Isn't she almost a hundred? Shouldn't she be in hospital at her age?"

"She can be treated where she is; they have her on oxygen, there's not much more they can do. It wouldn't be kind to move her now, it would distress her. There's nothing more to be done."

"I'm so sorry." Jean squeezed my shoulder and said, "Why don't we aim for St Catherine's? Nothing like a challenge!"

The long stretch of Saint Catherine's breakwater lined the horizon over a mile away. I thought of Blanche's lost engagement ring, winking under the sea amongst the rocks. I smiled at the impossible goal and struck out after Jean.

Ed's Christmas outburst had changed me in ways I didn't really understand. I'd lost something: I didn't work properly anymore; a connection was fritzing inside me, fizzing in my

chest and stopping me from being properly in the world. My life looked strange and alarming from every angle, I couldn't even look at Ed without flinching. I found myself taking Michael for long walks along the seafront while I went over every story Blanche had ever told me, again and again, looking for clues. Food hidden in prams, fiancés abandoned on the pier, Mum tied to the bedposts unable to chase after her big, exciting, glamorous sister. What clues, I didn't quite like to think. My footsteps echoed along the pavement in rhythm: stupid, stupid, stupid Penny, stupid, stupid, stupid Penny. By the end of each winter walk I unwrapped a half-frozen Michael from his blankets, kissing his small red nose back to pinkness and warmth. Mum noticed the difference in me.

"Are you eating, Penny?"

"Yes, Mum."

"But are you keeping it? You've gone so thin."

"Mum, I'm fine, there's nothing to worry about."

"We could take Michael for you for a night or two, if you and Ed fancy a break. Or maybe Blanche could –"

"No! Sorry. No thank you. We're fine."

My dreams were exhausting. Over and over Blanche's numberless fiancés slapped my face; rings shimmered under water just out of reach; a German officer pointed his gun and shot me in the chest, the images turning over and over in a feverish carousel. In the cold hours of the night my grandmother stretched her arms through dark bannisters and tripped me up. I avoided Blanche completely, even making an excuse not to visit on the anniversary of Uncle Raymond's death. Blanche and Ray's had been a late in life marriage, cut shorter by Ray's death from a heart attack at sixty-five. How could I see her, knowing what knew, what I didn't know, what I didn't want to know? How could she look at me and not see it in my face? Blanche eventually gave up telephoning the house, only to be told that I wasn't in. Ed himself

became more watchful, perhaps regretful, even. He told me to cheer up; I was so unlike my old carefree, cheerful self. He missed me.

But I didn't know how to come back; I wasn't sure I even wanted to. Who was I, when everything I thought I knew was so wrong? It was Ed, in the end, who changed things, by telling me a story.

"Penny, did you know Blanche tried to adopt some children once?"

"What? No, where did you get that idea from?"

"She told me one time, when you were expecting Michael. It was when she and Raymond lived in London. She went to an adoption agency and was going to take a brother and sister, but then the adoption people told her she'd have to bring her husband in to meet them first. So she didn't do it."

"But why not? I don't understand."

"She said it was because she didn't want Ray to know she was unhappy."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"She didn't want you to know she was unhappy either."

It was a peace offering, an apology. That exchange marked the reconciliation between us, and somehow it freed me to return to Blanche, who welcomed me back without ever asking why she had been exiled for so long. I'm not sure which of us was the exile, really, and I still don't like to think about it, not even so many years later. That tentative first meeting: she held Michael in her arms and squeezed him tight, kissing his fair hair over and over, with me hovering to the side, hopeful. I could weep.

Saie Harbour

The end of the month. My last official swim of the fundraiser. The forecast had made me frown the night before: it promised fog later in the day and I wanted to have my final swim in the sunshine. But nothing had materialised beyond a high heat haze above the fields and

sea. The island is prone to summer fogs; they descend before you know it, insinuating across the warm beaches and woodlands in a chilly wave. If you stand on the cliff tops you can hold out your arms to sea and watch the fog creep in and cover them up, wisping cold feathers along your skin. I always used to think, this is what it feels like to walk through a ghost. There are ghosts everywhere in Jersey. One more now, I suppose.

The day before still felt like a shock to me; death always does, I find, even when you think you've prepared yourself. Afterwards, when the Sisters were laying out Blanche and I'd given her soft cool cheek one last kiss, Sister Maria Theresa handed me a small bundle of letters. A tiny parcel sat on the top wrapped in brown paper. She also gave me some forms; I knew those ones well enough now, after Ed.

"These are what we were holding in the safe; they belong to you now, as Blanche's next of kin. The forms are for probate; let me know if you need any help filling them in. There's no hurry to clear her room, we don't need it for a while. Take your time."
I tried to thank Sister Maria, but found I had lost the words. I looked helplessly at the nun while my thanks floated away on an invisible swell.

This last morning I walked across the cliff paths on the headland towards the beach, scuffling in my sandals along the long uneven route, perched right on the edge of the land. I looked down at the steep fall to the sea and wondered how easy it would be to slip down there if my ankle went, or if I tripped on a root. Gorse flowers sprung bright yellow amid the browning ferns; sparrows argued in dust bowls at the edge of the path and, above, grey-backed seagulls hung in the air cawing their scavenger's lazy call. I came to the standing stones guarding the beach and stopped for breath. It wasn't a welcoming bay. It was full of wide angular rocks and pebbles, stacked unevenly from the sea line to the edge of the cliff. It would be a challenge to walk through. I concentrated on finding a path through the rocks and stones, losing my balance, scraping my toes on the pitted rocks studded with limpets. Mum

had always liked this beach exactly because of its rocks and awkward position. It meant that it was never crowded with tourists or other families – heaven forfend that we should share the beach. Only the hardy came here, usually stopping just long enough for a swim and then heading back home.

I was one of the hardy now. I adjusted the top of my bathing suit and pushed off with an energetic breaststroke. I headed out in a straight line aiming for France, its coast clear on the horizon. Today I felt I might actually reach it, if only I could keep going and going. Small waves splashed me in the face as I swam against the tide, but I kept swimming, further and further out.

At home, the probate forms were lying on the dining table, signed and dated. The bundle of letters and Aunty Blanche's jewellery box sat next to them. I had filled in the forms with a practised hand; it felt like no time at all since I had last ticked those boxes. There wasn't much of value in the jewellery box. A thin gold wedding ring, an engagement ring with a tiny diamond, a nice cameo brooch, and the rest was the costume jewellery I remembered so well: glass rubies, crystal beads and fake moonstone drops. I turned to the letters. A cup of tea first; I could be a world class procrastinator when I tried. While the kettle boiled, I returned to the table and picked up the brown paper bundle. It was so light, it could have just been a ball of paper. I gently unwrapped it and laid the contents down. A tiny baby cap, crocheted in white wool. I picked it up and saw that it was unfinished: a tail of wool hung down at the back, not tied off. On top of the bundle of letters I recognised Uncle Raymond's handwriting, probably letters he sent when he was courting Blanche from London. I flicked through the bundle, looking at the stamps and postmarks: Acton 1964, 1965. A few postcards from me and Ed, from our honeymoon in Paris, and other family holidays. At the back, though, were two letters of a different size and colour, addressed in a hand I didn't recognise. The stamps were older, a dense green print mostly obscured by the postmark. Frankfurt, 1946. I sat back in my chair. I touched the edge of the letters with the tips of my fingers, gingerly, as if they might bite.

The water was always rougher further out, but I kept pitting myself against the swell, my costume sagging. Stroke, breathe, stroke, breathe. Water chopped up in my face, getting in my nose and my burst of energy suddenly vanished. I turned and floated on my back, looking up at the cliffs over the beach. I could feel myself being pushed slowly to the edge of the bay; if I let it, the tide would take me half way round the island. It was almost tempting. Keeping myself afloat with one paddling hand, I reached into the front of my swimming costume and pulled out Blanche's unopened Frankfurt letters. Holding them up against the sky, I looked at the wet rectangles of paper, dark ink running across them and dripping down my wrist. Deliberately, purposefully, I took a letter in each hand and spread out my arms, dunking the letters into the sea. Gulls dipped overhead in the sky while I bobbed in place, waving the unopened letters though the water. They bent and sagged in the current, eventually becoming as soft and supple as the seaweed brushing against my legs. I barely noticed as the letters slipped out of my hands and floated away on the tide.