‘Invincible Summer’

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Masters
in
Creative Writing

at Massey University

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2019

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‘In the midst of winter, I found there was, within me, an invincible summer. And that makes me happy. For it says that no matter how hard the world pushes against me, within me, there’s something stronger – something better, pushing right back.’

— Albert Camus

## ABSTRACT

Why is silence considered to be golden? This Master of Creative writing thesis questions why so many women suffer in silence and dares to break that silence. The thesis examines the genre of the personal essay in a contemporary context and explores its relevance and utility for the expression of the stories of women's suffering. The thesis consists of two sections, creative and critical, and has an eighty percent creative component and a twenty percent critical component.

*Invincible Summer* is divided into two parts. The first part is titled 'Concerto' and consists of 8 personal essays. This section explores content and subject matter that is specifically about and, relevant to, my personal experiences with suffering as a woman including Anorexia nervosa, Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, Postpartum trauma and being the mother of a child with Autism. The second part is titled 'Risoluto' and it is structured around critical analysis of the communication of suffering experienced by other women writers including Ashleigh Young, Maggie O'Farrell, and Leslie Jamison. As a whole, but most directly in this essay, the thesis questions and investigates the criticisms leveled against the personal essay, particularly the accusations of solipsism, narrow scope, and sensationalism.

The thesis employs a variety of approaches toward the personal essay in order to explore the diversity and flexibility of the genre as a form of autobiographical writing. These personal essays utilise different approaches to structure and are built around scenes from specific times in my life. The essays explore the use of patterns and connections through personal writing in a way that allows each essay to be effective as a stand-alone essay while also functioning as part of a whole

through the interweaving of common themes and events. By taking this approach, I aimed to portray the essays as snapshots of unique moments in order to demonstrate how fragments of a life may be perceived as isolated incidents while still forming part of a whole cohesive picture.

My purpose when creating this thesis was to demonstrate the versatility, power and accessibility of the personal essay for women who write about their suffering. In the creative component, I aimed to demonstrate the flexibility of the personal essay as a framework that is capable of supporting multiple stories from multiple stages in a writer's life. In the critical component, I defend the personal essay's place in a contemporary context and argue against specific criticisms in order to justify that self-disclosure is an acceptable and respectable form of communication.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to thank my thesis supervisor and advisor, Ingrid Horrocks of the English and Media Studies Faculty at Massey University. I am indebted to her for the patience, advice and wisdom she shared with me while guiding me through this writing process. She brought a unique combination of compassion and pragmatism to this project that has been invaluable to me in the shaping and writing of this collection. She has been an enthusiastic editor, a tireless and approachable mentor and an inspiring role model. I am most grateful to her for helping me tame my 'wild metaphors.'

I am indebted to my closest friends who encouraged me, supported me, read for me, listened to me and comforted me through what has been, at times, a difficult and painful experience.

Most importantly, I am immeasurably thankful to my husband and my sons for supporting me in my writing endeavours. They live amongst my towering piles of papers and stacks of books, encourage me to be myself and make me laugh. I am humbled by their generosity in allowing me to include details of our family life in the telling of my personal stories and truths.

## PREFACE

*I should not talk so much about myself if there were anybody else whom I knew as well*

- Henry David Thoreau*, Walden*

*Do I dare*

*Disturb the universe*

- T.S. Elliott, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*

I dared to break my silence despite the fact that I'm actually not a big fan of self-disclosure. To clarify, I should point out that I'm not referring to the self-disclosure of other people, I'm referring to my own. I find it confronting and intimidating to reveal hidden or unknown aspects of myself.

Like so many people I used to cringe a little when I heard the clichéd declaration by some writers that their autobiographical writing experience had been a journey of self-discovery, self-acceptance or self-healing. However, through the creation of my own work and examination of the work of other women writers, I have found that this journey of the self is a crucial and, in fact, inherent aspect of the successful personal essay. Lee Gutkind states a similar point in his book, *You Can't Make This Stuff Up.* When describing the most important aspect of creative nonfiction he explains that it is the inclusion of the writer as part of the story. He says this inclusion of the writer '…provides satisfaction and self-discovery, flexibility, and freedom' (Gutkind, 2012, p.13).

I'm not sure if Gutkind is referring to the freedom of the form or implying the writer is somehow set free through the writing process. Regardless, I have found he is correct.

I grew up and lived most of my life in Queensland, Australia. I didn't know it at the time, but I was a complex child; good at sports yet anxious, extroverted yet socially awkward, outspoken yet naïve. I spent much of my life as a child and as a teenager hiding or, trying to hide, the parts of myself that I believed were unpalatable to other people. These were parts of myself that I tried to leave in my past as I grew older because I felt that they were proof that I was faulty or odd or damaged. I feared what others would say or think about me if they discovered these aspects.

I spent my professional life dedicated to teaching Drama and English to high school students. I was driven by a desire to help young people who may have been feeling as lost and alone as I had at that age. I had found my early high school years to be an alienating and damaging experience and I had found most teachers to be callous and cold. Because of the negative associations I had developed toward school, I very much wanted my students to know that they mattered and that they belonged. I wanted them to believe they were no lesser despite backgrounds, family life or what I refer to as 'individual wiring.'

I was individually wired in such a way that I had experienced Anorexia Nervosa, Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder and Postnatal Depression by my mid-twenties. Because of these illnesses I understood what it meant to suffer psychologically and physically. As the years passed I learnt what it was like to suffer through the pain and trauma of others when my eldest son was diagnosed with Autism and when I discovered my parents had given up their first child for adoption. At times, I yearned to read stories from other women with similar experiences to my own but, though I found some essays and books I could relate to about specific topics, there did not seem to be any collections of essays that covered a variety of experiences in relation to the

suffering of one woman. This seemed peculiar to me because I knew that it was possible for an individual to suffer in a multitude of ways.

When I moved to Auckland, NZ in 2011 with my husband and our sons, I found myself with the opportunity to return to full time study. I had always dreamed of having the chance to study creative writing and of writing something substantial of my own. (I am aware that this sounds like another tired cliché!) I enrolled at Massey University to study a Graduate Diploma of the Arts (Creative Writing). It was within this course that I first became immersed in creative nonfiction and discovered the allure of the personal essay. The *Glossary of Literary Terms* by M.H. Abrams and Geoffrey Harpham defines the personal essay as an informal essay in which 'the author assumes a tone of intimacy with his audience, tends to deal with everyday things rather than with public affairs or specialised topics, and writes in a relaxed, self-revelatory, and sometimes whimsical fashion' (Abrams & Harpman, 2009, p.1160).

I also encountered the robust criticism that confessional poetry frequently attracts in my poetry studies with Bryan Walpert. A great deal of the negative criticism directed toward confessional poetry focused on the perceived self-indulgence and self-centredness of these poets. In particular, I was struck with the disdain and dismissive attitude shown toward poetry collections by women such as Sylvia Plath and Jenny Bornholdt. The main complaint regarding the work of these women poets was the fact that they wrote about themselves and their immediate world rather than tackling mainstream issues or topics.

In my first semester of studying my Masters I completed a major project for Creative and Critical Research with Jack Ross (editor of Poetry New Zealand) as my supervisor. This project defended confessional poetry from those detractors who would label it as solipsistic or narrow in scope. In this essay, I included information of my experiences with Anorexia Nervosa and the

power of confessional poetry as a form of catharsis. Jack asked if I would consider publishing this essay in the 2018 edition of *Poetry New Zealand.* The publication of this essay gave me confidence in my ability to argue logically when defending what many would consider to be the emotional or irrational. I aimed to bring a similar approach of blending creative nonfiction with considered arguments and research to this thesis.

As I researched women writers of the personal essay, I discovered there were women who felt about the personal essay as I do. Brenda Miller in her book *Tell it Slant* explains, 'I love the way writing creative nonfiction allows me to straddle a kind of "borderland" where I can discover new aspects of myself and the world, forge surprising metaphors and create artistic order out of life's chaos' (Miller, p.xiii). Adair Lara took it one step further when she declared, 'Writing is a kind of word-drunkenness that makes you want to do that – to take off your clothes and turn your experiences into art, despite who may be watching, despite your embarrassment, despite anything the world and your own self-doubts throw against you' (Lara, p.7). There is something both courageous and spontaneous about the personal essay but that doesn't mean the personal essay is without craft or careful structuring. The personal essay is a considered and structured foray into the wilds of the emotional and dramatic. Lara helps out here once again. She writes, 'you start with your hot heart spilling any old way onto the page. And then you bring in your cold eye' (Lara, p.9). It is this balance that is so often overlooked when the work of women writers of the personal essay is reviewed. As I discuss in my final essay, 'Downpour', women writers of the personal essay have been condemned for over-sharing, for being self-absorbed and for writing about the trivial. Frequently, the skill and technique of these women in communicating the painful and personal has been overlooked or underestimated. Similarly, the organic relationship between the

writer and the writing is too often discounted. There is too little celebration of the exploration of the rich, natural and unpredictable between the writers of the personal essay and their craft. The inclusion of the personal, the intimate and the emotional content does not exclude the existence of the informed, the considered and the well-crafted in the personal essay.

When I began devising the structure of *Invincible Summer,* I wanted to challenge ideas of what a personal essay should be and I wanted to focus on the subject matter of a sole woman suffering through a variety of experiences without succumbing to solipsism or sentimentality or sensationalism. My aim was to create pieces that would highlight the positive aspects of the personal essay and to demonstrate its function as a reliable and robust genre. I wanted share my stories not for sympathy but, rather, to share my experiences with other women who may have encountered similar experiences and to assure them that they were not alone. I wanted to empower other women to lift their voices in spite of a history that encouraged women to protect their reputations through suffering in silence. I wanted women and men to understand that there is nothing shameful about a woman admitting to suffering.

One of the things I consider to be a strength in this collection has been the emergence of the narrative and the way the individual threads of each essay has interwoven into a cohesive whole. *Invincible Summer* takes a developmental approach to the growth of the voice of the writer. In this way, the tone of the writer varies frequently and the mood of each essay is crafted in such a way to promote understanding rather than sympathy from the reader.

The first essay reflects my teenage years and mirrors the claustrophobic attitude of the narrator looking inwards at a self-aware stage of life. The writing, including choice of words and a lack of clear links in the structure echoes the disjointed thought process of a teenaged girl caught in the web of Anorexia. As the essays proceed through the next stages of my life, the writerly voice

matures and shows a more sophisticated awareness of and interaction with the world beyond the individual. Through the purposeful movement of the thesis, the reader witnesses the development of the writer from girl to woman, from daughter to wife to mother, and the progression and evolution of the writerly voice from the insular to the broader and more outward looking. This results in a variety of points of view, shifts in motivation and changes in tone and voice. The reader witnesses the progression of the writer from a vulnerable and powerless girl to a capable and wiser woman. In this way, the flexibility and varying purposes of the personal essay are explored, including confessional approaches, investigative approaches, and reflective approaches.

The strength of the narrative culminates, I believe, in the final essay in the creative component, 'Inclement Weather.' In this essay, the reader is able to see the growth and development of the writer as an individual. The writer begins her writing journey with her mother in the world and she ends her journey in a world without her mother. The contrast in shift in voice from the first essay in the creative component, 'Below Freezing' to 'Inclement Weather' is significant. The writer begins the creative component with an essay that discusses and focuses on her personal suffering and ends with the writer reflecting on the suffering of another woman, her mother. The most telling evidence of the shift in focus from the internal gaze to the external gaze is the way the writer evolves from the frequent use of 'I' in 'Below Freezing' to the use of 'my mother' in 'Inclement Weather.'

I think there is a great deal of good that can come from the acceptance of the 'whole self.' I wasn't so sure of this idea when I first began my writing journey but I'm not sure anyone can be in the field of creative nonfiction. I agree with Dinty W. Moore that 'the essayist *does not sit down at her desk already knowing all of the right answers* because if she did there would be no reason to write' (Moore, 2010, p.5/6). I started this thesis with the intent not to educate others about what

I know but, rather, to explore what I don't know. I wanted other people to understand that sometimes there is no rational explanation and sometimes there is no solution to the messiness that can occur in some lifetimes.

A major objective for me was to inspire women to understand that there is no ideal time to break a silence. There is never a 'right' time to discuss something painful or to revisit traumatic memories. But, this is a significant moment in time and a time of purposeful change for all women regarding societal expectations and limitations. Kristin Ferguson and Catherine Fox echo this view in their book *Women Kind* when they write, 'Now is the time to come together to challenge the basics of this unfairness because the world, at last, is starting to listen. There are no rules, no borders, and all are welcome' (Ferguson & Fox, 2018, p.15). It might just be time for women to swap their pain for purposeful action through the personal essay. Most importantly, I wanted to communicate that there is no weakness in admitting that suffering exists. I agree with Jane Caro, editor of 'Unbreakable,' who says, 'Hiding what happened to us not only doesn't help anyone, it perpetuates the legacy of shame that has silenced victims for millennia' (Caro, 2017, p.xviii). There is no reward for suffering in silence.

There is a considerable distance between what should be viewed as the 'personal' and what should be viewed as the 'private.' *Invincible Summer* is a collection of essays that deals with the personal but, I hope, does not overreach into the realm of the private. There have been times when I have known I have not been ready to commit certain experiences to paper and there are some details of my life that no one will ever know. These essays have been drafted several times over and I have spent many hours contemplating the contents of each. I have gained permission from my husband and my children to include details and I have omitted names or changed them at times to protect the privacy of others.

In these essays, I have sought to deliberately avoided romanticising suffering or resorting to shock value to attract reader engagement. Any resemblance to anything romantic or shocking has been an unintentional by-product of attempts to effectively tell a story. One of the myths I was determined to discredit when I began writing this collection was that of the delicate, patient, martyred woman who chooses resilience and denial in order to avoid disrupting the lives of others. This is the often romanticised traditional view of women. I had learnt, when growing up, that this was expected and appropriate behaviour for women and it affected my perception of my own suffering for too many years. I wish so very much that my mother had broken her silence fully and allowed herself the space and right to suffer. I hope these personal essays encourage other women to embrace their whole existence and to relinquish their silence in the face of their own personal suffering.

I took an organic approach to the writing of this collection because it seemed like an unnatural and awkward thing to approach it clinically. What mattered most to me was getting the words right in order to best reflect the frequently painful life experiences I was writing about. I aimed to differentiate between the facts of an event and my personal truth. As a result of this, some pieces had numerous versions while others were written in one or two sittings. Part of the reason for this is because reflecting on suffering is often as painful as the initial experience. Because of the issue of this revisited pain, I doubt I'd have been able to share my stories in any form other than the personal essay. There is something immediate about this form that allows the writer to disregard issues of formality and the rules of structure in order to unravel and share the complexities of different life experiences. The personal essay is also a compatible genre for creative nonfiction because it so easily forgives the expectation that successful stories tidy up all loose ends and have happily-ever-afters. Philip Gerard in his book *Creative Nonfiction:*

*Researching and Crafting Stories of Real Life* explains this aspect well. He writes, 'The hardest part of writing creative nonfiction is that you're stuck with what really happened – you can't make it up' (Gerard, 1996, p. 5). He then adds, 'You're stuck with stories that don't always turn out the way you wish they had turned out' (Gerard, 1996, p.6). I was very grateful for the flexibility of the personal essay when crafting an approach to the telling of all the on-going messiness of my personal truths.

These are essays that, I hope, demonstrate courage in their telling. Ultimately, these essays elaborate on what is not known rather than what is known. I still don't have the answers to many of the questions I've posed in my essays such as 'how does one write about having OCD?' or 'how does one describe living with Anorexia'? or 'how does one express what it's like to parent a child with Autism?' But, I feel that I may have drawn a little closer to answering these questions through the writing process for *Invincible Summer* and I hope my readers are also a little closer to the answers.

Lastly, I would like to elaborate on the inclusion of the song lyrics throughout this collection. Music has always been an important part of my life and it has always affected me deeply. There have always been some songs that have resonated more significantly for me than others and during times of great stress or emotional trauma I have turned to these specific songs. The lyrics included in this thesis are from songs that I have sung and, listened to, many times at different stages in my life. It was at the suggestion of my thesis supervisor, Ingrid Horrocks, that I decided to find a musical term to separate my critical component from my creative component. The creative component is titled 'Concerto' and, just as it describes a musical piece written for one instrument with the support of an orchestra, it indicates that the creative component is a piece written for the individual with the support of an ensemble of other people. The critical component

is titled ‘Risoluto’ which is a music term that means, very aptly in my opinion ‘bold, strong and resolute.’

It is a relief to embrace all of the stories of my life that I had previously kept filed away in secret compartments. I have encountered freedom in accepting my personal truths. Adair Lara describes this liberation through personal writing in her book *Naked Drunk and Writing,* ‘No one could deny the experience I’d had or that I felt about it the way I did’ (Lara, 2010, p.6). This is what really lies at the base of many personal essays; the embracing of personal truths free of guilt or shame or intimidation. Through the creation of these personal essays I have developed a greater understanding of myself and have allowed myself to feel compassion rather than disappointment for the woman I was in those stories. I have, I hope, done her and the personal essay justice.

# CONCERTO

## 1. Below Freezing

*'Cause I was born to destroy you*

*And I am growing by the hour.'*

'Hate This and I'll Love You' - MUSE

The day of my first athletics carnival in high school, I awake with a familiar buzz of energy from primary school. I am 13 years old. The second daughter and middle child of good-looking parents who are well-known in this rural Queensland town. I've only spent a few months at my new high school and I still feel more like a primary school student with my spindly legs and skinny arms. The one thing I know I really learnt at the Catholic school where I spent my primary school years is that I can sprint. These new teachers and students have never seen me run.

*

I pull on a pair of velour maroon shorts and scrape my hair back into a ponytail. I walk down the hill from our house to the athletics field where the school has relocated its students for the day. All that is in my mind is sprinting. Adrenalin booms in my ears and through my veins as I stalk up and down the lines of waiting athletes; on edge, waiting, prowling. I run the 100m and the 200m and I am happy with my results…but it is the 400m that thrills me. The boys and the girls run together. Somehow, I pull away from the heaving mass of adolescent bodies. I beat them all and come in first. I stand, incredulous and panting on the other side of the finish line, my hands on my knees, waiting for acknowledgement from my peers about my run. I look around expectantly for the

congratulatory comments. What I hear instead are the snickers and muffled comments from a group of boys at the finish line that have nothing to do with my run but a lot to do with my legs and my 'short shorts'. I wrap my arms around my body, self-conscious and awkward and try to make myself smaller. I edge off the field. I leave the track with its haphazard and deceptive guard of honour. I head toward the ramshackle tennis courts and press my back into the wire of its rusting fence. The win doesn't bring me respect or security. I feel unsafe and foolish. I do not go back to the field.

*

One day I wake up and puberty has arrived. It takes hold of my once angular, boyish frame and begins to make mounds of flesh that encase my bones. I don't like it, this new covering, this evidence of the hormones hijacking my body. But, in truth, it is more than that. I don't recognize myself. I walk around in this new body like someone clothed in tin cans. I feel I clank now…that I clatter...I jar in the space. I am no longer able to fold myself into corners. I have become conspicuous.

*

A girl at school tells me that a group of boys regularly talk about my budding breasts. I am humiliated that these small, new additions to my body have been noticed by others. I wait for the girl to tell me that she has defended me. That she has told them not to speak of me in such a way. She does no such thing. I stand with my jaw slack; my mouth devoid of words. I am betrayed. And

idiotic. I know some of these boys. In primary school, I would have considered some of them friends. I feel as if I have been physically harmed. I want my old life back. I want the old familiar back and forth of the primary school yard when the girls stood, hands on hips, face to face with the boys, shouting them down, confronting them. When we yelled fast and forgave faster. But, I cannot snatch it back… Now there is innuendo and flirtatious games to play that make me feel like I'm being smothered by wet cardboard. The girls cackle at me and the idea of my 'pyramid tits.' They laugh while they push their own chests forward and shoot yearning glances at the guilty boys.

*

The PE Master discovers I am good at running. Those wins have been recorded. He compiles his list of athletes for interschool meets and he posts the typed sheets on the school noticeboards. Someone points out my name. I am on the school athletics team. Other students turn to tell me; to point me out. I will be expected to go to training and to travel to meets at other schools and sports fields. I will have no choice. I feel an overwhelming hatred for the athletics team and anger toward the Sports Master who has made decisions for me without my knowledge. I make plans to miss PE lessons and I will simply never attend a training session. Not a single one. I know that I cannot refuse to be on the team. It is compulsory and the Sports Master can allocate students as he sees fit. But, I determine ways to slide out of his grasp. I bring notes from home or I hide in the sickroom and I, more increasingly grit my teeth, jump the school fence and sprint away from the horrible school and the panic inducing training sessions.

*

Monday mornings in high school are parade days. On these days, the entire student body is made to stand in their year levels before a makeshift dais of rostra. I stand on assembly with everybody else. I look straight ahead at the speaker but I am sick. There is a strange not right feeling that somehow invades every nerve and sinew. My insides have been scooped out and replaced with quavering liquid. The liquid runs in waves down my arms and legs into fingers and toes. I need to move. I fall. My head cracks into a concrete pillar as I go. I wake on my back; my torso in the shade and my head in the sun's glare. There are teachers leaning over me like a many headed beast – their faces blotted out by shadow. The teachers speak. One wants to know if I ate breakfast. My older sister and I are transported somehow to the administration building.

Our mother is out of town. She has gone to a dentist's appointment in the city two and a half hours away. The school contacts our aunt, our mother's sister. She arrives at the school flustered and embarrassed because she is not wearing a bra under her terry toweling pink house dress. She hustles us into her pale green, cigar shaped car and drives us to the doctor's surgery. On the way, she complains about her wobbling breasts under her shirt and chastises me in a half-humorous manner.

I'm ushered into the doctor's consulting room. My sister and my aunt are with me. I lie on the examination table. My aunt relays what has happened. The doctor asks me to report how many fingers he is holding up. I feel the frustration building as I try to find the fingers. He repeats the question and I fail to answer again. Finally, exasperated, I ask him; 'What fingers?' I am blind. My sister dissolves into hysterics. The doctor asks me if I have a headache and I reply no. Seconds later I begin to wail and clutch at my head. 'There it is,' observes the doctor with a degree of calm satisfaction.

*

The doctor sends me to the local hospital. My mother has still not appeared. I am admitted to a ward with another girl occupying an accompanying bed. The beds are old with metal frames and flaking white paint. The staff bring me toast with vegemite and orange juice and white tablets. I spend the night in the creaking vinyl floored room and in the morning, am taken to a room to have breakfast with the other girl. She says it is cold. I have not noticed. I wonder why my mother has left me here when she knows how to make toast and bring juice and administer white pills.

*

Somehow, my fainting spell and the subsequent headache are determined to be symptoms of migraine. My mother is informed that her middle child has suffered a migraine and that this diagnosis will require further investigation. Another trip to the city will need to be planned. Our regular GP gives my mother the name of a specialist who will conduct tests to check on the behaviour of my brain. What I do not know is that my mother is concerned that I may display a propensity to 'take fits,' a behaviour that my father has displayed at least three times in his married life. My mother has been waiting in dread for symptoms to surface in one of her three kids. On the day of the appointment, my mother and I travel alone to the city. My mother looks sophisticated and carefully put together. I am a shambolic mess. At fourteen, I am caught between girlhood and womanhood. In the specialist's office, I am humiliated to be stripped down to my unbecoming juvenile bra and pants. I have my period and think I will die from embarrassment. My legs feel thick and the outline of the pad wedged into my underwear is visible. I am inept at the maths

questions. The doctor's assistants stick blu tac with the electrodes attached onto my scalp. The machine blips as I open and close my eyes in response to the specialist's instructions. Inside my head I am tired and dejected; ugly and deficient and I think about never opening my eyes… My mother chats energetically to the specialist. It is like she is behind a wall. I spend the rest of the afternoon with my chin dipped, pulling blu tac out of my hair.

*

The specialist finds nothing unusual in my scans and tests. There is medication for the migraines. Two tablets to be taken every morning. My mother is told the tablets may stimulate appetite. The prescribing of the medication occurs at the same time that my body decides to complete its journey into womanhood. This is the real beginning of my loss of control of my body. I don't know if the boost of roundness to my breasts or buttocks or thighs is a result of the medication or hormones. Alone or in conjunction, womanhood and medication will strip away the sprinter's physique. Gangly legs will become fleshier. Breasts will begin to drive away the remnants of the childhood torso. I will struggle with the oncoming changes as organic as they may be. My lack of ability to sense my body in the space I move through will become an issue. After 14 years of ownership my body is a vehicle I do not recognize and cannot maneuver.

*

I stand at the lime green kitchen bench with my younger brother and my older sister making chocolate milk drinks. My father lets my brother and my sister stir and mix without comment. He

tells me, ‘You really shouldn’t drink that.’ For a moment, I am touched thinking he has remembered that chocolate can cause migraines. ‘You don’t want to get any bigger than you are.’ My face explodes into heated embarrassment. I am five-foot-four and 56 kilograms. I am obese and disgusting; vulnerable and exposed. I remove my hands from the glass and I put the spoon down, my skin searing with shame. From this day on I will always think of myself as the big child in the family; dwarfing everybody else, including my parents with my height and my size. I will always feel that I take up too much space in a room; that I am overwhelming everybody with my sheer enormity. I have begun the battle to escape myself.

*

Most of my teachers at the high school hate me. I am not sure why but they do. Something about me irritates them. I cannot get a grasp of the varying timetable. I never seem to be able to work out the teachers or how to behave in a way that would make them think better of me. I can never seem to be able to remember to bring my textbooks or to do my homework. I am constantly abuzz with anxiety. Just being at school seems exhausting to me and I cannot apply myself in classes. It is only when a new teacher arrives that I begin earning As in English. But, by that stage, it is too late. Much as I am humbled to have someone recognise and nurture my abilities, I cannot overcome the social anxiety I feel in the school grounds. I begin to actively avoid school. I feign sickness. I beg and plead and rage at my mother. I lock myself in the toilet. I fear the anger of my siblings who quickly tire of me keeping them late through my avoidance behaviour. When I do return to school, my tepid friendships have cooled and the distance between me and my peers widens. More

and more I retreat into myself. I begin to wonder how I can become the person I want to be, a confident person in control.

*

I am staring down into the toilet bowl. The remnants of bread and cheese are a soggy mass and they are bobbing in the water. It occurs to me as I look at the regurgitated food that the bread and cheese can hurt no one now. They have been rendered harmless. It is like a revelation. I feel I have discovered the solution to a mysterious puzzle. I am cleansed. A new beginning is offered. The moment is life changing. My brain will never work 'normally' ever again. I will stumble mentally through the next decades as an ungainly scarecrow. I will never grasp the concept of 'being at peace' again. The door to the past and my childhood has been closed and the gaping wound of my future has been opened.

*

I stagger down the hallway from my bedroom to the bathroom. Dizziness has enveloped me from the moment I put a foot to the carpeted floor. I lurch into walls and have to correct my path. I stand beside the stained lourved door of the airing cupboard and rest my head against its ridges. I have not eaten for 24 hours. I will not eat today. But, my reward for this voluntary starvation will be a glass of orange juice. I know a glass of orange juice equals one piece of white bread. I push away from the dark brown cupboard and I weave toward the bathroom scales in order to weigh myself. I am already shrinking and I do not have words to describe the elation.

*

I become a fevered fanatic who consumes only a glass of juice a day. By the end of the first week the scales tell me I have lost 14 pounds (6.4 kgs). I am feeling human; less grotesque and, more worthy of living. I am delighted to be 8 stone (50 kgs). I am flushed with a feeling of success and deep-seated satisfaction. My willpower has been unleashed and it has become an individual entity that has taken up residence within me. I am… happy. I have reached my target but… I realise I will not stop there. I remember my sprinter's body with legs that were hard and thin and that did not touch. I remember the beat of the sun upon those spindly legs and I know that is my true weight – my true identity. That is who I am meant to be. And I will get her back. I am chasing her.

*

I stand on the scales in front of my best girlfriend. It is like standing in the middle of a winner's podium. She has just weighed herself and is bemoaning her 57kg, young woman's body. I cannot wait. I am almost salivating to show her my incredible cleverness. My weight is revealed on the scales and she pulls back in vast disappointment. 'I thought you would weigh about the same as me.' She frowns. She is perplexed. Inside I am grinning and grinning and hugging my shrinking frame with joy. I do not tell her what I have been doing. It is my secret. Let people think this is who I really am.

*

Somewhere, in a recess of my brain, an illogical idea is born and slithers out. It bends itself around the rational. A parasite of a notion that insinuates itself into every aspect of my daily ability to function. It tells me that 'fat' can be transmitted, is in fact, contagious. I must be careful not to contract this 'fatness' from objects or people around me. I must take care what I look at and what I say. As much as possible I must try to master my thoughts and my senses. The idea grows and matures and before long it is an individual entity that guides me daily, lays down the rules and issues consequences to its host. The entity is married to willpower and, together, they work to whittle my body down and still further down. Like a client ignoring the fact that their personal trainer is, in fact a destructive sadist, I obey the entity and its spouse. It is easier to relinquish control than face the fact I may be out of control.

*

I become acquainted with real hunger, starvation. My brain bargains with me frequently. A relentless voice issues forth from the entity daily. It rationalizes and negotiates. It is ordered and controlled. It plans the schedule and I stick to it. I follow the rules. Because the rules bring peace. If I eat anything substantial then I must not eat for three days afterward. There must be no milk on my cereal. There must be no dairy. There must be no fat of any type ingested. Everything eaten must be written down. I begin the Food Journals. I will fill several books with these writings – each so painfully neat with headings, correct punctuation and dates of the suffering recorded. I am selective about the books and the pens that I use. These instruments must be worthy of the task of holding this essential information. Each daily entry attests to what I have eaten for breakfast, lunch

and dinner. Any failing will be recorded as evidence over the coming days. How liberating and consoling it is to be able to lodge an empty entry under the individual meal headings. Any disruption to my eating routine becomes an issue of discomfort and distress. The only way to compensate for anything unusual or unplanned is to observe the practice of two or three lean days after the sin is committed. Once the penance is completed then I can begin the Spartan meals again. When I begin to feel exhausted or mentally depleted I remember that my brain is a hard task master but it is proud of me and it gets results.

*

I have become an expert. My mother drops me off at the front of the large supermarket in the neighbouring town while she attends to other business. I find the supermarket visits to be exciting and a little overwhelming. I experience anxiety as I loiter in the supermarket aisles reading ingredients. I do not want to make a mistake. I use the knowledge I acquire from diet books and magazines to determine whether I will purchase something or not. I am horrified to find that a cheese slice is two serves of the product as is a package of noodles. How despicable. I become proficient at portion control. My ineptitude for maths does not extend to my dieting. I constantly calculate and recall knowledge and apply it. I am frequently elated at my inability to be 'tricked' by the manufacturers into eating a full-sized portion of anything. I begin to realise that there is a conspiracy that extends throughout all branches of my life. I am surrounded by people who are trying to force me to become fat. I must remain eternally vigilant to avert the catastrophe of weight gain. I meet my mother outside at the pick-up spot at the agreed time, clutching my bag of carefully chosen food.

*

I purchase containers only after much consideration of their potential to fulfill the role of food vessel. I wash them thoroughly and, only when all traces of any other human contact have been washed away do I commit my precious food to them. I secure a part of the top shelf in my mother's disorganized pantry and line my containers up after I push my mother's chaos to the side. I acquire measuring cups and use them religiously and meticulously. No one is permitted to touch or contaminate the containers. I show my older sister and my younger brother the containers in their allocated spot and I tell them they are mine. I label the containers. My cereal lives in one, my low-fat crackers in another. I am organized and clean. The organization requires further regimentation in my life but, the anxiety of the arranging, cleansing and checking is alleviated by the sweet rush of release that ensues when all is deemed to be well. If the containers remain pristine that feeling of relief and exhilaration will remain.

*

When we return home one evening a large green frog is squatting outside our front door. I am struck immobile with fear at the sight of the iridescent frog; horrible with its webbed feet and wide, smirking mouth. I beg someone, anyone to kill it. My voice is frail and is directed to no one in particular. My mother and my siblings file into the house. I look at the green blob wedged against the concrete wall of the house. I imagine it has been in the house. I imagine it has been in my cereal. I can see its sticky feet waving through the balls of puffed rice. I struggle and struggle. A

battle ensues in my head as I argue back and forth and try, hopelessly, to convince myself that there is no way the frog could have gotten into the cereal container. The next morning, I am reduced to tears as I stand in the pantry doorway. Despite my arguments I cannot make myself eat the cereal. Somehow, the thought has contaminated the container and its contents. Finally, beyond agonized, I confess to my mother. 'I wish you had killed it. Now, I can't stop thinking of it in the cereal.' I sob. She says nothing.

*

I cook for my family and eat none of it myself. It brings me a strange satisfaction to think I appear to others to have a functional relationship with food. My cooking efforts are rewarded with positive comments from my family. I invent recipes and serve them up without tasting them. I read recipes in magazines and it is as good as eating the dishes. I chop, I stir, I season…I am well versed in all aspects of food. My family eat the carbohydrates and fats that cause my lips to sneer. My family eat the protein I offer them indiscriminately, to my fascination and horror. I do not like the fact that it could feed my body and cause my muscles to grow. Muscle weighs more than fat. I am well versed in all aspects of food. I know the sugar content of all fruits and vegetables I may encounter. I avoid fats and carbohydrates. I nourish the bodies of others while I feed the sickness in my brain. I have an overpowering need to diminish.

*

I go into the bedroom I share with my older sister. Her jeans lie on her bed. Without planning to, I pick them up and slip them on. The stiff denim slides easily over my protruding hip bones. My sister is four inches shorter than me but the jeans fit perfectly along the length of my legs. I look at myself in the mirror in astonishment. I call my sister up the hallway with excitement and pride burbling up in my throat. She stands in the doorway and casts a cool eye over me and she says in a throw away manner, 'Don't stretch them.' She goes. And my smile is dissolving on my lips and I understand. I need to be thinner.

*

My mother decides there is something wrong with me. My father comes to talk to me. I am lying on the silver-grey couch in the 'good' lounge room. He tells me how pleased he was when I first started losing weight. He says he was worried that I would be fat like my aunt. And then he tells me that only abnormal people don't eat. I am drowning in my own bloody thoughts of failure and despair. What I hear is that I am still in danger of being 'the fat one.' The only thing I am sure of is that I must not stop.

*

My grandmother has a corner shop. She sends home a box of chocolates to encourage me to eat. My mother holds them out to me. She says, 'Nana sent these home for you.' I am amazed. The box is rectangular and darkly coloured. There are splashes of red across its face. I stand in disbelief, contorted inside. Somebody has shown concern and interest in me. I am mildly thrilled to receive

them. And embarrassed that I may have become an inconvenience or a worry to others. I realise my mother has been talking to her own mother about me. It is a touching yet strange notion to me. The chocolates are sealed tight in the plastic film covering the box. I love the glossy feel of the plastic. I hug them to my chest and take them to my room. I can smell the chocolate through the pristine packaging. I slip the box underneath my bed. I plan when I will eat them. Over the next weeks I check on them regularly and note the amount of dust growing on them. I dust them like an ornament. They are never eaten.

*

Eventually my mother admits defeat and stops fighting my school avoidance. She drives my sister and my brother. It becomes an accepted fact that I will not go to school and my siblings stop harping at me about it. The head mistress from the school comes to talk to my mother about my truancy. My mother does not invite her into the house. I twitch the loungeroom curtains aside and I watch my mother talk to the head mistress in the front yard of our house. My mother holds her head high. I cannot hear anything they say.

*

I agonise over drinking water. With parched tongue, I check and recheck my nutrition sources to confirm that it contains a little salt but no calories. But, how can this be a fact? I sit on the flesh coloured carpet in my parents' good lounge room and stare, unconvinced at the diet book that I have snuck away from my mother. How can something be completely guilt free and innocent?

Could the water, in some way, trip me up and make me fat? How can I risk such a thing? I shut the book. My brain starves and dehydrates.

*

When I reach a plateau in the weight loss I am devastated. It is simply not falling off fast enough. My goal is to be 44kgs (7 stone). At the moment, I am 48 kilograms and, though it is wonderful to be the weight I was when I left primary school, it is not comforting. I am determined to reach my goal. I know that when I reach that goal I am going to be so deliriously happy. I know everything is going to be alright. I know I will eat normal food and socialize with people; my rituals and compulsions will disappear and I will get back on with the business of my life. I will pursue other dreams confidently dressed in the mantle of my new body and my new identity.

*

I stand alone in the kitchen; desperate for food. The lime green bench top is covered in packages of food and used cups and glasses. My hand juts out, sticklike. I open the packet of jam biscuits and spread them with butter despite the fact that I hate butter. I eat the biscuits. I am like a wooden puppet with jaws mashing up and down without any human context. I eat the whole serving bowl of fruit salad. Then, I jolt back into my body and I am running into the backyard toward the tank stand, my finger stabbing down my throat. My relief at the sight of the spoiled food soaking into the brown grass is immense. I am so very, very thankful. I tremble with gratitude. I have another chance.

*

My mother lets me buy containers of fresh fruit salad at her father's eatery. Together we pretend that this regimentation is normal. Sometimes I even pretend to look at the menu. Always, it is the same, a container of fruit salad and a can of diet coke. Once they are purchased, I clutch them close to me until we reach home. In this way, the food is protected from contamination. At home, I eat the fruit salad and drink the Diet Coke. I love eating fruit salad – I pretend I am eating a real meal because I get to use cutlery. I love the fact that the chunks of fruit on the white plastic fork are just sugar and water. It is so easy to burn off – so easy to get rid of – not like horrid carbs and protein which threaten to lurk in my body. I sit in the same place every time I eat my food. I perch on the striped brown and yellow armchair cushion and concentrate on the mouthfuls so that each piece remains uncontaminated by thought or action. I lift the fork to my mouth with my sterilized hands. One day, when the sugar and water meal is gone I realise I don't even need the fruit salad or Diet Coke and I am up racing outside. I stand around the corner of the house in our front garden and, as I vomit up softened chunks of fruit and black foam, I am exhilarated and free.

*

My lips are stained brown from the skins of the apples I eat. Sometimes the skin peels from my lips like strips of soggy brown paper. My tongue is covered with a thick white coating that I scrape off with my fingernail. My period has long since disappeared. I am on automatic pilot. I cannot reclaim control of the ship. I am beginning to nosedive into the jungle.

*

I lie in bed wrapped in devastation. I am begging, pleading, imploring God to let me weigh the same in the morning. I cannot sleep for fear that I am lying there growing somehow. I berate myself for eating. I cannot justify why I did it. I am disgusted in myself. Nothing else matters but being thin. NOTHING. I am a lather of moist terror. I clasp my hands tighter and tighter in painful prayer. At some point in the night, I doze off only to wake fitful, starving and desperate at dawn.

*

I hold the apple to my lips. I try to make myself eat it. Even the entity has agreed I can have it. But, my mouth will not open and my lips and teeth will not part to allow the apple to enter. I am not sure of the relationship my mouth would have with the fruit. It seems illogical to consider placing it on my tongue. And how would my teeth introduce themselves to it? I know real fear as I lower the apple. The world scares me. Food scares me. I do not know how to eat anymore.

*

Being thin has become my passion, a distorted religion. It's a cult and I am the most devout follower, the staunchest believer, the most pathetic victim. Being thin equals purity, worthiness and salvation. Only thinness can lead to peace. I know the sacrifices I make will deliver me from

contamination and inadequacies. Each day I am becoming more pure, more worthy, more salvageable. I imagine the glory of being thin enough to slide under doors. Of being a slip of paper.

Of simply…

…melting away…

*

We sit in the restaurant, my mother, my father, my younger brother and I. We are on holiday on the glamorous Gold Coast. I am struggling. My nightmare is almost complete. A restaurant visit, on our vacation. Menus perched before us – we will have to complete the ritual and order and eat food. I have planned zealously in advance for this holiday. I have been on near zero food consumption in preparation. The plan now is that I can eat food. That I should be able to eat food. Even eat ice-cream. Because, even if I eat, I'm so thin, I'll only revert to pre-holiday weight. But, it is hard, so very hard to let go. I am constantly fretting and worrying over undoing all my hard work. Now, we sit in the restaurant and my brother kicks my foot under the table. My nerves are screaming – I am taut as a bow string. An arrow about to be loosed at a hostile target. I snap at him to stop it. My brother thinks my overreaction to the kick is funny. He kicks me again. My head is full of shrieking violins. I demand that he stop. He does it again. I am up in an hysterical mess, hurling harsh words aimlessly and hurtling out of the restaurant. Once outside, I stand still on the footpath, alone in the warm coastal air. I am filled with pain. I heave in air and grasp my knees like a marathon runner. I have nowhere and no one to run to. I cannot even pretend to myself that I can cope. Above, the summer night sky is obscenely beautiful.

*

When we walk along the beach I hope that people who see me with my protruding hip bones and xylophone ribs think this is my natural shape. That this is how I am meant to look. The idea fills me with intense excitement. The notion that people are looking at me with envy while I eat ice-cream is thrilling. I wonder if they look at me the way I used to look at others, enviously thinking how lucky they were to be able to eat what they wanted while retaining a rake thin physique. Now I feel lucky. It is like winning an award. It is the same euphoria as crossing the finish line first in a race.

*

I stand outside our house. The hill slopes away and a breeze rustles up its length and into our yard. I stand in my short sleeves in the summer afternoon. The wind breathes out and licks at my arms. For the first time, I see how long the soft white down has become on my arms – how my body has created this covering to shield my shell from the perpetual cold I feel. I reach out with disbelieving fingers and stretch a hair to its full length. It is funny I think that while the hair on my head is falling out this hair is growing thicker on my limbs. It is a familiar horror. I do not recognize this body.

*

Terror grips me when I realise I will never function normally in the world again. How can I ever leave this house? I know now that I cannot exist in a world with food. I wish bitterly that human beings did not have to eat. Why, oh, why, do we have to be in servitude to eating? The outside world with its array of junkfood and real food is overwhelming. How do I work out what to eat? I become increasingly confused about the role that food plays in a person's life. I am rapidly reaching the conclusion that I will never have a functional relationship with food ever again. I reject food, I reject it…I pray it stays away.

*

I am dressing in the bedroom I share with my sister. I catch sight of myself in the dresser mirror. I gape in horror and revulsion at the skeleton in front of me. For this one fleeting moment, I do not look fat. It is like looking at someone else. I see nothing but bones and bones. My skin stretched taut over my face. My hair dark and lifeless. My collarbones breaking through my skin. I tremble. I feel like a prisoner. I am my own jailer and I know that I am incapable of stopping. I know I do not have the power to save the creature in the mirror. I know, in this moment, that I need help.

*

It is unthinkable to live anyway else. I write in my food journal diligently. I weigh myself every morning. I have long since stopped attending school. There was no point. The school is peopled with alien beings who laugh too violently and show too much teeth and skin. I shudder at the thought. I am weak and hopeless. My daily routine has become a parody of the life of an old

person. Draped in fatigue and hunger I rise every morning, make my bed and move to the armchair in the lounge. I will stay here until 10.00am when I will eat my apple. It is only ever one apple regardless of its size. I try to slide under my brain's radar by cheating. I try to buy bigger apples but they are frequently inedible and floury and there is little pleasure in eating them. But, the experience of being able to take actual bitefuls of something; the physical experience of grinding up the tasteless fruit is more valued than the idea of something delicious. This is the point at which my mother panics; when my world has shrunk to a striped faux leather armchair and a browning piece of fruit.

*

My mother tells me I need help and tells me she is taking me to see our GP. My mother has known the doctor for years. He has seen her as a regular patient and has helped her through her struggles with anxiety and depression and he has seen all of her children for various ailments at some time or another. As we sit in the waiting room on the beige, plastic chairs I think about what the doctor may ask me. I think about what I might say. In one of the doctor's four consulting rooms, he asks me to sit on the examination bed and he asks my mother to leave the room. I am nervous and a little dry mouthed. I can't seem to be able to project myself as a working human being. The doctor closes the door behind my mother and turns to me. He does not ask me any questions. He admonishes me for what I have forced my mother to endure. He gives me an instruction. He orders me in a calm voice to stop doing what I am doing to my mother. He makes me tell him that I will stop it. Befuddled, I agree to stop though I am not sure what it is I am doing. The doctor nods at

me and opens his consulting room door and I slip off the table and go. My mother stands when she sees me.

*

When I am a ghastly marionette, a poor imitation of a teenaged girl, my mother secures the name and address of a clinic in the city. My uncle is a doctor and he has arranged the appointment. Years later I find out another girl has been pushed from the appointment schedule to allow me to attend the clinic. My mother phones the clinic and makes an appointment. She tells me I am going to see a psychiatrist. I do not argue and I am not alarmed. I am cardboard, grey and thin and one dimensional. The world drifts by in black and white tones.

*

I sit on the blue velvet cushions on the wrought iron chairs at my parents' treasured oval glass dining room table. I take up my pen and write in the food journal. Suddenly, like a flash of white, I see the future. It is a series of never ending doors and each is identical. And each leads to the same thing. Every day I will rise, sit, eat an apple and wait for 7pm to slide into bed. The insidious horror of the days of my life span in front of me. I sit, in ghastly stillness. The pointlessness, the utter pointlessness of existence. The futility of trying to alter the course of a life. I intuitively sense and realise these things in a flash and I realise I am meaningless and so is my existence. And I sense my complete isolation and loneliness in the world. How can I possibly continue to live?

*

The psychiatrist has a thick dark bob and expensive sensible shoes. She wears skirts with matching jackets and business blouses. She is the epitome of efficiency. She interviews me alone. I sit hunched on the thick cushion in the metal framed chair. She is disarming and pleasant; instantly trustworthy. She sits behind her desk. She looks at me when I speak and sometimes pauses to write notes on sheets of paper that are housed in a manila folder. When she calls my mother back into the room she tells my mother that I am a perfectionist and that I have Anorexia Nervosa. I do not move. I let the words filter into my brain and I try them out for size. I'm not sure that they fit me. It seems incredible to me that I 'have' something that others can 'have'. My mother holds her hands tightly together and she asks what we need to do now.

*

The Anorexia greedily slurps up all of my energy. By 7pm each night, I drag myself up the hallway and collapse onto my sagging thin mattress. Here I lie, famishing throughout the night waiting for the apple that will appear at 10.00am the following day. One evening I once more refuse to eat any food that my mother offers me. I toil up the hallway with the day's duties and routines complete. The exhaustion is beyond description. I pull back the coverings of the bed I have used my precious energy to make that morning. I stare at the mess in my bed. There, spread out is a meal. Potatoes and beans are mashed into the sheets. Someone has slipped up the hallway and put the food I refused to eat in my bed. I do not call out. I do not tell anyone. I stretch out my bony digits and scrape the sheets from the bed. I fetch clean sheets from the linen cupboard in the hallway.

Struggling, I make the bed with the clean linen and then I sink onto the sheets and lie like driftwood on a dark shore. Unwanted, rotting driftwood.

*

I imagine the Anorexia as a witch that imprisons waifs in metal towers. I write poems about her and I call her ‘Ms Anna Rexia’. The entity, the parasite in my brain has a name. I despair of ever losing her brutal affection and her intrusive attention. I am tired of the scrutiny of my body and my brain, of appointments and vomiting and dizziness and a world with food in it and I am tired of living.

*

The psychiatrist asks me at my weekly appointment if I ever think about hurting myself. I tell her in a rather detached way that I do think about dying. She asks me if I feel lonely. She asks me if I ever cry myself to sleep. Something breaks open beneath my ribs. I cannot control my face. I begin to cry.

*

My mother finds out about the school from another mother in the town. It is a senior college that offers a technical school and academic subjects to students. Students can train for a trade or study in order to gain university entry. My parents decide to send my younger brother. He has finished

year ten and is not interested in the slightest in continuing on with further studies in senior. He will study mechanics. Our family begins to prepare for this new stage of our life. One day, my mother asks me if I would like to attend the senior college. She has discovered that the school offers Drama as an academic subject for students who wish to pursue university preparation. I become hysterical. Change is terrifying. How would I cope without my routines? I feel angry and threatened at the suggestion of loss of control over my existence. I tell my mother my answer is a definite 'no.' My mother manages to calm me. She suggests I go with her, my father and my brother when they make the three-hour journey to visit the school. She suggests I can make up my mind after I see the school campus. I go with them begrudgingly.

*

The school is in the beachside town we used to vacation at when we were children. I have countless good memories of this place. We drive through familiar streets and head past some sugar cane fields toward the school. I am still sure that I will not be a future student on this campus. But, something stirs within me. Something light rustles up under the debris of my life that lies like rotting leaves at my core. The college is large and clean and new. The pavements are wide and lined with greenery and flower beds. How I love the smell of the damp red brown bark in the gardens! The classrooms are fresh and many windowed. There is a canteen complete with metal chairs and tables like those seen in Hollywood movies that feature edgy teenagers. There is an inviting library with double glass doors and tidy shelves of fragrant books. My parents stand with the school's deputy principal outside the administration building and discuss whatever it is adults talk about in those meetings. I look away from my parents toward the library and the school's bell

tower. We have reached the end of the school tour and I have a sudden realization. I have no doubt that I want to attend this school. I want to seize this opportunity. The warm summer wind sweeps lazily around the corners of the pale buildings and through the fragrant gardens. The coastal breeze drifts across my face. I know what I will tell my parents. I want to start again.

## 2. Avalanche

*A trouble that can't be named.*

*A tiger's waiting to be tamed…*

'Clocks' – Cold Play

I squatted over my nephew's cup with the yellow cartoon character on the side. He had collected this cup from a fast food restaurant that included such toys in their kids' meals. I made sure that I collected my pee mid-stream. I removed the wand from the pregnancy test kit and placed it in the urine. Then I waited for a brief moment as adrenaline coursed throughout my tense body. I studied the grey walls in my sister's toilet. I could not fathom that I couldn't be pregnant. There could be no other explanation for my hardened breasts, for the electric zing that zoomed throughout my every fibre. I knew it. I knew it. I looked at the wand and saw the proof of it. The lines so very, very bold. Such a vivid pink! Both lines so strong, so equally coloured. And I could not conceive of a more blessed moment. It was the best experience, the best discovery I had ever made. I grinned. For myself. At the baby growing in my body. My hands trembled. Everything I had ever wanted was in my abdomen. My heart in flight, I flung open the toilet door.

I called out to my sister. I had been staying with her since my husband relocated after his promotion. I waved the urine soaked stick in the air. I revealed my sacred secret. I apologised for peeing in my nephew's cup. We clasped each other. We jumped up and down like over-excited teenagers at a music gig. I had never felt so electrified. Now, I had to phone my husband who was two and a half hours away in another town adjusting to his new role as manager of a clothing store.

I had to tell him that when I would see him on our scheduled weekend visit there would be three of us.

*

All I ever wanted was to be a mother. From the time, I was a little girl I loved babies. I yearned for a baby though I was not much more than a baby myself. My most prized possessions were my baby dolls and the large plastic wicker bright orange and blue baby carriage I had received one Christmas. There was a cherished orderliness about the ritual of caring for a baby that was so reassuring and so purposeful. In so many ways, it seemed babies were the answer to the meaning of life, babies gave adults structure and assured them of a clear identity. What could be more wonderful than lavishing twenty-four-hour love on a baby?

*

I talked to the baby regularly as he lay growing in my body. I knew him. I knew instinctively he was a boy. My husband felt this also. We bought baby clothes and they were all blue. We spent stupid amounts of money on these designer clothes. We were young and happy and apprehensive. We told each other blue was still a lovely colour for a girl to wear. Blue is our favourite colour.

One day, when I was sitting in the single armchair in the lounge room of our rented house, I felt bubbles rise up and float toward my ribs. And I was still in quietened, humbled joy. The baby had moved inside me.

*

My husband and I sat opposite the doctor. He and his wife were the general practitioners we had chosen as our regular doctors for our first pregnancy. They were a slick and well-presented couple, every inch professionals. Both were slim and athletic looking. They were long angles with dark hair. Both towered over my husband and myself. They shared the rooms with two other doctors who may well also have been a couple for all I knew. Both of the GPs had that relaxed yet sophisticated air of city doctors who have migrated to a better gig on the coast. They seemed well settled and suited to treating the various ailments pertaining to the upper-class who had retired to the glamorous, resort-peppered coastal village that we now called home

Now, we sat listening to the GP. He had just completed a physical examination of my taut tummy. He spoke calmly and authoritatively. I nodded in silent acceptance of his words. Why should anything be easy?

'Wait. What…' my husband's face was screwed up in an expression of equal parts bafflement and panic. He was an immaculately presented twenty-five-year-old with blonde hair, flashing green eyes and a fierce attitude and he reacted indignantly to the news we had just heard from the doctor. I could tell from the look of outrage on my husband's face that he had taken umbrage with the doctor and his firm advice on what might occur in the delivery room. It all seemed brutally unfair. I felt frightened. And adrift. I could sense my husband felt out of control, a feeling that he had found throughout his life to be, not only foreign, but intolerable. He leant forward while addressing the doctor. He looked scornful and angry as he confronted this man who was at least twenty years older than us.

The doctor was unruffled, unimpressed by my husband's posturing and attempts at intimidation. He reclined in his chair. He repeated himself.

‘We don’t know if your wife is going to be able to deliver this baby naturally. The head isn’t close to engaged. That’s not unusual for first time mothers but…your wife’s hips are narrow and this baby is large. We have no way of knowing if your wife will be able to have this baby vaginally.’

That was it. It was like we had just had the irrefutable mechanics of an engine explained to us. The doctor continued to gaze levelly at my husband. My husband was silent for an awkward beat.

‘Well, what if she can’t?’ demanded my husband.

‘Then she would have to have a caesarean. A C-Section.’ The doctor’s voice was measured and unemotional.

‘Can’t you just do the C-Section?’ snapped my husband in frustration.

‘No. We have to do trial by labour.’

My husband glared at the doctor as if the doctor was stupid. The GP did not shrink under my husband’s cold stare and wrinkled nose. I was chilled by this unwelcome news. I was raised hearing the stories of my mother’s three deliveries. Of hearing her proud declarations of suffering nil stitches. Of simply bearing down and doing what she ‘was told.’ I had never thought I would not be able to deliver a baby naturally. While my husband continued to take the doctor to task, I sat in quiet annihilation, so great was my fear and disappointment.

The doctor explained the process of ‘Trial by Labour.’ I must be allowed to go into natural labour. If the labour didn’t progress and I ‘got into trouble,’ then the medical staff on duty would perform a caesarean section. In exasperation, my husband outlined the blatant stupidity of this ‘plan.’ Why wait for danger? he asked. Why take such an unnecessary risk? The GP remained unflustered. He told my husband that’s just the way it was… it was policy. Hospital policy. And

hospital policy loomed over us, huge, clinical, immovable and dangerous. We had no room to negotiate.

We left the surgery and wandered aimlessly down the curved brown brick steps toward the footpath. We avoided eye contact with each other. In our individual ways, we were both fighting a sense of failure. I might be unable to do something natural and expected of women and my husband was unable to solve the problem. My husband walked in front of me and refused to cease ranting about his disgust at the idiotic 'policy.' But, we both knew we had no power in this bout. We were at the mercy of the GP, the hospital policy and my narrow hips.

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The doctors did not ask for any details regarding my psychological history. And I did not volunteer any information. It was irrelevant, anyway, I thought. I would be a totally different person after the baby was born.

Sometimes, when I was alone, fear would invade and I would chant out my reassurances into empty rooms. I was particularly terrified about stillbirth and abnormalities and evil anything. I chanted/prayed that my child would be spared evil, abnormalities and tragedies. It became ritual. My mantra of desperation. Could I possibly be 'good' enough to escape such things. Would a child of mine be special enough to be spared such things? If only I wasn't unworthy. I hoped unworthiness wasn't contagious.

I did all the 'right' things. I ate banana yoghurt under the watchful eye of my husband each morning despite the fact it gave me indigestion. I ate the huge egg filled sandwiches my husband made me while I sat at the staff lunch table each day. I have never been comfortable eating in a

work environment. It feels unnatural and forced. I felt peculiar and conspicuous as I took the food out each day. People commented on it and the doting of my husband and that made it worse

Despite all of my inadequacies, our baby grew within my body. And I was amazed. This body that I had starved and punished for so many years, this body that was rake thin with its stretched skin and obscene covering of fair down, was able to cradle a baby. I was grateful and terrified. I wanted to be casual and blasé. I wanted to demonstrate the 'typical' behaviour of pregnant women. But, I could not bring myself to complain happily about 'waddling' or sleeplessness or heartburn, because I was terrified of tempting fate. I wanted to slide under the radar undetected. I wanted my existence to be a whisper.

From the moment the female GP performed the internal examination of my pelvis while my husband looked on and she told me my pregnancy was not ectopic, that everything looked 'normal.' I felt like I had been given a 'get out of jail free' card. From that moment, I begged the universe to look the other way. All I needed was time to grow this fragile being. I just wanted to be able to shield my child. I only needed everyone and everything else to stay away.

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Sometimes things aligned beautifully and I had moments of near peace. We lived in a beautiful coastal town on the Queensland Sunshine Coast. It was small enough to offer a sense of exclusivity to appeal to more affluent tourists while its hinterland offered a relaxed 'vibe' to surfers and those interested in an alternative lifestyle. In the evening of that summer, the breeze blew in from the beach and it was intoxicating. I felt blessed.

One evening, I put on a lightweight pink and white cotton, gingham overall style dress with a hem that ended at the knee. I parked my car and wandered down the clean, sand-sprinkled street to meet my husband for dinner. The salt air wrapped around my shoulders and kissed my bare legs. My hair, lightened by the sun, flipped around my shoulders and fell across my face. I flicked it from my lips. Two young men approached me. 'Hi' said one. 'We're going to a party' said the other one. 'Would you like to come with us?' 'Oh, no,' I said, 'I couldn't possibly.' 'Oh, go on' said the first young man. 'I'm meeting my husband,' I said and I could feel my skin vibrating. I was so alive with love and goodness. 'Lucky guy,' said the second young man. And, I smiled slightly and nodded. I bit down on the jubilant laugh that was bubbling inside me, so close to breaking free. These two had no idea of the baby living in my body. I walked past the two strangers. What I really want to yell to them, to the indigo night sky, to the on-looking, powerless world was, 'You have no idea how lucky!'

Sometimes the fear crippled me. I would be overcome with the responsibility of growing and protecting my unborn child. I began the food eliminations and restrictions as a means to create the illusion of some control over my pregnancy. Potatoes were out. What if I accidentally ate a potato that was green? Imagine the horror of causing possible brain damage to your child? Coffee and tea were out. All the literature seemed to agree that caffeine was evil and unhealthy for the unborn child. Chocolate was also dangerous for the same reason. No innocent child should be forced to ingest caffeine simply because its mother had chosen to be selfish. Junk food was out. I soon settled into a ritual of restricted eating. Repetition and familiarity kept me feeling 'safe' and fed a belief in my almost supernatural ability to protect the baby.

During the day, I worked as a secondary teacher of Drama and English. In the evening, my husband and I returned home and had dinner. On the weekends, we did laundry and tended to the

house we were renting. We went grocery shopping. Sometimes I retreated to the spare room to complete the never-ending paperwork of a teacher. We had one friend in this town who worked with my husband at his previous store. We did not socialise. We lived far away from our families. We had each other and our two dogs. Sometimes we would come home from work and discover that our springer spaniel had killed another blue tongued lizard. My husband would be incensed with rage at the dog. It was devastating to behold the misery of another lifeless creature; the lizard motionless, half sheltered by the blood red hibiscus. We watched television sometimes. But, there was a pointlessness to such things. I felt restless. We sat outside amongst the tropical plants in the yard in the warmth of the early evenings. I would sit on the weathered grey wood of the picnic table, in the repetitive vacuum of sameness that can only be felt in a coastal town. Above our heads, the palm trees dropped their leaves into the clear water of the in-ground swimming pool. There was white, powdered sand between the pavers that dusted our bare feet. It was quiet. There was a hum of nothingness, there was a sense of existing without having a shape. We were alone in paradise.

I attended regular appointments with the GP and the hospital. The hospital was old and it was located in another town. The consultation rooms were repurposed old wards. The examination beds had rusting iron frames and fading, misaligned curtains hanging from warped metal rails. In these gray rooms, I had to succumb to the probing of my body by people I did not know. I had to accept the hands of strangers inside my body. My husband sat on the other side of the curtain while medical staff entered my body with their crooked fingers, reaching for my cervix. The elderly doctor snapped his lubricated gloves and asked the overweight, wheezing nurse if she could feel what he had felt. I knew it was normal. The doctor told me that it was normal. He told me it was a training hospital and the nurse was being educated. But, I felt violated. Like a specimen. Like a

jar. Or a container rather than a mother. As though I had no control over what happened to my body. As though I hadn't been able to keep the outside world away from the unique miracle in my uterus. My husband drove us back to our town. He had work to return to and so did I. But, despite the fact that I would have to face classes when I returned to school I could not comport myself and I could not stop feeling unclean. I sobbed in the passenger seat while my husband twisted his face in impatience and focused on the road.

My fundus measurement did not correlate with the estimated age of the fetus. I found this out when I was lying on my back on an examination table in our GP's clinic. The GP held the ruler firm against the mattress and showed my husband and I the measurement. I knew the exact day our baby was conceived. I remembered everything about the day our child was made. I knew what fragrance my husband was wearing. I knew we were packing up our house and we collapsed on the bed in that inexplicable desire that overcomes people who love each other desperately. I knew the baby's age. But, our baby measured two weeks older than it was possible for it to be. I discovered that a mother's facts were not trusted or considered to be as reputable as medical facts. 'It is a big baby,' said the doctor. Medical staff would say this over and over at all of our appointments. 'Yes,' we would murmur, 'we know…' It would be suggested to us several times that I could have gestational diabetes. And this would give me further cause to punish and castigate myself.

One day I went and spent hours lying on a hard examination table in a blood collection facility. I pretended to have a semblance of interest in the book I had brought with me. At the appointed times, I would close the book, make my way to the toilet and pee in a jar. I would then hand the jar to the staff who would label it and remind me how many more times I'd have to aim my urine into the little receptacles. The staff and I would then crack jokes and swap sarcastic

insights into the whole unsavoury process. I'd promise I wouldn't pee on the outside of the container, the staff would assure me that I would and we'd all laugh. The staff would then direct me to the back room of the clinic where they kept the cold bed. I laid on the white bed in the white room. I felt insignificant and transparent. I felt stretched. My skin was stretched over my hardened tummy and my enlarged breasts. My lips were stretched with the effort of faking smiles. My brain was stretched with the strain of feigning normalcy.

Eventually, I became too big to continue to work. Maternity leave finally arrived. I told my students it was my last week. My class of fifteen-year old students were tender and gentle and loving as they wished me farewell. I had loved teaching them despite this being such an anxious time in my life. I was finding it harder and harder to remain remotely relaxed in my skin. My chanting and praying had escalated. My terror of something happening to my child hung over everything I did, everything I thought, everything I said. I tried to erase the feelings of powerlessness by actively thinking the bad things out of existence. It was exhausting. One of my fifteen-year old students approached me. I was sitting on a chair, wearing denim overalls and a striped skivvy that made my arms look like sticks. He was a special needs student with large, heavy movements. He was a remarkably sweet person. He looked down at me and his mouth opened in a wet smile. 'Happy Baby,' he said quietly. And I knew he meant so well. I forced a smile back at him. I hoped the universe was not listening. I hoped the boy had not tempted fate.

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Our son decided when he would be born. One day, at forty weeks pregnant, I sat on the couch with my husband on the floor near my still bony ankles. He reached a hand up and laid his palm against

my stomach. We continued to watch the T.V. I felt disinterested and disconnected. And, possibly a little irritated. I glanced over at the ugly curtains that covered the large bay window. In the earlier days of this week I had cleaned all of the window sills in this room, ensuring that even the smallest of corners was pristine.

My husband remarked on the regular tightening of my abdomen. 'Yes,' I replied impatiently, 'those are the Braxton Hicks.' Did he think I was not aware of them? I turned my attention back to the T.V. without any real conviction. We sat in silence for a handful of minutes. My husband turned to me, suddenly energized. 'You're in labour,' he said.

'No,' I replied, 'I'm not.'

But, he would not listen. He began to time the contractions. He was grinning. He rang the hospital. The whole time I was mortified… and irritated. How embarrassing, I thought. I tried to tell him again that I was not in labour. I begged him to stop phoning people. He continued to ignore me. He rang my mother. He told her I was in the early stages of labour. She said she would drive down to see us. I was horrified. My husband was confident, his mood buoyant. I went to bed.

My mother arrived with my sister the next day. It was the weekend. I roamed around the house, consumed with guilt at my failure to be in labour. My husband forced me to walk around the block. My mother stood at our front door, perplexed, watching us as we disappeared around the corner. I wore dark blue maternity tights, one of my husband's shirts and a dejected expression. We passed the day with my mother, my sister and our nephew in our house. That night my husband ordered pizza. We sat around the table and ate together. We stopped talking about possible signs of labour or trying to justify what might have been earlier contractions. The mood became strained.

After dinner, my sister and her four-year old son settled to sleep on our fold out couch. My sister laid on her left side and looked at me and huffed. I didn't know how to apologise for not

being able to reward everyone's excitement. I passed the couch and my disgruntled sister on the way to our en-suite. And there it was… I stared at the redness spreading in the water in the toilet bowl. Excitement ignited in my chest. I caught a glimpse of my electrified face in the bathroom mirror before I ran out to tell my husband and my mother that I had had 'a show.'

By 2.00am my husband had rung the hospital to alert them of our impending arrival. He bundled me and a pillow into the backseat of our little hatchback. My mother claimed the front passenger seat. At some point, someone must have decided she would accompany us to the hospital. My husband checked his 'emergency delivery kit' that he had prepared according to the instructions given at a prenatal class. He had sterile scissors in a plastic sandwich bag and a clean tea towel ready in the glovebox. We set off into the night.

It was a long trip to the hospital. I caught sight of my husband and my mother exchanging concerned glances as I moaned from the back seat. My husband parked the car and we walked across the hospital lawn toward the main entrance. Light spilled out from the glass double doors and formed yellow rectangles on the grass. We walked through the yellow light and my husband pushed open the glass doors. He informed the staff at reception that his wife was in labour. We waited to be admitted. While we waited I watched another woman in labour. She was wearing a hospital gown. She walked perfectly normally, upright and without gripping her stomach. She roamed the corridors eating grapes. I turned, hunched over with painful contractions, to my mother. 'I think labour must be worse for me than other people,' I commented while I watched the woman in disbelief. My mother smirked dismissively.

A midwife arrived to take us to a delivery room. The room was familiar. We had seen these rooms on a tour of the hospital. I detected the faint smell of feaces and of unwashed female bodies hanging in the air. I remembered looking at the blue gym balls in the room and noting the sticky

smelliness of them. The midwife giving the tour told us that some laboring women liked to drape themselves over the balls and rock. No way, I thought, would I even be touching one of those balls. It would not be long before I would be hanging over those dirty blue orbs with my face pressed firmly against the offensive smelling rubber.

First time mothers take a long time to labour. They told us this again. And again. As the pain rose up in crescendos the midwives gave me passionless glances and, occasionally, scribbled things down on the clipboard. The night was long. But, I managed. I lived minute by minute. Second by second. One of the midwives convinced my husband to take me into the shower room. I wanted to remain curled in a ball. The pain was more bearable when I was completely still, with my knees to my tummy and my chin against my breastbone. But the midwife insisted. It didn't cross my mind that I may have had the right to refuse. I was obedient; compliant.

Standing was a complete indescribable agony. The pain in my abdomen was echoed ferociously in my back. I could not stand. I could not breathe. My husband helped me shuffle toward the shower. I stood, bent, vulnerable, my tormented core unsupported in this vertical position. As the corded ropes of blood escaped my body, to trail toward the shower floor like slick, thick red vines, my husband fled to find a nurse. 'Look!' he said in horror to the midwife when they returned. His face was twisted in horror. 'Is that normal??!' He thrust his hand toward me. He had the look of someone witnessing a violent accident. I was an exhibit. Obediently, I turned my face toward the midwife so she could assess me. The midwife did not approach me, she simply flicked her eyes across the bloodied scene. 'Yes,' she said and walked away. I looked at my husband with dead eyes. I think I said, 'Just shoot me.'

Back in the ward, I climbed back onto the rickety bed. I continued on. We continued on. Minute by minute. Second by second. I would manage. I was determined to manage. I heard the

midwife and my husband talking. ‘Oh, she’ll be hours, yet,’ she said. ‘First time mothers take a long time.’ It was at this point that I knew I couldn’t go on. It wasn’t possible to continue with this level of pain. My disappointment at not even being close to delivery was all consuming. The midwife’s name was Pam. I asked Pam for some pethidine. She was surprised but she agreed. The pethidine helped me nap between contractions but it didn’t ease the pain. As it turned out the baby was closer than we thought. This was not a good time to be injected with the pethidine.

Through the fog of pain, I registered that indescribable, irresistible urge to bear down. I announced to my mother that I needed to push. She said ‘don’t you dare!’ I bypassed my mother and told Pam I needed to push. She said, ‘Well, do you want to have this baby or not? Push.’ But the pushing was beyond excruciating. I tried to tell Pam of the constant crush of the clamp that encircled my entire torso. Pam was not surprised. She informed me this was because my baby was facing the wrong way and I must wait for it to turn. It was a wordless torture. I waited. I shed my hospital gown. Finally, Pam gave me permission to push. I was on my knees. My mother shot a disapproving look at my husband. She gave birth with dignity, in a hospital gown, on her back with her feet in stirrups. I was feverish and naked. I gripped the iron bedframe and, face to the wall, I pushed…

There was a moment when my son and I were held between worlds. He was partially out of my body. His head thrashed back and forth against my inner thighs. He was strong. He was stuck. We were still joined. He was not yet an independent person and I was not yet a new mother. We were caught in time. Suspended in another dimension. Struggling together…

The midwife suddenly seized my son’s head with her hands and she pulled him fiercely and roughly out of my body. I was still on my knees, eyes fixed to the wall. My son was behind me on the bed. My only thought was to get to him, to reconnect with him. I began to turn my head.

‘Don’t look!’ screamed Pam. It didn’t occur to me to disobey her. He was blue, my mother told me later. Pam was panicked, my mother told me. Pam yelled ‘Don’t do this to me!’ my mother told me. My mother would later list these events of my son’s birth story like she was revealing plot details from an unexciting movie. Each new disclosure would tear another hole in my bright balloon of happiness. But, at this stage of my son’s delivery I had not been aware of those details. I believed I couldn’t turn to my child for some medical reason. I obeyed and did not move because I thought if I did, I would endanger the safety of my child. I waited impatiently for the issue to be rectified so I would be allowed to get to my son. A desperate, almost animal urgency to hold my baby to my body overwhelmed me. It was harder to contain than the urge to push had been. Finally, I heard ‘You can look now,’ and I unfroze and turned, still on my knees. On the crumpled white bedsheet behind me lay a beautiful baby with a crown of fuzzy hair. I reached out and lifted him to my chest. Nobody else in the world existed in that moment. I had never imagined it would be possible to be that happy.

My husband and my mother went for a cup of tea. I held my baby to my breast. I was determined to feed him immediately after the birth. His naked body was still covered in the white waxiness of vernix. I knew that the vernix should remain on the baby for as long as possible because it was good for his skin. My son’s small, purpled lips moved against the brownness of my nipple in an automatic response. I had never felt more connected to another person in my entire life. I had never felt before that I was a worthy human being who had an unquestionable reason for being in the universe.

My sister and nephew popped in to see me. They stood in the pool of blood on the floor. My sister looked stricken. My nephew had been delivered by scheduled caesarean. ‘I didn’t think you’d be able to do it,’ said my sister. She looked down at the blood underneath their shoes. ‘I

didn't know it would be like this,' said my sister, meaningfully. They looked at the baby. My nephew asked when the baby would be able to play. He had remembered that I had told him that the baby would be his little playmate. My sister and I suppressed our genuine amusement at his comment. My nephew's unexpected question helped ease the tense atmosphere in the delivery suite. Even so, I could see the worry on my sister's face. The scene really had nothing of the romantic about it. After a brief introduction to my son, my sister and my nephew left. The visit was understandably short given the state of the delivery room floor.

A young doctor poked his head around the door. He had the scar of a slight cleft palate repair on his upper lip. He told me I needed some stitches. I hadn't realised and I expressed my surprise. The doctor informed me that the baby's shoulders tore through my body. I accepted his expert opinion. I knew of stitches, of course and I assumed I would receive two or three. I smiled weakly at the doctor. He did not mirror my happiness but his demeanour was one of gentleness as he set to the business of positioning my trembling legs. He spoke calmly and kindly. 'You've done so well,' he said over and over. His reassurance unnerved me a little. He sounded like he was trying to soothe someone who had endured a trauma. I stopped trying to make light conversation with him and instead tried to forget his concerned frown and pitying eyes. For the next uncountable minutes, I stared at the crown of his blonde head as he worked between my legs. I was so very wrung out and so very thrilled. I had delivered my son successfully. I slumped against the thin pillow and stopped trying to focus on the doctor's hands.

My husband and mother returned. My husband handed me a cup of tea. It was the first cup of real tea I had drunk in nine months. It tasted amazing. The kind doctor finally finished his work. On his way out of the room, the doctor made eye contact with me one more time and gave me a

lopsided, compassionate smile. There was something almost sorrowful about his countenance that threatened to make me feel diminished.

A midwife appeared at the delivery room door. She had a wheelchair and she was looking at me. I stood and wobbled toward the doorway. 'How far is it to the ward?' I asked. I'm going to walk, I thought. I pictured myself walking down the hallway beaming at everyone but that was before I vomited into the sink. Diluted tanned water stained the white porcelain. 'Why walk when you can ride?' I said with strained levity.

The first night I spent in the ward I settled into the bed with my son beside me in the transparent, plastic cot. I could not sleep. I was still high from the oxytocin released during the labour. So, I stared at my baby through the murk of the dimmed lighting of the ward. When he cried or stirred, I picked him up immediately and I swayed from side to side and I whispered 'Shhh, shhh, shhh,' into his perfect shell shaped ears. I wanted him to know I was there, that I would always be there, that I would not hesitate to comfort him. I ran my lips across the fuzz of his baby hair. When he slept I laid in the pooling blood in my bed and tried to squeeze my legs together. It was freezing in the ward. My expelled blood cooled against my skin. Sometimes when I held my son throughout the cold hours, he vomited black tar down my front and I listened to it splash on the floor in an alarming gush. I cleaned it up. Cleaned him up. Tried to clean myself up.

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Two days after the delivery of my son, a midwife confronted me.

'Have you been taking extra nappies off the trolley?' Her tone was insolent and accusatory.

‘Yes,’ I replied quietly. ‘How else am I supposed to stop the bleeding?’ It seemed logical to me. I had been quietly pleased that I had been able to take the initiative in solving this problem. It was then the midwife softened. It was then I got medical attention. It was then I told about the floods of blood…much more than any maternity pad could ever hold, of the waterfalls of blood that fell out of my body whenever I stood. How I had been shoving cloth baby nappies inside my underwear in an attempt to staunch the flow. It was then I found out that this was not normal and that I was hemorrhaging.

The midwives came around and massaged my fundus. ‘You have a lazy uterus,’ one said. I refused to be disappointed in my uterus. It was tired and overstretched from housing a nine-pound baby and a massive placenta. I learned to massage my fundus to encourage the contractions my uterus was reluctant to revisit. The midwives showed me how to double fold maternity pads and how to tear them open and put ice inside to help soothe the violent swelling around my stitches. I was overwhelmed to receive so much attention.

I started to develop a hospital routine for my son and myself. I learnt which showers and toilets were more regularly cleaned and less bloodied. On the third day after I finished my shower, I caught sight of myself in the bathroom mirror. My breasts were the size of small melons. I was filled with wonder. My milk had ‘come in.’ My son and I were not only capable of successful childbirth, we were also proving to be champions at breastfeeding. I felt feminine, peaceful and blessed. I had still not managed to rest at all during this stage of my hospital stay despite the urging of the staff to sleep. Or to at least try to sleep. But, I had no ability to do more than doze. I didn’t seem to need sleep and I didn’t want to be asleep. I wanted to immerse myself in my baby. I walked the ward breastfeeding while midwives exclaimed at my cleverness. I rang buzzes for other

mothers less mobile than myself. I scooted off to the feeding room in the middle of the night to avoid waking exhausted mothers. I began to feel like a bit of an expert at new mothering.

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Our son was born mid-morning on a Monday. On the Friday morning of that same week, I slipped my blue maternity tights over my already flattened tummy and packed my belongings. I scooped up my son and attended a health class with other new mothers where I participated in a series of exercises while my son lay on the carpet at my feet. I felt capable and controlled as I demonstrated the competency of my abdominal walls that had already begun to knit back together and the integrity of my bladder which refused to lose even a drop of water when I jumped in place with the other mothers. My final hurdle had been cleared for discharge. The only thing I hadn't managed to do was sleep for any extended period of time. But, part of me believed this was simply a result of my new identity as a new mother. I felt exuberant and in control.

My husband brought our brand-new baby capsule into the ward. I presented myself to him; thin, clean, ready. I was the picture of the young wife who had 'bounced back' after giving birth. We dressed our son in his going home clothes and we settled him into the baby capsule's fluffy interior. I left the hospital with my husband at my side and my precious baby boy. I had a brain full of fizzy sunshine, breasts full of milk, underwear full of blood and a lower body full of stitches.

Stitches in the perineum catch on pads and clothing. They snag and the sensation is that of a sharp tearing as the flesh moves forward and the stitch remains behind. Some days it was impossible to get the stitches into a comfortable position at all. Those days felt unfair and irritating. There was so much to do without the hassle of the constant pinching. My tear was a third-degree

tear. I didn't really understand what this meant. I could feel the stitches with my hand when I went to the toilet or when I showered three times a day. The midwives told us the showering was necessary to avoid infection. Despite the strict instructions on the care of my stitches I was still not really sure what had happened to me. My husband told me he never wanted to go through 'anything like that ever again' when we discussed the birth. I laughed but he was deathly serious. A sense of unease began to creep up on me and follow me throughout each day. The euphoric bubble I had been floating in had been pierced by growing, sinister doubt. Finally, one night after we had company and the birth had been brought up and discussed and my husband had reiterated his horror at the miracle I performed in the delivery room, I gave voice to the niggling anxiety building beneath my sternum. We were standing in our en-suite preparing for bed. I worked to make my voice light. I fiddled with my hair and looked at myself in the mirror. My heart was darkening. 'How many stitches did I have?' I asked casually. My husband met my eyes in the mirror. There was no levity in his voice when he replied 'Countless.' Then he turned and walked through the doorway to our bedroom. Something broke in me. It was day three at home. A flood of grief crashed from my skull into my chest. My heart twisted. I could suddenly visualize my body with its hundreds of internal and external stitches. I saw myself ripping open and I realised I'd lost a type of innocence that could not be shaped into words. I stepped into the shower and, alone with my butchered heart and body, I sobbed…and sobbed.

Despite the knowledge of what had happened to my body and learning the details of the danger my son had been in during his delivery, I was determined not to let anything mar the experience of motherhood. I had been waiting for this sacred event since I was a little girl. So, I applied myself to the loving labour of mothering. We had been home for about five days and my son was in his cot, sleeping. I was standing above him, watching him. There was an unusual

calmness at my core. I had my child safely delivered from my body. He was safe in the cot in front of me. I had been able to manage mothering. Feeding, nappy changes, bathing, and sleeplessness; none of these had surprised me. For the first time in many, many years I felt that I was doing something well. There was a quietness in my mind that was foreign to me. I realised I had lost my internal conflict. And that caused a sudden uncomfortable awareness that my psychological struggles had eased. Nothing welcomes in unwelcome and unwanted thoughts like the raw desperation not to have them.

'What if…?' said the voice in my head...out of nowhere, unbidden. Panic rushed up my throat and turned my face to an icy mask. I was still looking at my son. 'What if you can't protect him? What if his future will be dark? What have you done?'

The moment of happiness, my moment of peace was shattered and the shards sliced through my connection to rational thought. Sleep deprivation and hormones prevented me from reasoning my way through the insidious questions. I felt that my intellect had been dulled. The horrible realization hit me, I had failed at mothering. And from now on, everything, everything would be ruined. I sat gingerly, stunned and defeated on the bed edge. My soul was full of razor blades. In front of me, behind the rails of his cot, my son slept on, unchanged while I sat dislocated and altered.

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Before the baby was born, my husband told me he would get up in the night with me and keep me company during these nocturnal feeding sessions. The reality was he didn't hear the baby at all. The beautiful white cot, with the carved teddy bears sat flush against the wall beside our bed. Each

night I staggered to the rails and searched for the small metal buttons that released the catches and allowed the rail to lower. I scooped the baby up and brought him into our bed. I crossed my legs and put him to my breast. I sat alone in the dark. My milk dripped down my chest and chilled me. I felt cold, lonely and hopeless. And my heart pounded and pounded. I could not forgive myself for having such frightening thoughts about the baby. What sort of mother would even entertain such horrible possibilities? I could not align myself in the universe. I could not find my centre. It was like my identity was sliding away from me across an icy pond. And I was powerless to do anything other than watch it go.

Every morning, I began with good intentions. I told myself that today would be different. I would regain control over my existence, I would master my wayward brain. I would not think about the unwanted thoughts about my son. And, by the end of each day, I was destroyed, an emotional and mental wreck; unable to stay on track, unable to avoid the self- hatred that my unwanted thoughts conjured up in me. I rushed off the rails of the rational and crashed into the dangerous scenery of unwanted fears and images. My thoughts ambushed me and prevented me from finding my way back to logic and reason.

In the middle of an unusually dark, silent night I stumbled through the house toward the kitchen. My heart thumped with the terror of the pursued. I stood in the dim light radiating out from the stove top hood and I gripped the kitchen counter top. With trembling hands, I took a piece of paper and a pencil and I wrote of my fears for my child on the small square. Then, I took up a lighter that my husband kept near the sink to light his cigarettes and, with violently shaking hands, I set the paper alight and let it burn out in the stainless-steel sink. I wanted so desperately for those thoughts to die…to be burnt out of my brain. I left the ashes in the sink and stumbled back to bed.

There is no appropriate or gentle way in which to tell those around you that you are mentally unwell after you give birth or are caring for a young baby. Physical illness in postpartum care seems so much more of a solid and acceptable condition. It seems more respectable, somehow. The physically incapacitated mother is most often seen as stoic and strong while shame and clouds of ineptitude seem to hang about the mother who suffers psychologically. When my nephew was born by caesarean section our immediate family became protective of my sister. We closed ranks around her and dedicated ourselves to caring for her and her son. She had been diagnosed with toxemia and was told she must have a c-section. After the delivery, my sister struggled to make decent progress toward recovery. During this extended hospital stay she suffered a hematoma and was committed to spending more time in hospital. Two weeks after she was finally allowed home, my sister returned to the hospital when my mother, who was staying with her, summoned an ambulance to assist my sister who was struggling to breathe. My sister was rushed to hospital and was diagnosed with pneumonia and, thus began another hospital stay.

My sister was never alone for long. We were all besotted with my nephew and we were all concerned about her. My mother spent some nights hiding behind the curtains around my sister's bed so as not to abandon her in this time of panic and distress. My not yet husband and I made many trips into the hospital and most times we went bearing gifts. When my sister eventually returned home again, my mother continued to stay with her and my husband and I continued to visit her weekly. We were determined to maintain a strong supportive network. It was the correct and logical thing to do when it was obvious how debilitated my sister was physically. I did not have these connections or support as a new mother. I had no one helping me to orient myself, no one helping me to find my way forward because my suffering was invisible.

*

My mother arrived in town. She was on a buying trip for her nursery. She had told me she would only be in town for a short while and wouldn't have time to meet me at my house. I would have to meet her at the suppliers if I wished to see her. I bundled my baby into a red and white romper. He was unbearably pretty. I buckled him with extreme care into his baby seat. And I placed myself in the driver's seat of the car. Placed myself like an object. I was completely dead. Numb. I observed the husk of myself driving. I checked myself for any sign of emotion. There was nothing but a flatline. I was alive but I was flatlining. In my head I entertained thoughts of cracking the husk open when I saw my mother. I imagined the strings cut from this hollow marionette that I was keeping erect. I visualized myself on the ground at her feet. Yes, I would confirm, yes, I am nothing. I am not alive. Look at me becoming lesser and lesser at your feet. Please save me; help me want to live.

My mother placed one of her beautiful, work roughened pointer fingers on my baby's chin. Her nail was long and naturally well-shaped and had a yellowish tinge from her cigarettes. She cooed at my son absentmindedly. I knew, as she turned away to her plants, that I would not tell her of the dark chaos in my soul. I would not beg for the help I needed so desperately. I did not know how to justify my internal collapse. There was no reason for me to play the role of a troubled daughter.

I drove over the crest of the hill and saw the waves, edged in orange sunlight, rolling in to the white shore. I thought about driving into the sea. I did not visualize relief; just an ending. A distant part of my brain recognized this was inappropriate. But, desire to eradicate myself was so incredibly strong. There was no tomorrow. There was no hope for change or for anything at all,

really. I was not human. Normalcy had been murdered in me. I could not grasp at any reason for me to be alive. It was like I'd lost the manual to myself; I could no longer make this model work.

I did not drive into the ocean. I did not save myself. But, I saved the innocent baby in the backseat.

*

I sat on the lid of the toilet in the filthy public restroom. It was in the basement carpark underneath our doctors' surgery. It was cramped and foul. My husband stood in front of the grimy, tarnished mirror while I balanced the baby on my knee and fed him in the rank smelling space. My husband was on the phone to my mother. Though the environment was disgusting, I was experiencing a sense of nervous and tentative relief swimming against the tide of the erratic beating of my heart.

We had just attended an appointment with our doctor. My husband came with me because I had tried to tell him that something was not right with me. I had tried not to sound desperate or unhinged while still being honest enough to tell him I needed help. Our doctor had suggested that I admit myself to a nearby hospital for new mothers. I would get twenty-four-hour assistance, should I need it. We would get the urgent help we needed as a young family. My husband explained to my mother what the doctor had said in the appointment. The appointment where I barely scratched the surface of my fears and dread. The appointment where the doctor looked at me with real concern and murmured, 'I wonder if you have post-partum psychosis?' The appointment where I revealed what a terrible human, wife and mother I was. Despite, the horrors of being so exposed to the world, there was some trembling sense of comfort that someone might help me.

Something about my husband's tone of voice stilled my racing thoughts. I looked from the baby's eyes to his. I could hear the hesitation in his voice and the gaps lengthening in his side of the conversation. I could see the doubt creep across his face.

'Okay…' he said, finally and ended the call to my mother.

My husband turned to look at me, sitting sullied on the toilet lid and he said, 'we can't go to the hospital.' He related to me what my mother had told him; 'If you go to that hospital, they'll take that baby away from her!'

So, that was that. Hope had been snatched away as quickly as it had appeared. The thought of losing our baby because of my unstable mental health was terrifying and humiliating. I felt ashamed. And I knew I had to find a way to solve the problem myself and an important part of that solution would be to keep quiet.

*

Being alone was the worst. There was no distraction from me. I manipulated the stiff, cardboard shell of my body throughout the days in order to complete 'normal' activities. I pretended to be something 'other' for the baby who was so innocent and dependent, who deserved a 'normal' mother. Every day I did laundry, cleaned the house and tended to the baby. Every day I completed the tasks expected of me. Every day I prayed for a sign that I was still alive somewhere within my body or brain. I searched for a hint of anything individual or human within myself. But, I was a scooped out hollow. I was ribs and shoulders holding up skin. I was utterly without use. The desperation to feel emotion ignite in my chest was the only constant sensation that I knew. When I breastfed the baby, dread ran in cold rivers throughout my torso. My heart accelerated and fear

filled my veins. I sat on the couch, the baby pressed to my body and I felt the frozen waters break over my head, flow down my neck, into my chest and abdomen before they settled in my legs. My legs and feet were ice blocks. Panic gnawed and chewed at my throat. I sat quietly dying day after day.

Like a building slowly eaten by acid rain, my façade started to tarnish. My resolve began to crumble and it became too difficult to maintain a pretense of happiness. At about 2.00am one morning, my husband and I found ourselves in a treatment room at a local hospital. I sat on the examination bed, swinging my bare legs like a pre-adolescent. My husband sat in the doctor's swivel chair holding our chubby, thriving baby. Our son was gaining a pound a week. The midwife at the baby clinic had weighed him and declared, 'Your milk's worth bottling!" My husband had beamed with pride and promptly told everyone. The beauty of our son and the fact that everything seemed to be progressing successfully seemed to make a mockery of everything I said. The attending doctor, after listening to my symptoms decided I needed immediate relief from my anxiety and told us that he recommended a short course of sedatives. My husband and I had avoided eye contact during the consultation. It was so hard to hear those dark words in the air when we both thought we should be excelling at this parenting gig, that this was not who we were meant to be. When the doctor went to get the sedatives, he closed the door behind him and we were left alone. My husband and I sat in silence and then, we made eye contact. We almost immediately began laughing. We laughed at the absurdity of us, at the craziness of the situation, at the fact that we were doing this together. We were reminded of who we were… I remembered that this man loved me and that I was capable of being loved. I remembered that broken things can often be mended. I was reminded of who I am.

The sedatives were wonderful. They gave me back some clarity and gave me room to breathe. When I was not completely swamped by panic, I was better able to get a grip on my circumstances. I took a quarter of a Xanax a day. I was overcome with gratitude every time the compressed powder slipped down my throat. Even the sun seemed brighter throughout those days as it shone through the kitchen window and onto the space on the bench where the Xanax temporarily lived.

There was enough of the medication for one week. Sedatives are habit forming. My husband and I were both aware of this fact. My mother had been addicted to sedatives since she was 37 years old. Her tranquillizers had become part of the constant background noise of her life. Because of this, I had always been loath to take any medication. Still, it was with a heavy heart that I stood in front of the empty container on the seventh day. I licked my ring finger and ran the tip of it around the inside groove of the narrow container in an attempt to glean every last sprinkle of powder. I put the finger in my mouth and allowed my tongue to search my finger for any trace of the medicine. The tablets were really gone.

The medication allowed a sliver of hope to slide into my fog of despair. Sometimes I could almost grasp my personae but it would slide out of my hands, slippery as a fish in water. At first this panicked me but then it bobbed up again one day and prodded at me. This time I knew it wouldn't stay but I didn't panic because I knew it would come back another day. And it did. The essence of me returned more frequently and stayed for longer periods of time. Sometimes I actually felt hungry and I could eat without feeling like I was choking. Occasionally I surprised myself when I laughed at something with my husband. Now and then I found myself lost in my son and having fun with him. These moments were some of the greatest I had ever experienced. Getting

back to me, learning to like myself, accepting that I deserved to live were some of the most exquisitely joyful and humbling lessons of my life.

One early evening I walked into my bedroom and saw a black cocktail dress laid out on the bed. The dress was for me. There were flowers and tickets to a musical for that evening lying beside the dress. Gifts from my husband. I ran my hands over the black crepe. I slipped the dress over my head. It laid flat against my tightened tummy, it lifted my milk filled breast and fell elegantly along my calves. I turned and caught sight of myself in that ensuite mirror that had witnessed so much of my pain. I smiled at myself. I felt pretty.

## 3. Storm Warning

*It's days like these you learn to live again.*

'These Days' – Foo Fighters

*Before parents of an autistic child were the parents of an autistic child, they were a couple (Siegel, 1996, p.136).*

We were not ready.

We met at the senior college where we were both enrolled as high school students. We were both 17. The boy who would one day be my husband pursued me tirelessly. One day he slipped me a letter sealed in an envelope. He had chosen good quality, cream coloured parchment paper from a range of stationery that he couldn't know was my favourite. When I unsealed the envelope I saw his round, confident hand writing marching upright across the lineless paper. He had numbered every page and had included a sketch of something inconsequential. I replied to his letter, using the same thick, luxurious note paper and I pointed out that my letter was longer before I signed my name. Soon, we were invested in a private competition to see who could write the longest letters. We exchanged letters several times a week. We dropped them onto lunch tables in front of each other before we returned to our separate friendship groups. We gave them to each other in the one class we both attended and we snuck them to each other behind the backs of disapproving friends. They disapproved because I already had a boyfriend and our friends believed my one day to be

husband and I were too close. The gossip and the scowls did not deter us from our writing competition. It only grew in scale. We began using different coloured pens to brighten our 'abstract' sketches that we bestowed with pretentious names. ('I call this one, 'The Dance of the Deranged Firefly.') Before long I had a cascading collection of letters stashed underneath my bed. By the time I was 18, I had moved to a different city where I was a university student. Not long into the semester, my not yet husband told me he was moving to the same city to begin work in the hospitality industry. He needed somewhere to live and I was looking for someone to share the expense of the old house I had rented. Three years later we were married in the same church where my parents had held their wedding ceremony and where I had been baptised. The video that a relative took on that day has an unsteady close up of my husband watching me walk up the aisle. My husband mouths the word 'beautiful' while he sobs and wipes at his face with the white tissue someone hands him.

We were always going to have children. There was never any doubt. Before we were married, in my second year of university when we were living in a gingerbread style townhouse, my one day to be husband proposed to me that we have a child. How wonderful it would be, he enthused. But, I wanted to wait. I had to finish university and we weren't married. So, I kept taking birth control pills. One night we made love in the rain, out on the balcony that led off from our bedroom. Afterwards we watched lightening cut through the indigo night while we held each other. I knew we were blessed. I knew we were meant to be and I trusted that everything would slot into place for us in our future as a couple and, eventually, as a family.

*Autism is a developmental disorder that affects many aspects of how a child sees the world and learns from his or her experiences. Children with autism lack the usual desire for social contact. The attention and approval of others are not important to them in the usual way (Siegel, 1996, p.9).*

All children have their quirks. Our son couldn't follow the most-simple of our instructions. 'Get your shoes,' we would suggest mildly and he would stare at us blankly. But, he could operate a VCR and a computer and he could match all of his videos to their cases. When I was standing in a grocery store one day with my son, he looked up at the banner above our heads and declared 'Star Wars!' and he was right. He could read before he went to school. No one ever taught him; he just knew how to do it. The big hearted, tiny framed woman who was our son's daycare teacher took me aside one day to tell me, with great sadness, that she thought our son was deaf because he did not respond to any of her commands and he did not answer to his name. At my goddaughter's birthday party, I took my son aside and told him that we would be leaving in ten minutes and then I took him aside and told him we would be leaving in five minutes. My husband watched me in horror. He grabbed me by my arm and hissed, 'he's not stupid!' And I was totally bewildered and unsettled because this was the method I had developed to stop my son from becoming upset whenever we had to make a transition or change and I had thought I was clever but now I had to wonder whether I was patronizing or stupid.

Our son spent hours lining up his toy engines. He was obsessed with Thomas the Tank Engine. He knew all of the engines' names and collected them in many versions. We had multiple engines with the same fixed grin in plastic, metal and wooden versions. A sprawling wooden set of rails usually adorned our lounge room or play room floor and was added to regularly. Our son's

bookshelves were taken over by a multitude of Thomas books in numerous shapes and sizes that offered the reader the opportunity to lift flaps, feel textures or simply read old fashioned stories and look at the quaint illustrations. Our son had a Thomas the Tank Engine CD that we played on our home stereo or in our car on long trips. And we had a significant collection of Thomas the Tank Engine videos that our son knew by heart. The only other videos that may have rivaled his affection for his Thomas videos were his videos of the Wiggles. At some point our son had received a plastic red guitar and he played this while he sang along to his Wiggles videos and imitated every dance move. He called his red guitar his 'Murray' because the red Wiggle who played the guitar in the group was called Murray. Everyone who visited our house remarked upon the adorability of our son dancing and singing and mimicking not only the gestures but the facial expressions and the vocal intonations of the Wiggles. It became a form of entertainment for our guests to watch our son's flawless performance of each song. He was never distracted from his task. Sweat would gather in his golden curls and across his determined little face from his efforts but he would not break eye contact with the screen. Eye contact with real people was a different matter.

*For autistic children, making eye contact with most people seems to be as difficult as staring down someone very threatening (Siegel, 1996, p.47).*

Our son never really made eye contact with other people. He developed an endearing and unique way of looking at people out of the corner of his eye. Instead of looking anyone who attempted to engage with him in the eye he would turn one ear toward the person and slide his eyes in that direction. The effect was an adorable profile of a perfect little ear lobe, gorgeous golden curls and a chin that jutted upward and pointed away from anyone who had approached him. Now and then

my son would hold my eye and look at me directly. He did this enough for me to consider that he was connecting with me and his lack of ability to maintain the contact only reassured me that he was an excitable, typical toddler.

One day my son did something that I considered to be naughty. It was serious enough that I felt I had to impress upon him that he must never do it again. I have no idea what the thing was now because the main thing that stayed with me from that day was the way my son could not look me in the eye. I crouched down on the floor beside my son and began to talk to him in a gentle but firm manner. My son did not respond to me as I had expected. Instead he treated me to the head turning, chin jutting, ear lobe presenting behaviour. I was taken aback. This was not his 'normal' way of interacting with me; this was something he did with other people. I was an inexperienced parent and my first instinct was that my child had to be made to look me in the eye to understand the severity of what had happened. I cupped my son's chin in my hand and turned his head toward me in order to get him to make eye contact with me. His eyes slid away from mine and refocused on a different part of the room. I tried again. And my son repeated the same behaviour. I stopped and allowed my son to toddle off. I was shaken. The thing that chilled me the most was how, for quite a while after that event, any time I used my serious voice or told my son to listen to me he would cup his chin in his own hand and turn his face toward me while his eyes slid away. I was so thankful when he finally stopped doing it.

*Today we know that the preschool and early school years are prime time for identifying ASDs and starting appropriate interventions (Romanowki Bashe, 2014, p.85).*

My husband was there when the teacher swooped toward the flock of parents outside the classroom window. It was the end of the second day of school. My husband had taken a week off work so he could participate in the excitement of school drop offs and pick-ups. The teacher had raised an arm above our son's head and addressed all of the parents waiting for their children. 'Who owns this little one?' she asked pointing toward the top of our son's head. My husband said he did and the teacher asked him to stay to talk.

When I arrived home from work, my husband took me aside to explain in detail what had happened when the other parents left. The teacher had told my husband that our son wasn't coping with year one. Our son didn't understand what to do when the bell rang. He didn't know how to sit on the mat with the other children or how to organise his personal property. He couldn't follow instructions.

'She doesn't think he's ready for Year One,' said my husband.

It was crushing. I thought back to the day before when we had lain with our son and his baby brother in our bed.

'Do you know what day it is?' asked my husband.

Our son had replied in a little muffled voice. 'First day of school.' He had shown no reaction at all. My husband had tried to coax some response out of our son. He had tried to inject excitement into the moment. But, our son had simply sat between us, head bowed, looking at the bed covering.

We had both dressed our son in his new uniform. My husband and I put the lunch and snacks we had made into our son's new lunchbox and we packed the stack of freshly contacted school books and supplies into our son's new bag. Finally, my husband went to get the camera to take photos of our son on his first day of school. My husband used a camera with actual film. I can

remember that we were outside and we took photos of our sons together and we must have taken photos of each of us with him because that is what is done on these occasions. We never got that film developed. We misplaced it. How strange it was that we should lose something so significant. Later my husband would say he was glad that our son would not have to look at any memories of that day.

*Parents of children with autistic spectrum disorders (autism and pervasive developmental disorders) do not, in general, have a high opinion of professionals (Lorna Wing in Siegel, 1996, Foreword).*

The doctor smiled at us when he told us our son had autism and that he would probably never love us. We were seated in fabric chairs in a consulting room at a private hospital. They were the type of chairs that don't offer enough back support and force you to sit ramrod straight and they were the colours of tacky resort furniture. I remember wondering why the doctor seemed so pleased with himself. Part of me thought the pediatrician to be a sadist who took obscene pleasure in his position of power over others. Perhaps, I thought, he was waiting for us to break and throw ourselves in desperation onto the altar of his medical knowledge while we pleaded for his help. Well, I refused to cry in front of this horrible person. Our son sat in the centre of our circle of consultation and played with the clinic's toys, oblivious to our conversation. When I looked at the top of my son's golden head, I thought of the times he had run to me and flung his arms around me, I thought of the times I had rocked him to sleep and the times I had soothed him when he had cried in pain and fear. I thought of the times my son had told me he loved me. And yet, this doctor was telling me my son was incapable of feeling anything for me. I looked at the smug doctor with

distaste and anger. I looked at my husband's sorrow filled face and I thought, 'This doctor does not know who we are as a family.' My husband and I maintained our emotionless countenances while we spoke to the doctor. We ensured we got the necessary paperwork filled out with information regarding our son's potential diagnosis. It was only later that we cried.

*Learning to accept, live with and grow through parenting a child with Asperger syndrome is a deeply personal and at times difficult journey (Romanowski Bashe, p.128).*

One evening, when both of our boys were in bed, my husband walked into our children's playroom and he laid on his back on the yellow and blue checkered futon. He threw his left forearm over his eyes and he broke open and he sobbed. The sound of my husband crying was guttural and primal. His tears were filled with vulnerability and tenderness. It was the terrible sound of a father grieving for a child who he knows will encounter struggle and difficulty and pain. I understood the agony throbbing through my husband's body because it was mirrored in my own. I stepped quietly toward the futon. I placed my body gently along the length of my husband's and he encircled my lower back with his right arm. He held me tightly against his body but he kept his left arm across his face. I pressed myself further into his chest. We had lain in similar positions so many times before. We had held each other in times of physical passion, in quiet companionship and in times of pain but this moment bound us fiercely and utterly.

*Most of us never realise how much about our children we take for granted until something like the ASD diagnosis suddenly throws all of our assumptions to the wind (Romanowski Bashe, p.129).*

It was like moving underwater. Everything around me flowed past in agonizing slow motion. I looked into the faces of my work colleagues and felt complete disconnection. I was stunned that other people had not worked out that everything was pointless. I was astounded that people smiled, ate, talked, engaged with life when they must surely have understood that the world was a treacherous, cold entity and that life was a thief that would rob them of even the smallest pleasure.

My students looked like cardboard cutouts as they sat in front of me while I taught. I switched to some sort of sinister automatic pilot through the days that followed our son's autism diagnosis. Like a pre-programmed robot, I formed mirthless smiles and uttered words and phrases that could be applied appropriately to certain situations. But, the varying tone and pitch of my voice sounded strange to my ears because I didn't feel the emotions I expressed externally on the inside. Still, my mechanical form remained compliant and I activated my personality chip every time I sensed someone attempting to interact with me. I obeyed my commands to help, listen, correct, demonstrate, entertain, react and reassure. It was like I ran on a loop of behaviours each day while inside my joy receptors malfunctioned and my happiness data became encrypted with codes I could not crack. This was me now, I thought, this withdrawn, detached shell.

I did not tell anyone at my place of work about my son's diagnosis of autism for some time. I kept the information lodged under my breastbone where it choked me daily. In the staffroom, my desk was next to that of a lovely man who had told me regularly about his own son who had autism and who was intellectually impaired. He told me, one day, how it was so weird that all kids with autism loved tomato sauce. I thought of my son who smothered everything in tomato sauce and I worked hard to keep my fixed smile from sliding into a cry of alarm.

*2nd January, 1996*

*My darling son, one day you will ask me how old you were when you went into daycare and I will have to tell you that you were only five months old. I feel like a real failure – I could just get in our car and drive for miles. I am not feeling good about things at all. I would like nothing better than to stay home – look after you and be happy* (An entry from my mothering diary, 1996).

We removed our youngest son who had just turned one from daycare. My mother moved in with us and babysat him throughout the week while his father and I were at work and his brother was at school. She did this because I was terrified that going into daycare at only a few months of age may have made my son feel abandoned. I worried that going into daycare may have stunted my son's emotional and mental development. I was fearful that going into daycare somehow contributed to my son's autism. I was desperate to prevent this from happening again. I was determined not to fail another child. Throughout the days when I was not at work I wandered the house sobbing sporadically.

I looked at photos of my son and I wondered at what point did it all start to go wrong? Was there a point when my child was perfectly 'normal' in my womb? Did I do something one day that marked my child from that day forward? Would people say that I damaged my son because of my years of self-inflicted starvation? Was my son autistic because of the shot of pethidine I asked for when I was in the last stages of labour with him? I loathed myself for asking for the pain relief. Why, I chastised myself, did I just not suck it up and work through the pain like so many other women seemed to do?

I wrote in my diary about my disgust for myself for using pain relief and I wrote my son a letter in which I apologised 'if I have done this to you.' I wondered if I was just a bad person

who tainted everything? I looked at other people with 'normal' children and none of them seemed to obsess over their children like I did…they complained and whinged about their kids. About the mess and the noise of them. One woman exclaimed how great it was to be back at work so she could get away from her kid. It occurred to me that these people did not question whether they were worthy to have children. I was fascinated at the nonchalance of these parents. Their attitude to parenting was so alien to me. They were like a different species of human. I would have liked to be like them.

*2nd January, 1996*

*You have beautiful olive skin and wide, trusting eyes…You have beautiful chubby fingers* (An entry from my diary, 1996).

Sometimes I was ashamed that I dared to be so happy. I caught myself remembering my elation at discovering my pregnancy. I thought of the irresponsible way my husband and I went on spontaneous, carefree shopping sprees to purchase baby clothes and expensive baby furniture. I was haunted by the way we decorated our son's nursery with such excitement and the joy we took in choosing bedding for his pristine, white cot. I hoped that no one noticed. I dreaded that someone would scoff at me and say, 'I told you so.' I marveled at the arrogance of me. Imagine being so self-assured that you thought you had the right to have children. Was that person ever me, I wondered. Why on earth did I think I'd get away with it?

I wondered if my husband felt guilt the way I did. I so desperately wanted to talk to him about my fears because I craved the comfort only he could offer. But, I couldn't do it. Every time I thought I could not hold the words in for another day and I could feel them forming in my mouth,

I bit them back down. I was terrified that this was all my fault. I was terrified my husband would agree that it was my fault if I mentioned my fears about pethidine and my inability to deliver our son easily. I wondered how constant was my husband's love for me. I worried how much it could be tested. All my life I had tried to be a good person. I had tried to help others and had striven to be compassionate and kind. I had focused on the most important thing to me; trying to be a good wife and mother. Yet, I'd failed. Why could I not get this one fundamental thing right?

*Being the parent of an autistic child is difficult (Kandel, 2018, p.38).*

When I had a very pregnant belly, my husband had a favourite pastime. He would lie beside me and press his lips to my stretched naked skin and he would blow raspberries at the baby. Without doubt, every time, the baby would respond. He would kick back and wriggle. My husband would laugh and laugh. Encouraged by the baby's reaction, my husband would repeat the action and, always he would marvel at the immediate response from his child.

*Today, we have not only more information and better research, we also have a perspective and a view of the future not available before (Romanowski Bashe, 2014, p.3).*

I began the business of reading whatever I could find about Autism. My husband was with me the day I found a book on Autism in a book shop. It was the first time I had deliberately gone in search of a medical book about the disorder. I didn't pretend I had wandered into that section of the bookstore by chance. I remember so clearly how I worried I was that browsing in that section or buying the book in my hand might somehow be a sign of… defeat or that it might signal that we

were admitting we had a problem that we couldn't solve alone. I turned to my husband with the book clenched in my hand and I held it up, cover out, for him to see. 'This looks like it could be a good book,' I said and I remember sticking my chin out a little. I kept my voice even though I feared that my husband would rebuke me for being stupid or that he would protest that the book would be a waste of money. My husband looked at the cover of the book and said he would buy it. The title of the book was *The World of the Autistic Child*.

*Twenty-five years ago, autism was blamed on cold, rejecting parents, "refrigerator parents" who supposedly caused their children to withdraw into their own worlds. Today we have a more enlightened, neurobiological model that no longer lays blame on the parents (Siegel, 1996, p.134).*

I read that Autism is caused by 'Refrigerator Mothers' or 'Refrigerator Parents'. I also read that this was an old-fashioned and ill-conceived theory that had been irrefutably disproven by later research. Still, the idea further eroded my peace of mind. I couldn't help but think of my struggle with postpartum trauma after the birth of my son. I gritted my teeth and sieved through my memories of this time trying to pinpoint any moment when my son may have felt that I'd rejected him. I wondered if my mental trauma had somehow passed into his small body every time I had held him. I worried that my husband would read the passage that I had read and would begin to question what effect my psychological issues may have had on our son.

I remembered the time when, sobbing, I had lowered myself into a bathtub and breastfed my son because a magazine article had suggested this could encourage soothing and calmness in mother and child. I remembered the times when I dragged a chair into my bedroom and had read Winnie the Pooh to my son as he laid in his cot. I remembered the time when I had thrown back

the ugly yellow curtains of our lounge room and blared music from our stereo, before scooping my son up and dancing and dancing in the sunlight streaming through the window, with his small face pressed to mine. I hoped these times had been enough.

*The emotional stress of parenting a child with a disability can be nearly devastating for some parents – especially at first (Siegel, 1996, pp.333/334).*

I read that 75% of relationships of couples with an autistic child ended in divorce or separation.

*On some level, we worry that having a label will render our child less of an individual in the eyes of others, that he or she will be thought of first as a person with a disability and second – if ever – as the person we know and love (Romanowski Bashe, 2014, p.78).*

We had to tell our families. My mother in law told my mother she had been thinking there was something wrong with our son because he was never excited to see her. She had previously tried to talk to my husband about her feelings of rejection. 'He doesn't get excited to see his Nana!' she had exclaimed. My husband's reaction was hostile. 'You just want to have a perfect grandson!' he spat at her. His loyalty to his son was unwavering. But, now we had to tell our families knowing full well they would talk about us…knowing full well they would tell members of our extended family…knowing full well that these people would judge us, gossip about us and worse, maybe pity us. I discovered that I couldn't talk about it. At all. With anyone. It was too raw. I did not want to hear how sorry people were and I did not want to hear that we were doing a good job. I did not want to hear how fortunate we were that we could afford to access quality treatment for our son.

My sister told me that, one day, my son would appreciate all we had done for him. But, I had the words of the callous pediatrician ringing in my ears and I said 'No, he won't.'

My brother and his wife drove to see us not long after we shared the news of our son's diagnosis. I remember the pinched look on my sister in law's face and the tightness around her mouth. She walked through the door holding a modest bouquet of flowers and she said my name and then she said something like, 'I'm so sorry,' but I wasn't ready to hear it. I swept the flowers out of her hand, turned my back on her and, talking brightly over the heartfelt warmth of her words, I headed into the kitchen in search of a vase.

*If your child is newly diagnosed, you have only begun to amass what can easily become a mountain of reports, letters, and other important papers (Romanowski Bashe, 2014, p141).*

We began navigating the world of specialists. We began to understand and use words like 'pragmatic language disorder' and 'sensory processing disorder' and 'pervasive developmental disorder.' We began the familiarisation with diagnostic reports and we became parents who receive these reports. They arrived, typed on official letterheads in our mailbox. In exchange for them we had exposed our son to physical and mental examination and probing. It felt like a very bitter trade off. Sometimes my husband and I would open the envelope together. We would stand with our heads bent close together while we read the pages. 'Did you see this bit?' we might ask each other or 'what do you think about that?' Sometimes I opened them alone and read them while sitting quietly by myself. On these occasions, I would struggle to grasp that this was my son being discussed in clinical medical terms. I would be filled with guilt and anxiety and…almost regret...were we doing the right thing? Was it fair and reasonable to expose our son to these

processes? Sometimes I would read aloud the beginnings of these reports to my husband because it was in these beginnings that we could take comfort. In these introductions, the specialists would describe our son as ‘a lovely, cooperative boy’ or ‘a friendly child’ before they began the inevitable business of outlining our son’s ‘issues’ using technical terminology.

The IQ testing was, by far, the worst. As a teacher, I had an intense hatred of these tests and the stigma that followed the children who fared poorly on them. My inclusive, free spirited approach to education had led to a hatred of pigeon holing and labels. I believed that such testing revealed limits for students and prevented them from participating freely in mainstream education. I learnt to change my mind regarding diagnostic labels as time went on but my loathing of IQ testing remains strong. We had two lots of IQ testing. I had no idea how to prepare our son for the tests. So much was riding on the way he would perform on them but, I didn’t want him to feel panicked or overwhelmed about completing them. So, I made sure he was fed and rested and as stress free as possible beforehand. One of the tests was performed in our home after school one afternoon and the other was conducted at the local hospital under clinical conditions.

The testing room at the hospital felt cold and impersonal despite the splashes of bright colour daubing the walls and furniture. There were tiny chairs for tiny patients to sit in while they were being analysed, tested and labelled.

The clinical psychologist was a giant of a man who squeezed himself into one of the small wooden chairs in order to sit with my son at the table. He balanced a clipboard on his knee. He was so kind to my son that I feared my calm exterior would dissolve into hot tears of grief and gratitude. I had never wanted to be rescued or held more in my life. I had never felt to entirely helpless before. The psychologist spoke beautifully with compassion and patience. I watched as

he asked my son to arrange blocks in order to perform tests that would demonstrate his fine motor skills. I listened, horror struck as the psychologist asked my son questions.

**Psychologist:** I wonder how we could stick two pieces of wood together?

**My son:** To build a house.

The psychologist raised his pencil to his lips and nodded before he said in an encouraging measured tone, 'Yes, it could be to build a house. But, what if I wanted to stick two pieces of wood together? Is there a way we could make two pieces of wood stick together?'

My son didn't look at the psychologist. I stood frozen in terror, heart thumping. In my head. I was pleading with my son to say 'with a hammer and nails' or 'with glue' but he said nothing. These questions were too abstract for our son we learnt when we read the report. Our son could deal in the world of the concrete but the world of the abstract or theoretical would always present significant difficulties for him. The reports from the clinical psychologist explained that our son's issue was not that of intellectual impairment but rather one of 'severe social impairment.'

We began sessions with a speech therapist who had extensive experience with children with autism. Her clinic was a partitioned room in an industrial sized shed that was framed by lofty eucalyptus trees. She was the person who introduced us to Semantic Pragmatic Disorder and who explained why our son struggled with idioms and how this would disadvantage him in educational and social contexts. He did not understand the meanings of statements such as 'pull your socks up' or 'why the long face' or 'deaf as a post.' We began to explain, in our turn, to friends and relatives and teachers that our son's world was centred on the literal. As parents, we knew now that our son would more often than not miss out on mainstream jokes and humour, that he could be ridiculed for not following a conversation and that he would not be able to socialise or interact with other individuals without significant effort and anxiety. We also learnt how frustration, fatigue and

isolation were the most common emotions and circumstances experienced by our son in his daily schooling.

The occupational therapist we were referred to held her sessions with clients at the house where she lived with her girlfriend, her girlfriend's three children and their children's father who lived out the back in a separate flat. The sessions occurred in the front room of the house that more often than not had squares of sunshine on the carpet. During one of these sessions, we were kept company by a pair of yellow underpants that had managed to sneak out of the therapist's bedroom and into the doorway. It was the OT who educated me and my son about his challenge to use both sides of the brain… 'crossing the brain' she called it and explained how important it was for my son to practice physical activities that would encourage this as often as possible. Together my son and I learned to improve gross motor skills by doing 'bear walks' and 'crab crawls' across her floor. I watched my son working to improve his fine motor skills by fighting his way through sticky tape wrapped around his fingers and by finding objects hidden in plasticine. Each week we completed homework set for us by the speech therapist and the occupational therapist.

My husband's reaction and response to every new challenge was to 'make an appointment.' He was determined that our son would have access to any therapy that could help make his life easier. Money was never going to be an obstacle. These were the days in Australia when ASD was not allotted any government funding. There was no 'carer's' allowance at that time. There was no access to funding for treatments or equipment to assist children on the spectrum. Autism was still being regarded with a fair amount of skepticism by state and federal governments. One day, after work, standing in the beginnings of a glorious sunset outside our staffroom, I vented my frustration to my colleague with the autistic child. 'How do those families cope?' I raged. 'What happens to

those children?' My friend looked at me, unruffled. He shrugged his shoulders. 'Those children don't get treatment,' he said.

Whenever I heard about another avenue for treatment, I would share it with my husband. He would always agree that anything that fell remotely in the realm of the logical was worth pursuing. We tried biochemistry and chelation when hair tests revealed our son had mercury poisoning. We trialed our son on a gluten free diet. We attempted a brief stint at using sign language to assist in communications.

I greeted my husband in the kitchen one summer evening when he arrived home from work. I turned from the dishes in the sink in a whirl and followed him past the kitchen bench…all the while telling him about a new therapy that had been explained to me. My enthusiasm blinded me to anything else and I remember I was smiling and speaking rapidly as I outlined how it would work. My husband went very still and it took me a little while to register that he wasn't responding. He walked toward the glass sliding door that led to our backyard and he looked out into the gathering dusk. I stopped speaking. My husband didn't look at me as he said, 'Okay, but I don't want anything to change who he is,' and I realised he was crying.

It's wrong to say you grieve when you, as a parent, face an Autism diagnosis. It's wrong because it's not the right word. And mourning doesn't seem to be the right word either. You break. You alter. Something fundamental inside is severed and it is never stitched back in its original position. You heal around it and you develop scar tissue that helps to disguise the original wound but you can never be the same again. The only other person who understands this is someone who has experienced it.

*Once you have lived with it for a few years, make it a habit to look back now and then (Romanowski Bashe, 2014, p.527).*

One evening not long ago, my husband and I were sitting on our deck in our Auckland backyard. I have never been good at filtering my questions or emotions and I launched straight into talking about our son's autism diagnosis without much preamble. I wondered what my husband's recollections were of this time. My husband paused, he straightened and turned to face me. I bit down on my lips to ensure my silence and tried to make my face look attentive without looking expectant. My husband told me he had 'no doubt we would make it.' He meant we as in 'us' – him and I, he clarified. 'It made us closer rather than pulling us apart,' is how he remembered that time. I watched him closely as he told me of his memories. His face lit with passion and conviction and, in the shadow of that early evening, he was suddenly that determined, blonde haired 26-year-old with flashing green eyes again. And I loved him utterly.

## 4. ‘Blizzard’

*Hey now, hey now*

*Don’t dream it’s over*

*Hey now, hey now*

*When the world comes in*

*They come, they come*

*To build a wall between us*

*We know they won’t win.*

‘Don’t Dream It’s Over’ - Crowded House

We withdrew our suffering boy from university. It was only for a semester we said. He nodded and repeated this to others. I was loath to let him surrender his work hours. I worried that, separated from any external influences, he would become more anxious and withdrawn. For two days a week, I encouraged, coaxed and played the cards of tough love in order to ensure my son had money, independence and contact with the outside world. I fielded countless text messages from him when we were apart, I searched deep within myself for the appropriate words to assure him that he was safe. I tried to create some sense of orderliness around us. My own experience told me such things would become easier…

*If obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) was a drug, it would be taken off the market immediately. It’s highly addictive, has horrendous side effects, and doesn’t work (Forrester, 2015, p. xiv).*

‘Hey Mum, I need to tell you something.’

‘Sure, buddy.’ I stopped what I was doing and turned to my son.

I listened to his weightless confession. I nodded to show him I had heard and understand.

‘That doesn’t matter. It’s fine.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Of course.’

He had always been sensitive, my eldest child. Always prone to episodes of heartfelt guilt. Quick to apologise. Too quick to apologise, really. His continued innocence at 22 still grabbed at my heart.

‘Hey, Mum, I need to tell you something.’

I looked up. This was not uncommon behaviour. As a person with Autism, my eldest son frequently seeks reassurance about certain things. Sometimes he may ask the same question over and over or he may ask for clarification and reassurance that his ideas are, in fact, worth merit or that he is ‘smart’.

I smiled.

‘Okay,’ I said.

I listened to another trivial confession.

‘That’s nothing you were a little boy.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Definitely.’

‘Hey Mum, I need to tell you something.’

That’s how it began to reveal itself, to show its teeth. The disorder living in my son’s brain. Its

appearance may have been altered but I recognized the hideous bone structure underneath this new façade. Disbelief and an almost hysterical grief whipped through me. The hair crept up along my neck. I recognised the unwanted, uninvited presence in the room. 'You, miserable bastard!' I thought. I imagined it grinning, victoriously, back at me. I knew what this was.

It was after my wedding that I lost complete control of my OCD. It became savage and could not be tamed. For the first time the intrusive thoughts could not be eased through any amount of compulsions or mental rumination. They were with me in every waking hour and they followed me into every nook of my life. My brain was never at peace. Some nights the obsessions kept me from sleep. One night, in a state of trauma, fearing for my sanity and desperate to be free I threw myself at my husband's feet as he sat in one of our dining room chairs. I wrapped my arms around my husband's legs and pressed my head into his knees. I cried hysterically and the sound was as unruly as the OCD. My husband was taken by surprise and struggled to conceal his alarm. He patted my hair awkwardly and then he said, in an almost awe-struck voice; 'Wow, are you having a nervous breakdown or what?' I was 22.

*Obsessive-compulsive disorder is an anxiety problem. If we are bothered by unwanted thoughts that keep coming back to us even when we try hard not to have them, or there are certain things we have to do again and again until it feels right, it might be OCD (Forrester, 2015, p.9).*

I had not long decided to write about my own experiences with Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder when it erupted in my son's brain. It had always been something I dreaded reading about and so I avoided it as much as possible. I was fearful that reading about the monster that had dominated so

many years of my life would, somehow, feed it or give it back the total control it used to have over me. Finally, one day, medicated and with the monster a consistent yet subdued growling in the background, I decided I should tell my story if for no other reason than I might help another woman such as me. So, I turned myself to the task of reading copies of others' battles with OCD. Stories that left me exhausted, appalled and haunted because I recognized myself in so many of the pages I read. The irony was not lost on me that, just as I had finished reading several of these books, my son began to echo the disturbed thought patterns and behaviours of some of these brave, traumatized individuals.

My husband was overseas when our son's world began to grind to a messy halt. Unable to move forward from his thoughts, unable to go back to a trouble-free mind, he began the agonizing business of being 'stuck.' OCD is a relentless and cruel disorder. The feeling of being out of control of your own brain, of being the cause of your own acute suffering is bewildering and terrifying. I would have given anything to have spared my son the horror of making its acquaintance. It is a disorder that hits unpredictably, swiftly and hard. In a matter of days my son was standing in front of me, shaking from head to toe, aggressive and desperate as he shouted at me 'I AM LOSING IT!!!' I could only say 'I know, I know…'

When my husband arrived home from his overseas trip, I took him aside as soon as was possible. I had already put a plan into motion. I wanted my husband to know there was to be no negotiation regarding what I was going to say. I did not want him to believe he had the opportunity to decry or reject the facts I was about to reveal. I needed him to understand and accept my authority. I needed him to trust and respect me. I told him our son had severe Obsessive- Compulsive Disorder.

And then I said, 'I'm taking him to get medication.' My husband looked into my eyes and his brow furrowed in concern. Usually, I am the impulsive and emotional one, the one who panics if anything threatens our children. I feared my husband would believe he needed to dismiss my words as an insubstantial and baseless worry in order to calm me. But, without a moment's hesitation, he said 'Okay.'

*GPs have an incredible amount of knowledge and understanding at their fingertips and know a considerable amount about a vast number of conditions, diseases and disorders (Forrester, 2015, p.57).*

The doctor was a kind, sensitive man in his thirties. His compassion and interest in his patients was probably due to the fact he worked part-time, I thought, and he didn't see enough of people to become jaded. He had treated my two sons and myself for a variety of ailments and he had always impressed me with his thoroughness and his willingness to find answers to our medical complaints. His evident concern for people was what made me know that he was the right doctor to help our son to begin his treatment journey.

The GP listened so carefully to my son from the outset. I also listened to my son's desperate expressions of confusion, of losing control of his thoughts. Of not being able to control his mind. He told the doctor he was worried he was going crazy. I swallowed down the ache in the back of my throat from the unshed tears. I told the doctor that my son could no longer attend his driving lessons or his tennis coaching. I told him my son was unable to play his video games or listen to his music, things that had always brought him so much comfort and pleasure. My heart was breaking; the agony spread across my chest and into my shoulders and I felt so entirely fucked

over by the universe. But, the fierce outrage that had flamed in my core ever since I realised what was ravaging my son's brain overwhelmed the sorrow. I was strong. I was firm. It would be a deluded and irrational disorder that would even begin to cross my path.

By the end of the appointment, the doctor looked at me meaningfully and he prescribed an anti-depressant for my son that would also help to treat anxiety. The doctor turned all of his attention to my son when he asked my son to return to see him in a couple of weeks. I knew that the doctor was trying to give my son some sense of control over the situation. I patted my son on the shoulder. I said a very sincere, 'thank you'…for some reason it was important to me to make the GP understand we appreciated his interest and compassion.

We left the consulting room with the name of a highly recommended psychiatrist. I enclosed the paper in my hand with the grim determination that can only come from that of a parent protecting their child. I smiled a smile at my son that I did not feel in my chest. I told him that everything was going to be okay. He wanted to believe me. He nodded. I paid the bill while my son stood dazed and distressed. I put my arm around him. I felt empowered and dangerous, a force to be reckoned with. My son would not suffer as I had done.

*Whether its effects are small and subtle or large and obvious, OCD spreads into everything. It strikes hardest at the things that are important to us: our relationships, our home life, our work. It hits where it hurts us most (Forrester, 2015, p.59).*

OCD and autism are tightly bound. They keep firm company with each other and overlap constantly. Recent studies show us that it is not unusual for a child with autism to have at least one parent with OCD. In many individuals, OCD and autism coexist. The autism can overshadow the

OCD which may manifest in small ways like odd quirks in behaviour or through collecting and hoarding items or an inability to abide sticky substances. These may seem to fade into the background when parents are overwhelmed with their child's sensory integration dysfunction or their self-harming or their savage and unpredictable meltdowns.

As the disorder stretched its tentacles deeper into my son's brain, he detached from life more and more. It was pure sorrow to witness his bewilderment, confusion and panic. When rational thought and logic deserted him, when his usually dependable pragmatic brain failed him, he succumbed to desperate attempts to alleviate the anxiety. I watched him try to treat his intrusive thoughts with avoidance. He could no longer go for our usual walks. He became hysterical when he realised he would be exposed to anything that might trigger his anxiety. One day, I insisted he accompanied me to do some grocery shopping. He was a seething mass of hostility as we approached the trolleys. He spat words at me from between clenched teeth. He assailed me verbally as we moved through the rows. I knew in that moment he probably hated me. But, what he didn't know was that I did not care. I would not allow him to slide into the monster's jaws and I knew that surrendering the 'normal' only hastens the disappearance of the individual down OCD's bloody gullet. So, I behaved 'normally.' I asked questions and mused aloud whether we needed certain items. Constantly, my son prowled, powerful in his irrational fear. I did not relent. My son barely managed to restrain his fury and panic as we progressed through the aisles. He scowled at me, whispered aggressively in my direction and refused to interact with me in a civil manner. I remained aloof.

Groceries stowed in the boot of the car, I turned the car toward home and my son demanded a wipe from my bag to clean his hands because he had touched the trolley and he believed it could be contaminated. I refused. I explained to him it was not rational and, if he gave in to the fear, that

it would hit him harder next time. He writhed in the front passenger seat. He shouted at me. Thrashed back and forth against the seatbelt. It was easy to understand why people with OCD were often thought to be possessed years ago. He turned to me and he snarled, 'You fucking witch!' I kept my hands steady on the wheel, my eyes on the road and my voice level and I told him in loving tones that when we got home he could wash his hands. It was a very long trip.

*OCD is classified as an **anxiety disorder.** An anxiety disorder is a term used to describe several types of difficulties with anxiety – a feeling of fear or uneasiness ranging for (sic) mild to intense – is the main feature. It can be considered as psychological problem in that it consists of a pattern of behaviours or psychological symptoms that have an effect on multiple areas of a person's life, often causing high levels of distress (Forrester, 2015, p.50).*

My son was a crumpled wisp of his former self in the psychiatrist's waiting room. We sat in rounded armchairs next to each other and we held hands while he stared diligently at his knees. The rooms were in a converted and renovated villa. There was a thin verandah outside the white French doors. Patients could look out onto lush palm trees and vivid shrubbery. A breeze blew the leaves in a manner that, no doubt, most rational people would find visually and audibly comforting. It was an irrelevance for my son. He had lost the ability to simply sit and 'be.' Inside his head he was constantly engaged in mental combat, trying to find a safe place in his brain that would afford him some shelter, that would allow him to duck into brief doorways of salvation. We did not speak.

The psychiatrist emerged smiling broadly. He looked the same as he did in the videos I had watched of him lecturing at a university. It was what he said during one of these lectures that sold me on him. He was lecturing on depression and he said the only approach that could be accepted

when dealing with depression was to eliminate it. Completely. Not make it manageable but to have nil tolerance for it in the patient's life. Because, without this complete rejection and eradication of the depression it would simply rear its head again at some point in the patient's life. He sounded like a knight slaying a dragon. I was impressed with his understanding of mental illness and I was deeply touched by his compassion and determination to improve the lives of others.

The psychiatrist was long and lean in pressed slacks and a button-down shirt. He had short dark hair and conventional glasses. He was perfectly presented for this occupation. Non-threatening, visually reassuring. He was comfortable in his own skin and space. He led us into his office and invited us to sit. My son was not comfortable in either his skin or the psychiatrist's space. He did not really sit, he did not recline. He put himself onto the edge of the soft armchair and hunched into himself.

Some of my closest friends have told me I rave when I'm passionate about something. These are people who know me well and who have been on the receiving end of my early morning rants. Wonderful humans that they are, they have always 'talked me down' or gently ribbed me about it. I felt myself move into another gear as I faced the psychiatrist. It was the beginning of a rave. I told him my son had OCD, I told him when it began, I told him what I thought had caused the catalyst for this emergence. I told him my son's life had been reduced to our house, me and not much else. The psychiatrist looked at me while my son twisted his neck and shook his head repetitively in the chair parallel to mine. I knew he was trying to clear his head of the unwanted thoughts. I wonder what goes through such professionals' heads when they come across parents such as me. What do they think as we *tell* them, as we give our own diagnosis, as we speak for our adult children, their patients.

The psychiatrist was not cynical or rude. He did not dismiss me or my raving. He turned to

my son and tried to ask questions that my son was incapable of answering. The anxiety was so strong in my son that it was painful to watch him trying to exist in the moment. He clenched his fingers into his palms and turned his face toward a wall. When he gave up the details of his anxiety, his face twisted into an expression that was foreign to me. There was something dark and haunted behind his eyes. He was elsewhere. The psychiatrist agreed my son had severe OCD. I was devastated and relieved. He increased the dose of my son's medication. And he referred us to a clinical psychologist.

*There's no miracle cure for OCD and you should steer clear of anyone who suggests there is. Yet it is true that you can free yourself from the tyranny of OCD using a systematic approach (Forrester, 2015, p. 76).*

Cognitive Behaviour Therapy coupled with medication is widely believed to be the only really successful way to conquer Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder. This is the way in which the psychiatrist works with the clinical psychologist….one oversees the medication and one tackles the rewiring of the brain through correcting thoughts and behaviours. A significant component of this CBT is Exposure and Response Prevention Therapy. When I first read about exposure and response therapy to treat OCD many years ago, the idea terrified me. I simply was not brave enough to sit down with and confront my obsessions without going through the cleansing rituals or performing my routines of chanting or touching. I honestly didn't think I'd survive it. So, I cut corners and trained myself a little bit. It was a compromise, of sorts, I suppose. I would ignore some obsessions but I would allow myself to complete rituals for the ones that really bothered me. I knew in my heart I wasn't really 'living.' I was 'coping' and I knew, without a shadow of a doubt,

that I did not want that for my son.

The day we had our initial appointment with the clinical psychologist we got lost. My son had been yearning for this appointment. The wait time to get into this particular psychologist had been significant. My son had been living moment by moment, counting down the minutes until this day.

'How long until we see Harry?'

'Next week.'

'And, he will help me?'

'He will.'

'How long til we see Harry?'

'On Thursday.'

'And he will definitely help me?'

'Yes, he is very good at his job.'

'Why can't it be now?'

'How long til we see Harry?'

'Tomorrow at 11.45.'

'Why can't it be sooner?'

I phoned Harry after my son and I had combed the wrong street looking for his address. He told me we were not far away. I thought he could probably hear the knot of stress in my throat despite

my efforts to sound calm. When we finally arrived at the right street number, Harry was standing on the footpath, grinning a big crooked smile, waving at us.

'There he is!' I said to my son. Finally, I could deliver on this important promise.

I had already decided to come clean about everything regarding my psychological past with all of my son's specialists. My only mission was to protect and help my son. When Harry began with some gentle questioning regarding my son's referral we jostled round the psychiatrist's diagnosis of OCD until we got to other topics. We talked about my son's Autism and then we got to family history. When Harry wondered if there had been any family history of anything similar I simply blurted out:

'When I was a teenager I had an eating disorder. I've had OCD for my whole life.'

Harry's face split into a massive grin as he opened his arms wide, 'Welcome!' he said. I laughed.

It was on the second appointment with Harry that the CBT really began. My son had to look at images that would drive his obsessional thoughts and then he had to refrain from performing his rituals of seeking reassurance (from me) or chanting in his head. The session was brutal. Harry brought up on image on his phone and told my son that he would put it at the other end of the room. My son could not bear it. 'No, NO!' he wailed. Harry suggested he would put the phone screen side down at the other end of the room. He walked calmly and placed the phone and returned to his seat. My son was furious with panic. He pulled his legs up onto the couch and hugged his knees. He pushed his back into the cushions and retreated up the back of the couch like a demented monkey. In a very short time he began to sob. Great, uncontrolled, hysterical sobs of the tortured. Harry turned to me and asked me during this moment of turmoil if I thought it had gone too far. And I said 'no.' I had seen my son worse. Harry suggested that the phone be turned

up and that the image would face up to the ceiling.

'No! Don't!! Please!' My son thrashed on the couch, rocked himself violently through the space

'How high is the anxiety?' asked Harry. 'On a scale of 1-10?'

'Ten!' screamed my son. 'TEN!!!'

I stayed in my chair. I did not comfort my child. I did not interrupt. By doing nothing I was doing the most I could for him.

*It is possible to overcome OCD without taking drug medication; many people do. However, sometimes we can benefit from a bit of a 'leg-up' to boost our mood and make it easier to get started (Forrester, 2015, p.278).*

Daily, we waited for the antidepressant to kick in and to begin working with the chemicals in my son's brain. Each day he begged me to tell him how long it would be before he felt better. Each day I told him that medication takes a while to get into the system. But, I knew this was cold comfort and he needed relief from the constant torment in his brain. One day, when my son and I were lying beside each other on my bed, my son said, 'Mum, do you think I'll ever be truly happy again?' It was one of the most devastating and agonising moments of my life.

On our third visit to the psychiatrist I asked him if I might have a word to him in private. I asked him if he remembered asking about our family history of psychological health in one of our initial appointments and how I had indicated that I could not reveal too much because my son was in the room. Then I said that I believed I had information that might be very relevant to my son's treatment and recovery. I told him that I took fluoxetine to treat my own OCD. The

psychiatrist nodded.

'We'll change his medication. Historically, what works for the parent, works for the child.'

'Sounds logical to me,' I said.

We called my son into the room. We talked about the medication switch and the reasons for this change. When my son's OCD had emerged, I told him for the first time about my own OCD because I needed him to believe that I knew what I was talking about and I needed him to trust that I could help him recover. Now, I told him, we would have the same green and cream capsules to take every day. I raised the issue of my son's extreme anxiety. In reality, I was desperate for the doctor to prescribe a sedative for my son. Watching my child crawling the walls of his mind and fairly bursting from his own stretched skin was taking a toll on me and it was creating havoc with my son's ability to even exist in a room by himself. The psychiatrist gave us a prescription for anti-anxiety medication. I felt like I'd won the lottery.

*The notion of confronting your fears is widely recognized as a component of therapy for any anxiety (Forrester, 2015, p.57).*

At some point along my own OCD journey, I snapped and tried to explain the roiling darkness in my brain to my mother. I was at her house not long after my wedding and I was lying on her bed, face down, filled with utter despair. I tried to put it into words. 'I keep thinking these things. I can't stop thinking them.' I tried to convey to her how much I despised myself for not being able to function normally. How I so wanted to be like other people who could eat a meal without having to perform rituals in their brain to undo the thoughts they'd had about the people and the food around them. I told my mother that the thoughts made me feel contaminated. She asked what

worried me and I told her the truth, that it touched everything. My husband sat with us. He tried to ask helpful questions. His voice was so puzzled and gentle. I could not fully explain to them because I was too ashamed and too full of self-hatred to reveal all of the details.

Sometime later my mother told me she had found a clinic that specialised in phobias. This is what she believed I had, a phobia. She made an appointment to take me to the clinic in the city. On the day of the appointment I was overcome with relief because I believed there would be answers behind the double doors that led into the treatment room. My mother sat beside me in the musty hallway. The hallway had the type of tiles you would find in very old institutional buildings. We did not speak to each other. Both of us were, no doubt, tense with anticipation.

When the doors swung open we rose to meet the young man who walked towards us. He was dressed in a white lab coat and he was clasping a brown, old fashioned looking clipboard. Everything felt a little contrived and obvious; the scene, the young man's garb, the chipped clipboard and the cheap plastic biro he used to write on the paper.

I confirmed my identity and the young man explained that the therapy would occur behind the double doors in front of us. My mother and I said that we understood. The young man swung the doors open and I got my first look of the room beyond the doorway. There were at least twenty medical students sitting in a circle. They turned as one to look at me. All of my resolve and relief crumbled. I battled to contain my despair and panic. I demanded, in a quiet voice, to know what was going on. This was a teaching clinic, the young man explained. The students were there as observers. I told the young man that there was no way I would enter that room. The therapist (for that is who this young man probably was) decided to play devil's advocate and he said 'but, you have to go in. Don't you want to get well?' Something about the casual flippancy of this question changed me. Something about the arrogance of his assumption that he had control over me and his

patronising smile filled me with near hysteria. I felt the stress fractures widen in the façade I maintained so diligently every day. Raw emotion burst through the weakened gaps in my hardened exterior. 'This thing has nearly destroyed my life!' I said. I was trying to make this person understand the extent of my anguish. 'I am not going to discuss it in front of a group of people!' I could not remember ever speaking so loudly or so forcefully to someone I did not know. Never in my life had I ever allowed a stranger to see the writhing chaos at my core. Still, the therapist did not seem to understand the magnitude of what was being asked of me.

My mother was aghast at my behaviour. I strode away from the two of them and found refuge by staring into the corridor wall behind the chairs where, just a short time ago I had been nursing the bruised beginnings of fragile hope. The way the therapist turned to my mother made me feel threatened and cornered. Surely, I could not be forced to go into that room. My entire body was electric with dread. I heard my mother ask in very polite and civil tones, if there were any other paths for treatment for phobias. 'What type of phobia?' asked the therapist. My mother lifted one shoulder in a noncommittal shrug and I saw a rueful half smile appear briefly on her mouth. 'Phobia of the world,' said my mother.

The idea of taking medication for anything related to mental health had been repugnant and frightening to me for most of my life to this point. I had always been terrified of the potential of medication such as sedatives to become addictive and I was even more terrified of the social stigma that accompanied 'pill popping.' I was worried that people would gossip about me. I thought people could use this fact against me and tell me to 'take a pill' if I showed any sign of what they might consider 'irrational behaviour.' I had worked so hard all of my life to become a certain type of woman, someone considered capable, together, competent. In my mind, the taking of any sort of medication would eradicate all of my good work. But, one day, neither my husband

nor I could pretend I was making progress in combating the OCD on my own.

Not long after we were married, my husband accompanied me to an appointment with our usual GP. She was a 'frizzier' and 'edgier' and younger version of who my mother could have been. She wore gypsy skirts and bangles and costume jewelry and her hair was a long unkempt, mane that fell past her shoulders. It was so hard to explain what had been happening to me…the constant, downward spiral. The irresistible pull of the disorder and my inability to fight against the magnetic grip it had on me psychologically and physically. It was a terrible day in so many ways. I was reassured, once again, of my failures. Here I was, again, unable to control my unwieldy brain. Unable to complete simple tasks that other people took for granted and gave no second thought to throughout their day to day life. I was admitting, once more, that my brain continued to trip me up, continued to hold me for ransom. Throughout the appointment I felt humiliated and saddened. And desperate. Once again, I had reached the end of my coping resources and strategies.

The GP was remarkable in her approach. She asked questions and did not flinch when I answered them. She made notes on my file and referred me to a male psychiatrist. The irony that the psychiatrist was located in the same building as the psychiatrist I had seen throughout my treatment for Anorexia Nervosa was not lost on me.

I didn't warm to the psychiatrist. He was in his mid -thirties with thick, brown wavy hair. His office had a wall of glass behind his desk that allowed him to gaze out over the city scape. He liked to rock back in his chair while he 'listened' and he seldom made notes during our sessions. Each appointment was uncomfortable and difficult. I began to dread them. He was the person who recommended medication for me. I hated him for it and I told him so. Reluctantly I followed his instructions and began the medication. Nothing happened. The psychiatrist expressed mild surprise when I told him. But, not to be daunted, he upped my dose. Each day I took the tablets and fumed

and raged at the lack of change. How could nothing be happening? Was I putting poison in my body and brain for no reason? The arrogance of the psychiatrist infuriated me.

I was doing something mundane when I realised that I had been able to perform an action once and had not experienced an intrusive thought or felt a compulsion to repeat the action. I prodded around gingerly at the back of my brain, afraid to awaken anything savage that lurked there. The OCD was still there…I could still feel the presence of it. 'It's sleeping in another room,' was how I thought of it. It was still living in the house of my brain but it wasn't trashing the place. I stood quietly in the moment…I had not had an agitation free moment for a very long time. It was a moment of emotional surrendering and painful realisation. I understood and accepted that medication could improve mental suffering.

*We should neither avoid nor attempt to control uncomfortable experiences.: if we let intrusive thoughts and anxiety come and go, they stop interfering with our lives (Forrester, 2015, p.83).*

Harry grinned at my son. My son had just told him his anxiety level had been about a two out of ten.

'Really?!' exclaimed Harry. 'You've done so well!'

And he had. My son had pushed himself and fought with himself. Finally, he could sit in front of the images on the phone and not feel compelled to look away or to chant in his head. Harry told me this moment was as significant as receiving an award or a graduation ceremony. He wanted to be sure I understood the magnitude of it. I bit my bottom lip in an emotional, shaky smile and I nodded. 'I know, I know…' I said. My son had accomplished what I had never been able to.

Six months after my son had begun his therapy and recovery through the combination of CBT and medication, we sat opposite my son's psychiatrist. He outlined how changed my son was and how amazing was his progress. I told the psychiatrist that I felt blessed. We had a GP that had listened to us and referred us to this efficient and informed psychiatrist who had, in turn, referred us to a psychologist who had been a great fit for us. The psychiatrist, a little overwhelmed with the outburst of gratitude, said it was a combination of the right medication, the right help and good support at home. And, then I felt overwhelmed. I smiled. But I did not cry.

About fifty years ago, Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder was considered to be untreatable. There was certainly no school of thought that suggested any therapy that would lessen the effects of this insidious mental disorder. Approaches to the treatment of OCD began to alter when some practitioners decided to push their patients through the hysteria that arose when they were made to confront their fears and obsessions. Though the patients' anxiety skyrocketed in the initial sessions of this therapy, it was observed that the effect on the patient when exposed to their personal triggers in subsequent sessions had lessened. In this way, over a surprisingly short period of time, sufferers of OCD, were able to be freed from the grip of the disorder. The patients were not 'cured' but they were able to resist the irrational urge to respond to the obsessive thoughts that randomly arose in their brains. As a result, the compulsions, the truly devastating part of OCD were not performed. In this way, the patients were able to break the addictive cycle.

OCD never goes away completely. There is no cure for OCD. A psychiatrist explained it to my son as a switch that is flicked on and, once that part of the brain is activated, it stays active. At different times, all individuals who have battled OCD will face at least a tiny future skirmish with the monster. This is when the individuals who have progressed through their Cognitive

Behaviour Therapy will access their armory of skills in order to slay the monster. I have never been brave enough to challenge my monster to full combat. I am in awe of my son who entered OCD's lair, faced the horror of his fears and continues to slay the dragon.

## 5. ‘Hail Fall’

*That’s me in the spotlight.*

*That’s me in the corner, losing my religion.*

‘Losing my Religion’ - R.E.M.

I opened Facebook that morning before I was properly awake. A past student of mine, now a teacher herself had posted. ‘Rest in peace, beautiful lady.’ And my heart sank. A comment from one of her friends underneath the post explained that, though the friend didn’t know who had passed away she was sorry and hoped everything was okay. I knew it wasn’t. Following immediately from the post by my ex-student was a photo accompanied by a headline which informed me that Dolores O’Riordan, lead singer of the Cranberries, had passed away. She was 46. The news felled me.

Who can say why these things affect us so deeply? When David Bowie died I was crushed. He had been like a companion through each of my decades. The day he died, before I disintegrated into grief, I reassured my eldest son who hates seeing me upset. His Autism makes him incredibly sensitive to the moods of others. I took my son by the shoulders and tried to strangle the pain in my voice as I said, ‘David Bowie has died and, though it is silly because I didn’t know him, I’m going to cry.’ It took me months to be able to listen to his songs without dissolving into pain filled tears. Photos of his many personas elicited great sorrow. It made sense to me. I was in mourning and, though, I didn’t know Bowie personally, I felt his presence and his genius in the world and it made the world a better place for me. With Dolores, it was different. Dolores co-wrote two songs that I still love today; ‘Linger’ and ‘Dreams’ but, overall, I was never a massive fan of the

Cranberries. I never bought any of their music. But, over the next few days, I sat in misery reading about her, staring at pictures of her and…inexplicably mourning deeply.

It seems to me that demons that plague certain women often reemerge, more despicable and frightening than ever for these women in their forties. I know mine did. These were often issues, vexations or troubles that I believed I had bested, tamed and contained. How terrifying it was when the claws and teeth of these same vexations started reappearing through the bars of their temporary prisons. These were prisons built from denial, anxiety and the substantial sacrificing of rejected parts of my personality and past. They were erected on the unsteady foundation of fragile courage and determined strength. A large part of this tenuous courage and strength I managed to find within myself was founded on the rock of my religion. In my forties, this rock was revealed to be sand.

I was raised in a small town in rural Queensland as the child of a Catholic mother and a father who frequented the Masonic Lodge. We lived in an old yellow Queenslander that balanced precariously on old rotting stumps on a huge block of land. Every evening the kitchen windows grinned yellow light out onto the grass while my brother and my sister and I scampered in the vast backyard. The streets of our town were quiet as was the lifestyle for the most part. The population of the town were mostly descendants of families who had lived in the region for generations. (My mother would tell us with pride that she was a seventh-generation descendant of this town.)

My parents had met when my father was fourteen and my mother was thirteen. While my mother was a student at the local 'convent' as the Catholic school was known, my father was a 'state schooler.' One day, as my mother was walking home from school, my father happened to be riding by on his bicycle. He was immediately struck by her beauty and slowed his bike to talk to her. My mother used to say my father had always been good looking enough to be a movie star.

Like so much to do with my parents' marriage, at the base of the uniting of their religious beliefs lay an uneasiness. It was a trouble that was never resolved. My father harboured a dislike of the Catholic church and all it stood for at that time in his life. My mother used to love telling the story of she and my father attending their wedding preparation meeting with the priest. The priest had leant in and asked my father if he had ever entertained the idea of converting to Catholicism and, according to my mother, my father had spat a vehement, 'no!' at the priest. My mother used to laugh at the priest's response… a very firm, 'And don't you!' Still, there was little to laugh about in relation to the topic of religion in our household. For many, many years it was a constant troubling presence that provoked arguments and disagreements in our home and refused to be tamed.

When I was a baby and my sister was three, my mother convinced my father to allow his daughters to be baptised. She took us to the Catholic church where she and my father had begun their turbulent marriage and my sister and I were baptised with water from the old marble font that stood guard at the church entrance. The water in the font was always unnaturally cold and the basin was always a slick green with algae. When I was a child I used to sometimes dip my finger into the bowl and watch as the algae swirled up from the bottom of the basin. It was like watching small green spirits being conjured to the surface.

My father refused to get his only son, my younger brother, baptised. In a sense, my brother belonged more to my father. My mother used to relate the tale of my brother's birth and explain what a joyous occasion it was because our father finally had a son. These were the days when the Catholic church taught that unbaptised children who die cannot enter heaven but must languish in purgatory forever. We girls accepted this as fact and we fretted about our parents' 'unsaved' son. As my sister and I grew older we learned to lie to our friends and even to our brother about his

unbaptised state. My father said my brother could make up his own mind about religion when he was older.

When it came time for a school to be chosen for her children to attend, my mother managed to persuade my father that the small, local Catholic school would be best. The school was staffed by the Sisters of Mercy who lived on the premises in the same huge wooden convent where my mother had boarded as a child. Most of these nuns were of Irish descent, some still with thick accents that, at first seemed to portray the nuns as entertaining or, possibly, jovial. This impression was malformed. The nuns were a constant reminder of the difference between goodness and sin. It was a simple enough concept to grasp even for primary school aged children. The nuns, brides of Christ, were overflowing with goodness and we, mere scraps of wretched humanity, were overflowing with sin. I knew from a very young age that I was severely wanting in grace and that I would have to work very hard to be considered worthy enough to enter heaven.

It was during primary school that the devil began living under my bed. He liked to lie on his back on the cracked linoleum and watch the underside of the small lump that was me. He particularly liked the small gap between the side of my bed and the wall. He laid mostly up against the wall and slid his talons up through the slit between the mattress and the cold wooden panels of the wall. I knew, instinctively that it was imperative that I laid, motionless in the very centre of the mattress in order to be shielded from his touch. His talons couldn't reach that far. I spent countless childhood nights awake while Satan laid patiently, twirling his thumbs, waiting, under the bed. My prayers were sodden crumbs of wafer in my mouth. I lay paralysed, my faith an impotent power.

*

For the next three decades, I lived in terror. Fraud that I was I could not pray my way faithfully out of anything. Always I recognized myself for what I was, a guilt filled, shameful, inadequate vessel. I could never be clean enough for Christ's love to dwell in me. Still, I tried. Valiantly.

I was pathetic in my gratitude every day. I was thankful my family members weren't killed. When I left my family home at sixteen, I was thankful that I could have the comfort of a bedside lamp lit during the night and that I could keep my shameful neuroses hidden from my peers and teachers. When I was a university student I was thankful for the beautiful man who loved me, and held me, protectively, in his arms at night in our bed. When I was an adult working, I was thankful I could maintain a façade of normalcy in front of my colleagues and students at my place of work. I was thankful that the years of self-induced vomiting did not ruin my teeth or esophagus and that the years of starvation had not rendered me infertile. I was thankful for the brief times when the chanting in my head stopped. I was thankful that I could be of service to others. I was thankful that my first son was saved during a traumatic delivery. I was thankful my son had specialists who could tell me he had Autism. I was thankful I stopped bleeding in my second pregnancy and my body was strong enough to hold onto our second son. I was thankful that I could disguise my misery. I was thankful, thankful, thankful… Always, I thought of how things would improve, how things would get better. I knew if I had faith that was strong enough, I would overcome all of my troubles completely. If I gave up my worries to God then I would be comforted and, ultimately, cured. One day one of my students told me with the confidence and arrogance of youth that to fear was a sin and I knew I was doomed.

*

One day, when I was about 15, my mother and I clambered into a cab in a busy city suburb. My mother told the driver the address. It was a group of specialists' rooms in the heart of the city. The driver wanted to know why we needed to go there. My mother told him. I did not look at him. The appointment was for me because I was battling a psychological illness. The driver was a youngish man with very dark skin. This cab driving would be a brief occupation for him. He had eyes that flashed zealously as he 'talked' to us via the rearview mirror. I looked at my bony knees. My mother unburdened herself. The cab drive, was about fifty minutes. In that time, my mother gave up, eagerly, the story of my turbulent existence and illness to this stranger. When we pulled up outside the specialists' towering building the cab driver asked my mother if he could exorcise me. And she said, 'yes.' I stood hapless, vulnerable and frightened as the stranger laid hands on me and commanded demons out of my body and mind. My mother stood on the footpath with her hands against her thighs, a bizarre beatific smile on her face. I have never felt so utterly foreign or soiled. The exorcism did not work.

Nothing could cure me because my faith was not strong enough, because I was too fearful. I doubted that I was worthy of being saved. God loved all of his children except me. I saw this as a daily fact. I saw people who laughed, who were free, who were not cursed. When I was a university student, my best friend's father came to visit her. I was, as always, too loud, too energized, too physical. When I said, 'God help me' as a throwaway comment during a story I was telling, my friend's father looked at me dubiously and he said with great certainty, 'He wouldn't listen to you, would he?' I felt the laughter die in my throat as I was reminded once more of who and what I was.

When I was a young, engaged woman, visiting my father in the shed he had converted into a small house, I noticed a piece of paper sticking out from other papers in a ramshackle pile. The

pile was on his living room floor. The piece of paper that was sticking out had my name on it. I pulled the paper from the pile without guilt. It had my name on it after all. On the paper, my father had written in his distinctive hand, 'Did dad say if we lost Jeanita that we would have lost nothing.' I found out later from my mother that it was something my grandfather had said to her about me and she, in her turn, had spat the words at my father during another heated argument. I wondered why I was always the filthy, rejected one. I had been marked. No one contradicted my grandfather's words.

When I was pregnant with my second child and the question of a safe delivery became a daily nightmare, I asked my mother what was special enough about me to guarantee that I would be okay during the elective caesarean that I did not want. She told me with a blank face, 'I don't know,' and then she walked away. Without any proof that I was worthy enough to be considered savable, my faith began to exist only as an external thing. Inside I doubted, I doubted, I doubted…I was worse than Thomas.

*

In my third year of university my soon to be husband and I moved into a brand-new unit that boasted slick, contemporary grey and white paint and carpets. The real miracle of the place was that it had never been inhabited by another human being. I had come to the conclusion that humans were foul, contaminated beings who had to be navigated around in order to maintain any attempts at a pristine world.

It was in this unit that had, at first, seemed to offer such promise of peace that my personal world came further and further unraveled. As university wrapped up for the year and I became

more and more organized with and, hyper-focused on, assignments I had less and less to occupy my thoughts. I found myself fixated daily on the horror of the world and its people and the evil that seemed to be everywhere. What was the point, I wondered more and more in continuing with this farce? As my soon to be husband left for work every morning and I sat waiting to find out where I had been posted by the education department, I slipped further and further away from the possibility of a joyful existence. I felt the ropes of despair pulling me deeper into terrified stasis and any sense of logical thought seemed to have deserted me. I felt so enormously the deviousness and the duplicity of the universe. I knew in that moment that there was no escape from the insidious elements of the world. The genuine pointlessness of it all was laid out like a set of disprovable equations.

One morning I walked spontaneously out of the front door of the unit with the grey and white paint and carpeting. I locked the door behind me, pocketed the key, walked down the internal stairwell and out into the carpark and turned into the road. I began walking in the general direction of a catholic church. I had noticed it when we had driven around the adjoining suburb. It was a few kilometres away. As I neared the church I felt a sense of bitter, fragile purpose. But, it felt like a lie. I remembered my friend's father saying contemptuously, 'He wouldn't listen to you.' Though my university friend had defended me I felt keenly that familiar feeling of unworthiness as I stood before the church. It was the feeling of the outsider who cannot gain membership to a club simply because they are not chosen. It was the shame of someone who had not made it successfully through an initiation. I pushed open the door and entered the building.

A priest appeared near the altar. He had a youthful, self-assured quality about him that I'm sure would have made him popular with his congregation. He approached me and asked me if he could help me. What a question. We sat in an ancient wooden pew, framed by a stained-glass

window. Fingers of sunlight stretched across the pew toward my skinny thigh. Outside the window was a gorgeous scene of native, untamed bush. The eucalypts leapt up, with joyful branches outstretched toward the blue expanse above. Reaching up to God, no doubt. No screen writer could have captured a more spectacular backdrop for such a scene. I confessed to the priest. It felt like sinful relief to finally lance the wound and admit defeat and fear and, yes, the pain of being denied comfort by my religion. I confessed I did not see any good in the world. In front of that beautiful display of nature I confessed that I did not see any hope or point in an existence in which I had no control over the frequent evils with which I was confronted. I was telling him I was done.

In that time, in that space, that man found the right words to say at the right time. Why not, he suggested, focus on my own small circle? Surely, he reasoned gently, if I did good works in my own circle then it would be logical to expect that these good works would create a ripple of goodness that would extend out into ever extending ripples into the world. Imagine, he suggested in his measured tone, the great impact of all these small circles of goodness overlapping and mingling with other circles. In this way wouldn't there be an impact on any evil and, wasn't that a reason to hope, to feel comforted?

I never set foot in that church again and I never saw that priest again. I do not remember how I farewelled him and I do not remember the walk back home. But I recollect so vividly my desperate desire for the priest's words to coax my damaged faith toward doubtless conviction and unwavering constancy. I remember grasping like a drowning person at a slippery rope thrown from the safety of a ship. But, a rope can only be of help to a drowning person if their grip is strong and such a rope is easily lost sight of in a turbulent sea and, as time passed and the waves of doubt and fear rose relentlessly higher, I realized the rope wasn't enough. What was needed was a life jacket and no one was offering me one.

*

I prayed a lot because I wanted to be forgiven. Absolved. When I sat as a young, self-conscious child in the confessionals shielded by a carved screen from the priest I made up 'sins' in order to have committed the sin of 'lying' so I could be forgiven for something. The penance was addictive. Emerging afterwards to kneel before the massive plaster figure of Christ on the cross suspended from the arched ceiling, made me feel that I had gained temporary access to an elite establishment. I adored the action of kneeling with bent head, of pressing my knuckles together, of whispering the passages onto the backs of my hands. I craved the humility and the goodness. But, the ritual of chanting out the Hail Marys and the Our Fathers never satisfied the cravings and I was left as hollow as that plaster idol.

*

As a parent, I never left either of my children to face the night alone. I co-slept with them from the time they were infants and my husband and I never, officially, turfed them out of our bed. As they grew older I often laid beside them in their own beds as they drifted off to sleep. Even now at 22 and 18, my boys occasionally wake me for reassurance in the deepest hours of night. While I laid beside my youngest son in his double bed one night as he gradually surrendered to sleep, I had a realisation. I have always said that there is a difference between understanding something and realising something…that night I realised that, if there was a God, he was not interested in the likes of us. I had always understood salvation was difficult to attain but now I realised it was a farce.

God was for other people and other families and other people's children. What god would allow my son to have Autism? What made us less worthy of mercy than other people? Why had my son been singled out for a lifetime of loneliness and struggle? I felt a sensation of cold, hard anger being forged within me. I was angry at God for being so terribly choosy about who he would deign to accept and help. I was angry and scornful with myself for wasting YEARS of my life in keeping to the rules of unfaithful faith. And the anger emboldened me and made me feel powerful…and free. I felt guiltless and shameless. And broken. I realised I was truly alone. I always had been.

*

Dolores was cut from a different cloth to me. Over the days that I read more about Dolores, I discovered horrible facts of her life I had never known. I learnt of the sexual abuse she suffered as a child, about her constant battles with depression and self-loathing. I gained insight into her violent outburst on an aircraft when she was overcome with the mania that would lead to her diagnosis of bipolar disorder. I read of the disintegration of her twenty-year marriage and her inability to retain custody of her three adored children; the only things that had ever really brought her peace or joy. Yet, in all of this, the thing that struck me again and again was the fact that she never lost her faith. Now and then an article would outline the comfort she found in her religion, how the village priest had been so important in her family's life, how she would be buried next to her beloved father and how a priest she knew personally would bestow her final rites upon her. Here we diverged. Despite understanding so much of her personal horror, I couldn't reconcile myself to the beautiful fact that she never lost her connection to God. Maybe it was because she never felt God overlooked her children? For me, I could accept being considered unworthy to save

and my self-loathing simply bolstered this view. But, the day I dared to question why my children should suffer changed and loosened something at my very foundation. A fundamental stone shifted and cracked. My faith reverted to sand.

Despite my newly unearthed cynicism toward religion, something about the innocent hopefulness of Dolores cleaving to her Catholic faith touched me deeply. It was like running into a much loved yet feared old acquaintance at an unexpected and painful reunion. I knew you once, I thought as I read yet another article. And then I thought of powerful, powerless, loving, self-loathing Dolores and I sent out a private kudos to her. Rest easy, Dolores. You finished the race. You kept the faith.

## 6. ‘Hard Rime’

*Can’t sleep*

*Bed’s on fire.*

*Don’t touch me*

*I’m a real live wire.*

‘Psycho Killer’ – Talking Heads

‘I can’t sleep’ we say when we are children, spooked by the dark and by the potential horrors enclosed in the night. ‘I can’t sleep’ we say as teenagers when we lie, heart clenched, pulse racing, our brains gripped with images of the object of our desire. ‘I can’t sleep’ we moan as young adults as work commitments crank through our heads and we stress about waking on time to make it to those commitments. ‘I can’t sleep’ we say as parents who are bullied through the night by our children’s cries. ‘I can’t sleep’ we murmur as we move into later life and we stress about bills and adult children and ailing friends and relatives. It seems everyone has a story to tell of being exhausted, of chasing sleep down uncomforting rabbit holes, of a traumatized early morning encounter with a clock face that simply won’t stop ticking. ‘I have insomnia,’ seems to be so frequently met with jaunty cries of, ‘Don’t you just hate that?” or ‘Me, too! Doesn’t it suck?’ And, maybe this is the reason it’s so very hard to explain the true agony of a disrupted, dysfunctional relationship with sleep.

I sometimes think if sleep was a person she’d be a hard to please, needy, selfish yet incredibly beautiful, much coveted lover. She’d be dark haired, with a pinched face, her translucent skin pulled back tightly across her bony nose, jaw and shoulders. She’d be long limbed and narrow

hipped. There she'd be lolling exquisitely on the parameters of my regular existence. A dark, elegant figure, lounging in grey shadows, unattainable yet so hard to ignore or to stop thinking about. So easy to despise yet impossible not to desire. Of course, she didn't always present like this…

Sleep first abandoned me when I was a child. She proved to be an unreliable bedfellow very early. No warning, no hint, just suddenly no longer available. She was inconsistent and moody. Like the haughty older friend that gets sick of playing with you on the child's playground and sneaks off to have a smoke with the rebellious kids. There I'd be thinking we were about to settle down for a cosy slumber party, just the two of us… 'Well,' she would announce out of the corner of her spoilt, petulant mouth, 'I'm off. Mind those monsters in the corner!' And just like that, poof! Gone! Children are like dogs…they don't know how long it's going to be before their carers return. I didn't know if Sleep was planning to be gone for a long time or a short time…so, loyal foolish type, that I was, I'd stay awake waiting for her. Time would tick away like a bomb waiting to explode…Cold sweat would gather on my sun-bleached brows as I lay rigid in the dead centre of the bed. 'Listen,' Satan would murmur from under the bed… 'I don't think she's coming back. Maybe we should just get on with the damning you to hell business?' I was usually too busy trying to corral the monsters in the corner of the room to answer him. And, of course, night time horrors frequently steal away the voices of children, like evil adults steal children's candy, so these were usually vacuum sealed moments of fear. As the monsters gnawed their way through my vocal chords, I'd stare at the ceiling, compromised by the clot of terror in my throat and the snot in my nose from the dread induced tears and I'd wonder over and over how Sleep could do such a terrible thing to me.

Whenever she returned she always acted like nothing had changed. ‘Hi,’ she’d say nonchalantly as I lay on the too hot, mismatched sheets, exhausted from some athletics carnival. My tired legs would stretch out, delicious with the agony of exertion. Sleep would lay herself down beside me, wriggle in until she was comfortable and promptly pull me after her into blackness. She never apologized. I never got an explanation. And, I always forgave her because it was always such a bloody relief to see her again. Children are very forgiving, after all. And, each time she returned I had no reason to think that she hadn’t returned for good. This made the times she abandoned me in the future all the more disappointing.

By the time we moved into our teens, Sleep was, to be honest, becoming a bit of a bully. The relationship was truly one sided in terms of the old give and take. While my waking hours disintegrated into despair and loneliness, Sleep took it upon herself to ensure I didn’t get too relaxed about the precarious hold I had on my own reality in my night time hours. She had a really annoying habit of wanting to discuss horror movies we had happened to snatch small glances at in the past, as we lay in bed. ‘What about those vampires, though?’ she’d begin. ‘The one with the crucifix mark burned into his head! How terrifying was that?’ ‘Pretty terrifying,’ I’d agree while wondering how to get rid of the vampires that had been summoned to cluster around the outside of my bedroom window. ‘And the eyes on that werewolf! Holy shit!’ I would nod grimly into the cavernous night and think, reluctantly, of the werewolf in the cupboard with his yellow eyes.

As we edged further into our teens, Sleep started spending a fair bit of her time reminding me of how fat I’d become as I wrestled fretfully with her through the night. ‘I’ll exercise tomorrow!’ I’d offer as a desperate plea. She’d pop her pink, disgusting bubble gum, wrinkle her nose and reply, ‘Yeah, but you’re so fat now…’ I’d search deep inside for a way to placate this vile little sprite. ‘I won’t eat at all tomorrow.’ This was usually the trump card that could dilute

her scorn. ‘Okaaay, maybe…’ she’d say and she might even gently drape her fingers across my eyes for a few minutes. But, inevitably she’d pluck at my eyelashes until I awoke, to remind me that, even though my stomach was growling, I mustn’t eat tomorrow. ‘I know!’ I’d hiss. Then I’d lie awake fretting while Sleep settled beside my sister, leaving me to trudge down dark corridors of night toward the dawn, alone and desperate.

In my late teens, I found myself living with my brother and our best mate. During these two years, Sleep decided she hated me well and truly for a solid six-month period. I just wasn’t worthy enough of her company. She’d become snooty and snobby and was probably hanging out with the really popular girls and guys…who knew. But, she sure as hell, wasn’t hanging out with me in our modest living quarters with the offensive yellow curtains and the smell of rising damp.

Sometimes, I’d set up a little occult ritual of a night time to call her in…I thought maybe I could appeal to her sense of vanity if I made a special effort just for her. So, I wandered the supermarket tea section and bought rank concoctions to later, steep in hot water. I developed a night time routine that was better suited to an aged pensioner or a hospital patient. After a warm, soothing shower, I’d apply special moisturisers appointed for night time use only. The smell of these creams was meant to transport my mind and prepare me mentally, for my upcoming date with Sleep. Apparently, I’d smell so delicious she’d find it hard to resist me. Afterwards, I’d saunter out to our faded melamine topped kitchen table/bench. Here, I’d prepare the odious tea blend and then, sitting hunched at the table top, hands clutched like a witch’s claws around the special night time teacup, I’d spill the liquid down my gullet and hope to Christ that I’d got all the ingredients right for the spell to work. Then, with faux casualness, I’d rise from the tabletop, deposit the empty cup into the battered kitchen sink and wander off to my room, still feigning normalcy. Here, I’d move into a paralysed state of inertia. Trapped beneath the sheets, with my

eyes squeezed until the explosion of lights played out on the back of my lids, I'd fantasise that Sleep was about to come to me…that she was sniffing at the luscious creams staining my skin, that she was intoxicated by the tea on my breath, that she was about to embrace me. Unable to move toward Sleep, unable to commit to wakefulness…I'd continue the façade until morning arrived and I would rise and enter the day, all the time pretending I hadn't been stood up.

Sleep got over herself after those six months. She came home without force and shuffled back into my bed. Things weren't perfect between us and, there were still a fair few rough moments. When I was alone at night, with only Sleep for company, she was in direct control and rationed slumber out reluctantly and only in miserly amounts. On these nights, she'd flounce around my bedroom, simply refusing to be appeased. 'No!' she'd snap, venomous and spiteful, 'I refuse to settle unless you leave the light on!' I'd plead, beg, negotiate, try to compromise…and eventually, every time, I'd cave... 'Fine,' I'd mutter, broken and cowed, 'The light can stay on. Just please, come to bed.' Victorious and haughty, she'd deign to place her dark head on the pillow next to mine. Some nights I imagined I could hear her snickering softly into the void as she lay there…

But, I was able to gain back a little control over Sleep if my boyfriend at the time stayed over. Usually on these nights, Sleep lay across my body in my bed, while I flung my arm across the bare chest of the boyfriend. He'd drift off to sleep and she'd place her perfect lips to my ear and murmur, 'Remember that hideous film you just saw? Why did you go with him? The creature has escaped your mind and is roaming in the room.' 'Fuck off,' I'd reply, irritated and tense, while I scuttled further under the boyfriend's long legs. She'd sulk, hurt but she'd calm her rhetoric and consent to hold me gingerly.

I thought I had Sleep on the back foot and under my control when the boy I had fallen in love with moved in with me in my first year of university. This boy would one day be my husband. I was in a new city, in a new house. A new uni student living with the same old friend from school. Before my one day to be husband moved in, sleep had cranked up her aggressive behaviour to that of a shrieking banshee. I'd never known her to be so hideous. Hair streaming out like ropey tendrils, mouth perpetually open like Munch's Scream, she ran rampant through the old wooden house we were renting. She'd jump nimbly over the holes in the floor that urged snakes to enter our abode. Screaming, incoherently, she'd fling herself at the elevated corners of the high ceilings and jabber incessantly about the horrors of the night. I wondered if she was regressing to our childhood in the old Queenslander…I could do little except try to ride out her tantrums, hoping that she'd eventually wear herself out and settle but…most times she would refuse to relent and I would grit my teeth, heart hammering with fear and sprint down the echoing wooden corridor where I'd throw myself onto the mattress on the floor beside my good mate who'd be completely sated with Sleep. What can I say? Sleep was ever the strumpet.

A few months later, my one day to be husband moved in. I had never before experienced such complete infatuation. He smelt good enough to hold both Sleep and I in thrall to him. Every night I lay along his body, our legs tangled, sheltered in our delightfully twisted sheets. Sleep took a shine to my one day to be husband at this point in our relationship. She reigned in her eccentric shrieking, she calmed her demeanour, she became almost demure as she flitted, daintily through our night-times. She didn't begin to tire of our union until my one day to be husband became my husband. Then she became moody once more, a malevolent shrew who could never be satisfied. 'For God's sake, this shit is getting old!' I'd silently yell at her as she picked my life, my brain and the rest of me to pieces.

In all fairness to Sleep, I'd recently fallen for Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder. Demanding, perfect and cruel, he stormed through my days dictating how things would now be. He was intrusive and entitled. I tried to ignore him but, it was impossible. He'd just stand tapping his foot impatiently, chin jutting out, glaring until I relented. Sleep had no chance with him, either. He loathed her. When she was around he couldn't look down his nose far enough at her. He thought she was overrated and couldn't understand why I'd want to even entertain the thought of hanging out with Sleep. To really pound this point home, OCD worked hard to fill my mind with a host of unwanted, unbidden thoughts that served to crowd Sleep out. Satisfied, he would turn to me, jubilant. 'It's only us!' he'd hiss in his by now familiar, condescendingly harsh tones. I hid it well from OCD but, there were many nights I smeared a luscious cream on my body in an attempt to lure Sleep back. And, some nights she did creep back in and laid awkwardly between me, my husband and OCD. If she was very stealthy, we'd manage to create some sort of precarious equilibrium where we'd teeter, merged together until dawn broke. Then she'd gather up her skirts and flee and I'd be left in limbo wondering when, and if, she'd ever return.

One of the best things about having kids was that I could finally kick Sleep to the curb. I just didn't have time for her in my life. She could stalk around the bedroom half naked, negligee dangling from one firm, slender shoulder and I couldn't have cared less. I didn't give her half a glance during these nights. 'Look, fuck off,' I'd mutter impatiently while I cradled the baby to my breast. 'I've got enough problems without you whoring around the room.' No doubt, I offended her but I was too wrung out to care. I was too tired to sleep. Overtired, is the correct term, I believe. And, my brain was packed with post-partum anxiety and fears for the baby. To be honest, I'd started spending a significantly increased amount of time with OCD. And he was more demanding than ever. And noisy! That officious bastard never and, I mean never, shut up. Constantly at me

day and night. Repeating himself over and over. I just didn't have the energy to court Sleep at the same time…so, she had to go. I doubt she'd have enjoyed hanging out with me anyway and there's very little I could have offered her in the way of worthiness. I had massive purple bruises under my eyes from lack of her company, chapped hands from proving to OCD that my digits were clean and a skinny, shapeless body from burning all those calories breast feeding through the hours I should have been spending with her. So, though it seemed to be a clean break, it left behind an untreated fracture that began to fester. 'If you could get some sleep, you might not be so depressed,' my doctor suggested. I couldn't find the words to tell her that that wouldn't be possible because Sleep and I had parted company. It was actually a little awkward.

Over the decade that followed, I stopped spending so much time thinking about Sleep. She returned most nights to spend at least a few hours with me. She liked the fact that I was working so hard and this impressed her so much she forgave me and, though we never got back to any sort of solid relationship, she lost a little of her willful unpredictability. I thought she might be mellowing. It appeared she was succumbing to family life and had accepted her lot. I couldn't help but feel a little smug…that I'd finally got her in a malleable positon. Nothing could have been further from the truth. She had simply been biding her time, waiting to unleash her fury.

One night, not long after we had entered our forties, Sleep turned to me as we were drifting off.

'Hey, you awake?' she joked.

'Very droll,' I responded happily tired. I'd had a pretty good day, got some things done, exercised, ate right, mothered, wifed, and all to a standard that I found acceptable. No mean feat because I am a picky, perfectionist bitch at the best of times…

'I was just thinking…' Sleep whispered, lips pressed to my ear.

‘Mmm?’ (I confess I was becoming mildly irritated.)

Sleep pressed closer to my face and chest. For a brief moment, I thought she was submitting to my will…

‘You know those existential crises you used to have in your teens?’

‘Oh, for fuck’s sake, yeah, of course I do.’ I rolled my eyes under my closed lids.

‘Well…’ and at this point, Sleep pulled away from me. A voice like that of a pre-menstrual harpie burst from her mouth and seared into my brain…THEY’RE BACK!!!’

And that was that. My eyelids sprang open. Sleep hovered momentarily near the ceiling of the room, long enough to grin evilly at me and to allow me to feel sufficiently nauseated. She blew me a revolting kiss, stuck her tongue out at me and disappeared.

I’m not proud of myself or of my behavior in the weeks that followed…I told Sleep I didn’t care about her at all. I swore I’d be fine without her. I tried to cheat and take naps in the day but these were all fruitless efforts and made me super cranky and agitated. I became voyeuristic when I found myself in social situations that my husband insisted I attend. ‘Tell me more about how many hours you got last night,’ I’d urge one friend on in a breathy voice. ‘Oh my,’ I’d murmur to another, ‘an afternoon nap in front of the television? With pillows or without?’ My husband began to realise the irrational and unpredictable relationship I was conducting with Sleep. One night jetlag woke him. Irritated he turned over in the practiced manner of someone who has done this many times before except instead of finding a horizontal wife, he found one sitting ramrod still against the headboard, arms crossed, eyes staring fixedly into the night. ‘What the fuck, baby?’ he said, ‘It’s three in the morning.’ ‘I know,’ I replied and then, bizarrely calm I said ‘I told you, I can’t sleep.’ I think the acceptance in my voice and the, no doubt, unhinged look on my face convinced him we were facing a serious issue.

Finally, one night, desperate, alone and melodramatic I confronted Sleep. My children were in bed and my husband was away on another business trip. 'Listen, you bitch,' I said to Sleep and there was steel and mild hysteria in my voice, 'I've had your shit! I'm going to drown you in this red wine!' Then, under the suspicious gaze of Sleep I proceeded to down the entire bottle. 'There!' I slurred at her just before I passed out on the couch…only to be woken by Sleep beating a hasty retreat an hour and a half later. My face was stuck to the couch, I still had my jewellery and my jeans on and the rancid taste of sour wine along my tongue and teeth. Sleep shot me a disgusted, amused look as she flitted out of the room and I laid awake feeling ill, naked in my self-inflicted misery.

Of course, I didn't tell the doctor this when my husband insisted I went for professional help with the 'Insomnia.' I went knowing full well that I was about to answer countless questions. Because, as I pointed out at the start of this piece, most everyone thinks they've got insomnia or had an affair with insomnia or have become at least mildly acquainted with insomnia.

The first doctor listened in a very effective looking way and did a lot of professional nodding. And then he talked about developing a sleep routine and taking melatonin and giving the whole mechanism a good old reboot. And I looked at him with a little contempt because he seemed to think I was a newcomer to this event. 'I'm not an amateur!' I wanted to shout, 'I've turned professional, goddamnit!!!'

The second doctor asked me about my 'sleep hygiene' and listened sympathetically, her face reflecting her internal concern. I told her of my green tea drinking, coffee shirking, daily exercising, and my sexy Sleep routines. She was an older woman who saw no shame in prescribing sleeping pills when they were needed. I felt a surge of premature relief. Could it be that I could spurn Sleep entirely? Could I forge a new future with this synthetic sleep aid? The possibility was

giddying in its promise of escape. Sleep wedged herself into one of the corners of my bedroom ceiling and watched me down the pills and climb beneath the covers next to my husband. She snorted at me rather rudely and disappeared. The only person who engaged with Sleep that night was my husband.

When I returned to see a different doctor, I had the great and unusual privilege of being able to explain that sleeping tablets did not work for me. At all. I had been awake for two days and two nights at this stage. I could tell he was genuinely impressed. I upped the shock factor a bit more by blurting out that I probably shouldn't be driving because my senses were so blurry around the edges.

'How desperate are you to be unconscious?' he asked quietly.

What a perfect question! I thought before I started to feel myself becoming a little weepy. I left the surgery with a prescription for an anti-psychotic medication. 'You're not psychotic,' the doctor had reassured me, 'but we need to shut your brain down manually because you've lost the ability to do it automatically.' It was remembering the doctor's insistence that the action was necessary that gave me the strength to put the quarter of a tablet in my mouth. And, within half an hour my brain went into shutdown mode. I lay, half terrified as I felt the drug move through the files of my brain forcing shutdown after shutdown.

Waking up in the morning was bizarre. A bit like watching yourself have sex but feeling nothing. I felt a little like a fraud. 'Look what I did!' I wanted to squeal to my husband and children…but, I didn't really do it. The orgasms weren't really mine, I was faking. I also felt a little dirty like I'd cheated on an exam. Yeah, I got 100% but it wasn't my own work. All of this, though, was overridden by the relief of escaping myself and being rendered 'unconscious.' My fantasies of requesting a general anesthetic in order to escape myself didn't seem like such a logical

solution after I'd managed to knock myself out for a few hours. So, it would seem that I'd arrived at an awkward but workable arrangement with Sleep. I'd flirt with and, lay with, her disowned synthetic relative and she'd sit disapprovingly in the corner and ignore me. But, these drugs are frightening in their side effects and after one too many reactions to them, I found myself chasing after Sleep once more.

I decided to go it alone, to get back to basics and work on my relationship with Sleep. I realised it was my fear of losing her that had given her the power to be so cruel to me. If I stopped fretting about ever winning her over completely, maybe she'd be tempted to spend a bit more time with me. I stopped worrying about her. I stopped thinking about her and how to secure her fidelity. It was odd for both of us, at first. Instead of snarling at her or clutching at her desperately, I'd acknowledge her gently if she made an appearance in my bedroom. If she left me in the middle of the night, I stopped calling out for her plaintively. I stopped trying to reinvent myself in order to become someone I thought she would find appealing. Gradually, as I relaxed in the relationship, Sleep became less erratic and less demanding. She softened and I realised she hadn't been conspiring deliberately against me. The tension between us eased.

So, that brings us to today. I still call Sleep a hard to please bitch and she sometimes snips at me and refuses to submit to my will. But, we know each other now and we're comfortable (ish) with our present arrangement. Sometimes, Sleep goes off somewhere for the night but I don't berate her when she returns. Because, now I know, she'll return in her own time and she won't stay away for too long. I don't lie awake thinking, 'I can't sleep.' Rather I console myself that, 'I can sleep, just not right now.' You need patience to satisfy a fussy lover.

## 7. Squall

*When there's nowhere else to run*

*Is there room for one more son?*

'All These Things that I've Done' – The Killers

**RECONCILIATION… '***Peace be with you…*

*...And also with you.'*

'Mum says we have to go in Aaron's car.'

My sister's voice was impatient and resigned on the other end of the phone.

'Why?' I asked.

But it was a pointless question, really and we both knew the answer. He had always held a special, unchallenged place in her heart.

On the appointed day we traveled, as directed, in our brother's car to the prescribed meeting place. My sister and I sat in the back like the children we were in that moment; our mother beamed with delight as she sat beside our brother. My father was not with us…this was to be a story with disjointed and half-finished chapters. I had a sudden moment of intense, giddying clarity. I pulled against the constraint of my seatbelt until I was leaning between the two front seats.

'This could rip us all apart,' I cautioned.

They were words that would come back to haunt us all.

***

**CONFESSION….** *'Bless me, Father, for I have sinned…'*

On a normal weekday evening in my house, my mother asked me if I had received a text from my sister. We were in my bedroom. I was getting ready to go out to see a band with my eldest son.

'Yes, and I'm not going to see her, Mum.' It had seemed an odd request to me and out of the ordinary for my sister. Usually, if we wanted to see each other we would visit each other's houses and, if we had important news, we would use the phone to share it. In all honesty, I was not very enthusiastic about meeting with my sister in the public place she had stipulated either, a McDonald's restaurant in an area sure to be inhabited by students that I knew.

'You have to go!' My mother sat on my bed, anguished.

She looked shrunken and grey. I understood, in this moment, that she knew what the meeting was to be about.

'You have to go,' my mother repeated, 'it's life-changing.'

Anxiety ripped through me. I did not see how anything dubbed 'life-changing' could be good and my mother's twisted expression and anguished eyes did nothing to allay my misgivings.

'Someone is sick?' Fear stabbed through me. If my mother was the sick one why did she not just tell me herself? But, my mother denied the issue was one of sickness.

I reached for something else that my family would consider a significant concern.

'Baxter has gotten a girl pregnant?'

Again, another denial. But, something struck me about her reaction to my question and I said slowly…

'This *is* about a baby, though?'

My mother nodded emphatically, her eyes wide. Still she said nothing. I was at a loss. I did not know why a pregnancy or a baby should be such a terrible thing if it had nothing to do with my nephew. I shot off several more clueless guesses and then, wildly, grasping at straws I said it.

'It's your baby.'

And she began to sob.

'Yes, yes,' she wailed.

And, as my brain struggled to comprehend the possibilities of such a thing she said, with steely vehemence, 'And your father's the father.'

*

Excitement thrilled through me as I stood before my mother. I sank onto the bed beside her. She told me the baby had been a boy.

'Of course, it was a boy!' I said, elated. I put my arm around my mother's bowed shoulders. 'You are so clever!' I told her. 'Two boys and two girls!'

I could not stop grinning.

'Does he have children?' I asked. Because, of course, these were the important details.

'Three girls,' said my mother.

My elation grew. This meant my mother had four grandsons and four granddaughters.

Could anything be more perfect?

*

**RECONCILIATION…** *'Peace be with you…'*

I told my two sons that they had another uncle. That their grandparents had a son that they had given up for adoption before they got married. One night my children and I gathered around our old country style wooden dining table. My children pressed around my knees in order to get as close to the phone as possible. I put the phone on speaker mode and I dialed the number that my sister had probably given me and, when there was an answer on the other end of the line, my children and I chorused together, 'Hi, Uncle John!!!' My brother's chuckle crackled out of the phone into our living room. For the first time, I heard the voice of my eldest sibling. It was exciting, exhilarating and fresh, like the air after a thunderstorm. Everything felt new, invigorating and promising. Relationships were being cultivated, our family growth had been renewed.

*

He looked like us. It was a blindingly, immense moment. He was wearing blue jeans and had a black button-down shirt on. A boarding pass was tucked into the breast pocket of the shirt. Coincidentally, his three siblings had all dressed in blue jeans and black t.shirts.

'I'm John.'

'I'm Jeanita.'

We hugged. My head rested on his chest. He was taller than the rest of us. The hug felt unforced and logical and this was a possibility I had not contemplated. That he would seem so familiar, that hugging him would seem such a natural thing to do.

When I saw him, there was such an intense need to feel profound joy. A desperate, gnawing urgency to know happiness in that moment. And, there was happiness but the overwhelming sense was loss. Years of lost time. I would never know him as a child, would never know him as a teenager or as a young, independent man. I would never know if he would have defended me or if he would have been the older brother I had spent so many years yearning for. I would never get those years back when his children, my nieces, were young. It tinged everything with sadness.

Someone in our family had chosen a park near the airport to be the arranged meeting place. We sat at a metal picnic table eating hot chips out of the paper they had been wrapped in. My mother preened, threw her head back and laughed and held court. Her chin lifted confidently into the air as she spoke to her assembled brood. Her cigarette dipped elegantly through the air in descriptive arcs. Without her none of us would exist.

'Nothing beats a hot, deep fried potato,' John said and it was a peace offering. We laughed too hard; too brightly. We were a family of hot chip lovers. Of course, he was, too. As we ate the chips I looked at his hands.

'We have the same fingernails!' I burst out, impulsively, unwisely.

And we did. Our fingers appraised each other, splayed out on the table.

'We get it from our grandmother,' I groaned in despair because my paternal grandmother held no love for me. Who knows why we say certain things? I have always struggled to consider my words before they leave my mouth. Later, when John had gone and I had relegated the fingernail comment to the past, my sister brought it up. There was impatience and exasperation in her voice. 'I have those fingernails, too!' she said. 'Do you?' I said helplessly. My sister had always prided herself on her strong, square nails. I had never noticed the presence of the faint

vertical ridges that run along my own nails on her fingernails. I was not sure what I'd done wrong but there was no doubt in my mind that I had made a significant error.

**TRANSGRESSION…** *'…and forgive us our trespasses*

*as we forgive those who trespass against us...'*

I had read very little about adoption and what I had read often portrayed adoption as a romanticized act. Even the Bible tale that I had heard as a child, of Moses being set loose in his woven basket among the reeds reinforced the idea to me that giving up a child was somehow a noble thing to do.

The more contemporary stories I had heard of adoption frequently placed the stoic, suffering young mother in the spotlight. The teenaged mother who was packed off, furtively, cocooned in a layer of not so believable lies and bundled onto a bus that headed for a far-off destination. The baby that was wrapped in blankets and presented, as a gift, to the parents who could not have children of their own. The young woman who remained wistful throughout her life but was content and secure in the knowledge that she gave her child a better life than she could have provided. These were the facts that I would contemplate over the coming weeks. These were the facts I accepted because I had been told they were true. But, now and then I think I quite possibly said the wrong words…. I am certain I mentioned how hard it must have been for my mother to 'give her baby away'… I probably remarked to my sister that I could never have done such a thing and I would have run away…I may have commented that it was such a shame such a thing happened because, at nineteen, my mother was not too young to have a baby…

*

We were seated on my patio in the late afternoon.

'Stigma, stigma, stigma!' my mother screamed irrationally at me.

I was trying to unwind after a hectic day at work. We had been sitting in the quiet whisper of a still evening. Suddenly, my mother had shattered it and I was bewildered and confused. We had simply been talking about my older brother. My mother had brought up the topic of conversation. I had been half attending to it…still thinking about the paperwork on my desk at work and the household chores I needed to tackle that evening. My mother's outburst startled me.

'You said stigma!' she screamed again.

She stabbed her cigarette through the air in my direction. Glared at me through the blue haze. The anguish of the unjustly accused swept through me. I feared, legitimately, for her sanity.

'I never said that.' I tried for the rational, the reasonable.

Surely, she understood that it had been herself who had been sitting there ranting about the stigma she believed her past act carried while I listened for the umpteenth time to her offense at the word. As her voice rose ever higher and her ranting took on an alarming vehemence, I felt my calm resolve disappear. I was tired from working long hours, from caring for my children and running a household. I had tried to be gentle and generous in my reactions to her history. My heart broke for my mother's suffering and her years of private sorrow and I had tried to explain my feelings to her numerous times but, it was my mother who continued to re -tell her story; perhaps attempting to prove something to herself or me each time she told it. I did not understand why she worked so feverishly to hoist her blame or shame onto me.

‘You said that! You’re the one who has been sitting here saying that!’ And, just like that, she had broken me, had caused me to act poorly. Had diminished my displays of support and patience and understanding to this one moment of weakness. This would be the story she would tell to others, not the tales of my reassurances or my excitement at this new piece of our family puzzle. I wondered if she wanted to feel the blame and anger of others, even when these feelings did not exist. Was it something she craved or believed she deserved? Did it make her feel punished and chastised? Was it like a penance?

In the midst of my family’s tentative new beginnings, my husband and I made plans to move our own family to Auckland. He had received a fantastic job opportunity and I had always wanted our children to experience living in another country. We discussed the possibility and witnessed a suggestion turn into a solid prospect for our future. The decision was exciting and distressing. I would have to leave my mother…more specifically I worried that my mother would feel that we were abandoning her. My mother lived on her own in a quaint caravan near a beach but, she had a key to our house and she was free to wash her clothes at our house, to stay the night whenever she wanted and she usually had dinner with us at least three times a week. I was also more than happy to give her a weekly allowance in exchange for ferrying my children to and from school whenever I had before or after school meetings. The removal of all of these things from her life sickened me with guilt and grief. Would she think I was selfish? Would she think I had put my own interests first? Would she think I was somehow vain? Would my mother feel rejected or cast away? How many incarnations of guilt were there?

*

I did not contemplate too deeply the events that had led us to this new configuration of our family. As the 'middle child,' I had never been involved in family arrangements or business or decision making. I just turned up to family events and did my duty. I did not overthink the events that led to the reconnection of my brother with his family.

'Do you feel angry,' asked Aaron, 'that you weren't told?'

We were standing alone at a family gathering and he had taken advantage of this opportunity to voice his simmering outrage. He crossed his arms. I noticed that the edges of his lips had gone white with the indignant tension that he was working hard to contain. I understood, at once, what he was referring to. I considered the grass at my feet. Our sister was the one that our mother turned to in order to make her confessions of our lost brother. My younger brother and I were only informed once our older brother had been found and it was decided that we younger siblings should meet him. I stared at Aaron while I contemplated his words. I had never been privy to information first or been taken into confidence. No one thought to inform me when my paternal grandfather died. I found out when my sister phoned me and I assumed she was wanting to discuss our grandfather's sickness. My sister reacted in disbelief to my words regarding our grandfather's sickness. 'Mate, he died,' were the words my sister said to me. I had always had instructions and information and plans re-routed to me through someone else. It had never occurred to me that this situation could have been any different. So, I told Aaron honestly, 'I never thought about it.' I shrugged. But, a part of me was glowing warmly within that Aaron would consider that I should have been told. That I, along with him, had a right to know.

*

‘It’s so great,’ I told my sister, ‘to have the opportunity to start new with someone who has no preconceived ideas about you.’

I had always wanted to be someone other than who my aunts and grandparents assumed I was…at some point I had been labelled as a black sheep of the family.

When someone vandalized the mirrors in the toilets at my grandfather’s fast food outlet with a bright red lipstick, my aunt told everyone it was me. My mother confronted me about it. Horrified and hurt I told her of course I would not have done such a thing…even when the culprit was identified, I was never absolved officially. When the fact of my eating disorder filtered through the communication network of my extended family, my diminishing frame and my food intake was a topic for discussion scrutinized and discussed after family gatherings. When I shared a house with my not yet husband and our male friend, my grandparents gossiped about the fact that I was ‘living with two men’ and refused to enter my house because of this unsavoury fact. The idea that my older brother carried none of these preconceived ideas about me was thrilling and purifying. His opinion of me had not been coloured by the gossip of others…for all he knew I was a regular, worthwhile human being…

I told my sister how liberating it was to begin a new relationship with someone who knew nothing of my anorexia and nothing of my OCD…My sister shifted uncomfortably and said, ‘Mate, he already knows.’ Our mother had told him. A painful anger born of betrayal and loss ripped through my heart. ‘Those are my stories to tell!’ I said outraged and hurt. And then, I felt my indignation drain away and I felt a tepid resolve settle in my chest. My last chance to forge my own identity with a member of my family had been destroyed.

*

**RECONCILIATION…** *'Peace be…'*

I made arrangements to meet my older brother in Sydney. He told me he would wait in the lobby of the hotel where I was staying. As I walked across the marble floor of the lobby, I saw him from a distance. The fact that we were in our forties was forgotten. I was instantly a child again. I crouched down, knees bent in stealth position and I snuck quickly across the space toward him. My backpack style handbag bounced on my back. At the very last moment I launched myself at his back and landed behind him on the black couch where he was sitting. My knees bounced against the upholstery of the couch as I grabbed at his shoulders. He jumped, very gratifyingly in fright and swung bewildered, to look at me. When he saw my manically grinning face he blurted out, 'Veronica!' His daughter's name. My niece's name. I threw my arms around him.

*

I was impetuous and impulsive, too open and too ready to share intimate opinions and detailed parts of myself. Everything in those early days seemed so magical. Living in a different country from the family I had grown up with made me hungry for familial contact. Perhaps, if I had not felt such an immediate connection to my older brother, things might have been different. Foolishly, I thought everyone could see that my brother slid so easily into the empty space in my heart. I was so very eager to be loved by a family member who did not know anything except the tangled goodness of my heart. Someone who would love me despite my messy and chaotic core. I felt that my soul had been calling to his for my whole life. Now he was here, everything would be alright…forever...

*

I had been fearful for many years of my adult life that my mother would die without resolving the cause of her anxiety. I feared she would die without being happy. This thought haunted me for years and filled me with dread. I believed this discovery of my brother would solve all of my mother's problems. She would leave her depression behind. Now that she had her missing child back, she would be happy. She would be granted her much coveted peace. 'How wonderful that we are all still alive,' I said with unforgiveable naivety. How thankful I was that we would all get to know each other.

My mind raced ahead and I pictured huge family get-togethers at Christmas with my parents' four children and all of their grandchildren. I thought of all of the memories we had yet to make. I could not wait to make family history that had my older brother woven into its fabric. I pictured us all in the future, telling stories of our holidays in houses by the beach…of the BBQs and the carousing around bonfires, of the collecting of shells and the countless walks by the ocean… I imagined all the photos that we would take…albums worth of them… of 'us three kids' with our brother, of my children with their cousins…I dared to imagine the peace that we would all find in each other's arms.

*

I found out that my older brother was a musician. He could play guitar and he wrote songs. He had been working on a new album. I was thrilled. I had always been the odd child in our family,

hunkered down over books filled with my writing and my attempts at poetry. This all made sense, I thought. He would have been like me. I voiced these sentimental views to my sister and my mother. My mother told me that there was a song on my brother's new album about 'you three kids.' 'There's a verse about each of you.' She pursed her lips and looked at me in a knowing way.

I did not understand the implication. I asked my brother what the song about 'us three kids' was called. I listened to it.

*'Be careful', they say, 'what you wish for…'* I listened to the strained quality of my brother's voice coming through my computer speaker.

I wondered which verse was about me.

*

My mother, my sister and I traveled to Sydney to meet my nieces and my brother's wife. My youngest brother opted out of the trip at the last minute. My mother had not flown for many years. My husband paid for her ticket with his frequent flyer points. The whole journey had a sense of occasion about it. We three women were aflutter with nerves and excitement and happiness. It felt like such an unquestionably right thing to do. What could be more wholesome and normal than spending a weekend with your brother, your son, your nieces, your granddaughters?

My brother met us at the airport. He had brought his middle daughter with him. I was totally unprepared for the wave of grief and love that surged through me when I saw her. She was dressed in her soccer uniform, she had dark hair and olive skin and was relaxed and natural in her interaction with her father. I felt comforted that he had known what it was like to be loved so fiercely and fully. She did not appear remotely intimidated or uneased by these three women she

had never seen before. 'She's mine!' I thought as I watched her walking towards us… 'This beautiful creature is mine!' The realization that the same blood was moving beneath our skins overwhelmed me…that this young woman shared DNA with me seemed the most incredulous and miraculous thing in the world. And the sense of loss was indescribable….at one time she would have been a baby and other people would have rocked her and hugged her and shared her life and loved her. I was seized with jealousy and despair and wonder.

My brother took us to his house in a leafy suburb of Sydney. I met my other new nieces, both as radiant and miraculous as their sister. I met my sister-in-law and their beautiful golden retriever. At some point, I sat on the floor with the dog alone and patted her. I have always found animals easier to function around than humans. My sister-in-law brought us a pot of tea and the adults gravitated out onto the back landing to sit and talk together. My nieces disappeared further into the house. At some point, the conversation turned to the past…my family's past…our years of growing up, our grandparents, our other relatives, the town where we had lived…and I felt something solid and uncontainable rise up in my throat. I didn't want to talk about these things with my brother…I didn't want to rehash old family memories or talk of the 'before.' It seemed to be ruining everything. I wanted to be getting on with how our family existed now, in this new format. I wanted to move forward from this point not drag the present back into the past. When I realised I couldn't control my agitation, I got up from the tea things and went back into the house. I found my nieces in a room where they were watching T.V. I plopped down on the floor beside them, laid down on my back and found comfort in the present.

*

**TRANSGRESSIONS…** *'…and forgive us our trespasses...'*

My older brother came to visit me in Auckland. He was on a business trip. I was sick with nervous excitement. But, my role in my family had never been one of someone who suffered from anxiety or 'nerves.' I was always considered to be the 'spirited' child, the extroverted teenager and the outspoken adult. So, I did not succumb to my inner turmoil and I maintained an ordered pretense of the capable home cook and the welcoming, competent hostess. I made dinner in the kitchen of the three-story mini mansion my husband and I were renting in an upmarket suburb. My husband and our sons were there for the duration of the dinner and then they drifted away…it was a week night and the following day would call for school and work.

Nervousness and earnestness had a firm hold of me and I drank too much wine while my brother and I talked about his adoption, our family's reunion and how we all fit together. At some point, the magnitude of our past and the fact that it had affected us all as individuals hit me. My brother had been trying to tell me about his recent interaction with our father. I tried to speak through my drunken haze and the word I broke on was 'compassion.' I cried. Loudly. In the morning, my husband told me that he felt sorry for my brother having to endure my fit of crying. I immediately sent my brother a text to apologise. My brother sent me a text that said he had never thought he would ever sit down with his sister let alone be lucky enough to see her tears. I hoped he meant it.

*

My mother came to visit me once in Auckland. She was out of sorts from the moment I collected her from the airport. She made what, to me, seemed uncalled for derogatory remarks about the view as we travelled to my house. 'Pfft! It's no different to Australia!' she scoffed. I didn't know what I was meant to say… I had never intentionally intimated that New Zealand was more exotic than Australia. When we arrived at my house I was aware of the ordinary suburban appearance of it…. I had not ever meant to imply there was anything exciting about where I now lived. The most outstanding factor regarding my new home town for me had been the chronic aching loneliness and lack of family contact that my children and I now battled with on a daily basis. I don't think my mother had any idea of how much I had been looking forward to her visit…I had yearned desperately for someone to talk to… I dared to imagine her and I sitting on my lounge, our feet tucked up under us, talking well into the early morning hours…

My phone buzzed as my mother and I were standing, engaged in stilted conversation around my kitchen table. I picked up my phone and glanced at the screen; it was a text from my older brother. I gave a short laugh and immediately rattled off a replying message. My mother's voice was flat with disapproval when she said, 'Is that John?'

'Yes,' I said, still texting.

I don't know why I didn't realise that it was important to look into her eyes. I don't know why I didn't allow the unfriendly tone of her voice to register. Message completed, I put the phone down onto the table top and looked at my mother.

'Does he message you often?'

'More than anybody else does,' I said too easily.

*

One day during her visit to Auckland my mother turned to me abruptly and said, 'Your sister tells me you've always felt misunderstood!' Her tone was snippy and there was no doubt I had offended her. I had said this but I had not meant anything by it. I had told my sister this in a harmless context when I was attempting to explain my hopes for my relationship with my older brother. I was harbouring a small hope that my brother would somehow understand and accept me in a way that I felt no one had before. It was simply a fact that I did not feel that anyone in my family really connected with me or understood me as I was growing up. No doubt, I was to blame for part of this circumstance because I had learnt to 'act' a certain way from a young age in order to appear confident and competent. I had certainly not meant my words to be interpreted in a malicious or critical way.

'I have always felt misunderstood, Mum,' I said quietly.

There really wasn't anything else to say.

*

I didn't contemplate that my relationship with my older brother could affect anyone else. It did not cross my mind that the few dinners or coffees we shared alone could have been perceived as underhanded or suspicious. I did not see how my interactions with my sibling could be of concern or of interest to anyone else in our family. Nothing I had ever done, to my mind, had ever been of much consequence in our family. I bumbled along, stumbling forward into unknown territory while I forged a new sibling bond with my brother. The fact that each of our brief interactions were forming the basis of our new collective set of memories was deeply profound and precious to me.

I began to store these memories up, sometimes I talked about them to others and, I have no doubt, I failed to hide how thrilling I found them.

*

I did stupid things…I said stupid things…

One night, at dinner after a couple of wines, my brother said something acerbically witty and I burst into outraged laughter. 'You bastard!' I spluttered and then realised what I had said. My eyes widened in horror. My brother and I stared at each other, frozen for several seconds. And then he shrugged a shoulder and laughed and said,

'It's true; I am.'

And I laughed even more wildly in disbelief at his sacrilege.

*

**CONFESSION…** *'Bless me, father…'*

I understand now that my mother was the only one in our family who remembered the experience of the 'parting.' I failed to understand the extent of the shame and judgement my mother felt. I was eager for her to cast off the dark shadows the past had cast over her life. I did not want to continually discuss how my mother believed she was giving my brother a better life. I felt we had to confront what had gone before, face it and move on. All I knew was the excitement, the thrill, and the sorrow of the reconnection. In my mind, all was forgiven, there was nothing left for my

mother to atone for. But, my mother had the knowledge of the 'parting' enmeshed into her entire existence. While I felt the impatient rush to create new memories, she was struggling with old memories that haunted her. While I had chatted thoughtlessly about my brother, she would have been, no doubt, filled with insecurity and pain. None of us could alleviate that anxiety or burden…not even the return of her lost baby boy was balm enough to ease her suffering.

***

'He was my little companion…he was by my side every day for years,' explained my mother of living without the baby she surrendered. I pictured her with a little shadow stitched to her side, a little faceless, voiceless miniature who she missed and loved every day.

**RECONCILIATION… '***Peace…'*

I rang my brother in Sydney from the hospital in Brisbane.

'You should come now,' I said.

He said he would.

*

My husband took a photo of my brother and I from behind when we were walking on the footpath near Bondi Beach. I stared at the photo for a long time. My brother and I look so natural in the photo. We are walking close together, both looking off toward something on the right, probably

the restaurant where we ended up eating dumplings. One of my niece's heads is visible just in front of us. My brother clasps his car keys in his left hand. We both have our left foot out in front of us. We look like any brother and sister. 'My big bro and I putting our best foot forward at Bondi!:)' was the caption I typed underneath it. The photo was posted in June, 2014. Our mother had been gone for six months.

***

*'Be careful they say*

*What you wish for*

*You'll wake up one day*

*With a wolf at your door*

*Or a sleeping giant on your floor.'*

(Sleeping Giant – Fallon Cush)

*

After our first meeting in the park, we took him to the airport. It had gone too quickly. In that brief window of time we had begun again. There was no doubt he was of us. His facial expressions and his dark, fathomless eyes were so like our father's. It was humbling, bewildering, joyful and wretched. We stood in a disordered cluster. Our places had been challenged. No one knew the new rules, yet. We jostled, clung, shuffled. John took his boarding pass from his pocket. My sister and I hugged him. Aaron – our newly appointed *youngest* brother stood aloof near our mother. My

sister and I, hopelessly, began to cry. John extricated himself from the tangle of his newly discovered sisters' arms. He moved off, lanky and sure, toward the gate.

*

**ABSOLUTION…**

My mother tells me she was alone when she gave birth to my brother. She was a live-in nanny for a family in Sydney at the time. She was worried about disturbing the family by asking for help. So, she smothered her agony and stayed in her room. When the baby was born and she knew she could keep the delivery secret no longer she went to the bedroom door of the lady of the house and she knocked and said, 'Mrs Winterbourne, the baby's been born.' She and her baby were bundled into a backseat and taken to a hospital. I am sorrow struck, almost speechless. My mother and I sit side by side, not looking at each other. I feel the pain of my excised sibling. I imagine the shape of him cut out of the fabric of our memories. I hear the echo of his absent voice. I visualize where his shadow would have fallen in our family photos. I think of our smudged, inaccurate family tree and of our mother leaving a hospital with emptied hands, emptied womb, emptied heart.

'Did you even get to name him?' I ask quietly.

'I did.'

My mother's voice suddenly has more strength and she raises her chin a little defiantly.

'What did you call him?'

'I called him Christopher.'

I am immediately reminded of the St. Christopher's medals my mother has given 'us three kids'. He has always been with us, I think.

## 8. Inclement Weather

*These are the days it never rains but it pours.*

'Under Pressure' – Queen and David Bowie

Some moments shimmer twice; once in the happening and, again, in the remembering.

My parents were both 'film star' good looking. The only thing that kept them from fame and fortune was the drab country town they lived in and the two unwanted, out of wedlock pregnancies. They maneuvered out of the first. The second fused their futures together.

Most nights after dinner my parents subsided into the monotonous business of trying to scrub the house and themselves clean of the suffocating grasp of a small-town life. But, not this night. On this night, my parents abandon any pretense of doing dishes and we find ourselves in the Dining Room. The dining room regards us coolly and unforgivingly, like a distant relative too often overlooked. We three children stand with our smudged feet and brown, twig like limbs on the perimeter. We are quiet and small, our outside voices stolen, our backyard boisterousness stunted.

Our parents set about taming the frosty dining room. They make short work of the heavily polished table and the monstrously yellow chairs. The furniture is relegated to the side of the room with upturned legs resembling unearthed tree roots. I watch with agitated anticipation as, working together, my parents wrestle the oval rug with its many furniture divots into a cylinder. My father is muscled and sun-browned – almost burnt bronze. His work roughened hands are scattered with

nicks and cuts. The blood so thick it is ink-coloured in parts along his fingers. His hair is impossibly dark. Almost blue-black. My mother watches him with her dimmed green eyes. She is too thin. And, so beautiful. She is a wilting flower caught up in a residential desert. She is withering yearly.

Our father tells us now of how slender our mother was when they were dating. He reaches out his hardened arms and spreads his calloused digits. He joins his cracked hands fingertip to fingertip. That was the span of our mother's waist when she was 19. Our father's deep brown eyes meet ours. We nod solemnly and stare back with the potent seriousness of children. We learn these lessons of our parents' history like the bible in these dining room sessions.

My father rests on his haunches before the radiogram. My insides itch and quiver. We know what will come next. The excitement pools, unbearably sweet in my chest. My father's splintered hands touch the smooth wood of the radiogram and he lifts the lid. Inside is where the longed for but forbidden records live. Like a genie escaping from the confines of a too-long undisturbed bottle, the scent of the vinyl is released. It is, at once, intoxicating and comforting. (To this day vinyl smells like home.) My father selects an album and places it so carefully on the turntable. His coarse hand lowers the needle with such exquisite care. Our small breaths are mere puffs in our chest. We know of the danger of the dreaded scratch. The speakers spit and hiss and then…

My father approaches my mother. She does not seethe with unexpressed rage. She does not cross her arms across her bony chest and sigh. My father takes my mother in his arms. She grows and blooms. Thrives. Her lips curve, almost reluctantly, in a show of pure joy. Her shoulders slide back and she shakes her auburn hair behind her ears. My father enfolds her bony hands into the gloves of his own and they become one entity. They jive. They are extraordinary. Two captive birds fluttering uselessly against this cage of a life. Impassioned. Inflamed. They are unrestrained and newborn. The moment is as much about who they were as who they have become.

Finally, they burst apart, flushed and happy. Their memories are sacred living things in this space. With their hearts thumping forgotten rhythms in their chests they turn to us. Dance with us. Take us into their world. A world that stretches beyond a moment in an old yellow Queenslander in a rarely used dining room with mustard faux leather chairs and, most importantly, a radiogram that hugs the corner of the room.

*

I had no idea my mother was not perfect. She was the picture of the long suffering devoted mother for as long as I could remember. All she did and all she did not have was due to us, her children. Mothers sacrifice for their children. Mothers sacrifice their happiness for their children.

*

My mother's name was June. She was the first born of seven daughters. 'I was the eldest of seven girls,' she would tell us countless times. We understood that this was somehow an inexplicable horror. My mother's naming had been unconventional and she perfected the story of this event over the years. She was so convincing and so confident in the telling of her tale that I never stopped to contemplate that she could have no real way of knowing what had happened. She was a baby after all. But, the story became legend in our household.

My grandparents, caught off-guard by their unexpected bundle who led them down the aisle, were too shell-shocked and too young to be prepared with a list of baby names for their first child. The story went that, the baby and the mother safely ensconced at home, the days passed and

the pressure mounted to announce a name for the girl my grandparents had made. Finally, in exasperation and implied cold disinterest, my grandfather purportedly announced, 'She's born in June, let's name her June.' And, thus, the tedious job of naming their troublesome firstborn child was complete.

In her telling, my mother would make such callous indifference sound hilarious in its parental neglect. 'How lazy,' we would laugh, how unimaginative. We did not realise, of course, that the story cradled my mother's personal bitterness and was evidence of her deep-rooted belief that her parents did not 'like' her as much as they liked the six girls who were to follow.

*

The monotony of the everyday crippled my mother. Our laundry room had been added on to our house as an afterthought by some industrious and creative individual before my parents took ownership of the old Queenslander. The laundry room was lined with ceiling high cupboards that were filled to the brim with odds and ends like old clothes and my father's old tin soldiers and ancient meccano set. There was a doorway at each end of the laundry which meant that, if we chose to and the door to the spare room was unlocked we children could chase each other in a loop through the kitchen, the dining room, the spare room and the laundry. When we ran through the laundry we had to modify our pace and our gait. The pile of dirty clothing completely covered the floor and came halfway up our skinny shins.

My mother could never rally herself enough to perfect the washing. She never managed to 'get on top' of a chore that seemed so pedestrian in other people's households. The only time the laundry was emptied was when my parents sold our old home and we moved next door into the

new, modern home they had built. The new laundry boasted new cupboards and clean benches that could be used for folding. Despite my mother's best intentions and the number of new washing machines and dryers she would work her way through, it did not take long until this new laundry began to resemble the old one in the old house.

One afternoon my boyfriend accompanied me home from school. When I realized no one was home I instructed my boyfriend to wait at the front of the house. I insisted he did not need to enter through the back door with me. I raced around the back of the house to the backdoor to wrangle the key out of the hot water system and unlocked the backdoor. I stepped across the mound of washing and went to let my boyfriend in through the front door. He was more savvy than I thought possible for someone of fifteen. He looked me square in the eye. 'Why don't you just do the washing?' he asked. Such a difficult question to answer. Why didn't we just do the washing? Why was the everyday such a mammoth chore in our household? Why did simple tasks require such Herculean effort on the part of my mother? Later in our teens our mother would hire housekeepers and these would help her create the vague sense of order that she seemed to crave but couldn't attain.

*

For as long as I could remember, my mother was a night owl. I think she felt protected and unseen in the dark, long hours of night. When we were young children, my mother's sister would often sit at the wooden table into the early hours of morning with my mother. My aunt had had a nervous breakdown after her young husband had been killed in a freak motor vehicle accident. 'She has bad nerves,' my mother would tell us and we grew to understand that this was a terrible affliction.

The harsh yellow lights would burn down from the high, fly dirt speckled ceiling and reflect up from the pebbled linoleum. Under these lights my mother and my aunt would talk and smoke countless cigarettes. They would drink instant coffee thickened by generous spoonfuls of white sugar. The coffee was weakened with powdered milk or condensed milk or even carnation milk. Sometimes there was fresh milk. Sometimes my father would burst from the spare room where he had taken to sleeping and tell my mother and her sister to shut up. 'I need to sleep! You're going to get me killed!' he would yell. He worked long hours in the bush felling giant trees that were destined to be railroad sleepers. If he wasn't alert and adequately rested, he would argue, he could be crushed by a tree.

By the time we moved into our new house my aunt had moved in with her new partner and was living in another nearby town. This did not affect my mother's nocturnal behaviour. She still sat up into the wee hours of the night. She continued to smoke and drink coffee but now she also spent time on crafts. She discovered latchhook and completed a few pieces. She knitted garments from patterns including dresses and jumpers. But she discovered a dormant gift when she began to devote herself to longstitch.

By the time summer rolled around one year, my mother had created a collection of completed Australian animals and birds. She got each piece professionally framed. Together, including the labour and the materials, the collection represented a small fortune. My mother laid them out on the oval glass dining table. They resembled objects on display in a museum. Over the course of this summer, my mother would lead her many nieces into the dining room and ask each child which piece they wanted. And, then, as easily as that, my mother parted with those pieces. I can still see her swishing through the dining room doorway in her sundresses with the nipped in waists, her smile bright and her manner generous.

*

Why did my mother die and yours didn't? I think this as I scroll through Facebook or watch women and their mothers drinking coffee or shopping or driving. Why did my mum die? Why can't I have those promised years of caring for and doting over an older mother?

*

I don't think my mother ever felt adequately loved or loved enough. No one could make her feel valued or cherished. She told terrible stories of her childhood. Tales of being roused from bed at 2am by her drunk father who would demand she wash the dishes piled in the sink. She told other horrifying tales of being struck by her mother who chose tennis racquets, bamboo shepherd hooks from fairground dolls and ironing cords as implements of punishment. I thought the worst story was the one when she described her preparations for a night out as a young woman. When my mother walked out into the lounge room in her best outfit with her hair and her make up done, my grandfather snorted at the sight of her. 'Who'd look at you?' he demanded. Though she was beautiful, I don't think my mother ever felt comfortable with her appearance. She knew she was attractive but she still suffered with low self-esteem. She was vain yet bitter. I mean that in the gentlest sense.

*

‘Teaching is Jeanita’s vocation,’ my mother used to say. ‘It’s her calling.’

*

I was safely into my twenties, and I had completed a university degree and was employed in a job I loved. My mother and I were alone in her house sitting and talking casually while we drank cups of tea. She suddenly turned to me and, out of the blue she said, ‘Did I cause it?’ I had never seen her look so terrified during one of our conversations. I knew immediately that she was referring to the battle I had fought with Anorexia in my teens. My only motivation in that moment was to erase that naked look of dread on my mother’s face. I immediately said, ‘No! No! Of course not!’

*

When my mother was five my grandmother put her into boarding school. My grandfather had an earthmoving company and he worked ‘out west’ for several months of the year. Some years my grandmother went with him and camped in tents with the men for whom she cooked over camp fires. When it was time for my mother to start school my grandmother decided to leave my mother behind while she took the younger girls. In those days, my grandfather owned sleek black automobiles and he and his men drove in shiny convoys about town when they returned. My mother had vivid memories of the black car sliding off down the street leaving her in the clutches of the Catholic Sisters of Mercy. For her birthday that year a cardboard package arrived at the convent addressed to my mother. She opened it. I heard this story so many times over the years

that I feel that, I too, was there glimpsing the contents of that box. Inside was a red rubber ball, a packet of peanuts and a new pair of school shoes.

*

She died on the 1st of January, 2014. My eldest brother joked that she had died on this date on purpose so that he would never forget.

*

Complimenting my mother was always a difficult task. When I was of primary school age I believed I had the most good-looking parents in the world. I was incredibly proud of both of them. While other children criticized and complained about their parents, I had nothing but positive things to say about my own. One day, while our mother was dropping us off at school I turned to her and said, 'You're pretty, Mum,' and she replied with a dismissive sniff, 'Pretty ugly.' I protested. Told her that wasn't true. To no avail. It worried my young mind for many years and I wondered how to make it right. When my mother was in her fifties she still possessed a youthful figure. One day, witless human that I am I said, 'You look so young from behind, Mum,' and she turned to me and said, 'But not from the front, hey?' Another error which left me flushed, tongue tied and scrambling for words to counteract the harm I had done.

*

I cannot think of Christmas without thinking of my mother. It was an incredibly important time of year for her. In their forties, my parents had a change of fortune and ended up enjoying real financial freedom for the first time in their married lives. My mother was now free to 'do' Christmas the way she had always wanted.

One year, she returned from the city with hundreds of dollars-worth of wrapping paper, ribbons and Christmas cards. We stared in awe at the glittering temporary wrapping station our mother established on our glass dining room table. But, the best part was when she took up the shining new scissors she had purchased. Angling the untarnished steel against the rough side of the ribbon, she demonstrated the technique she had learnt from the clerk. The ribbon flowed out in a golden, curling wave under her hands. It was magic. It was like watching straw being turned into gold and our mother was like a maiden sitting at her spinning wheel.

*

My mother told us once that she could play the piano. None of us had any idea. 'I went to Grade 7,' she said casually. 'I could have been a teacher.' Our father confirmed this fact and we heard the story of how my father had wanted to buy my mother a piano when they were first married. All of us were flabbergasted. I felt an inconsolable grief for that lost, unpurchased, unused instrument and the young bride who would have run her fingers over the keys. None of us ever heard our mother play.

*

‘I used to be shy,’ my mother used to often say, ‘and then, one day, someone told me that shy people are the most selfish people in the world because they make other people do all the work in conversations. And, from that day on, I made an effort to always talk to people.’ My mother spoke to anyone and everyone. One night, I took her to a show at a theatre. She was still young and had, as always, taken care to dress up. During the interval, she meandered off to have one of her much needed and much enjoyed cigarettes and I went to get her a coffee.

I wandered outside in the direction she had taken. I found her at the bottom of some stairs, smoking with a husky, younger brunette woman with a flawless, pale complexion. She was leaning toward my mother and speaking in a very animated and eager manner. I could see the way she was looking at my mother. I gave my mother her drink and insinuated myself into the conversation. The brunette backed off when she realised my mother was not alone and that her companion was nowhere near as friendly. When my mother extinguished her cigarette, and laughed a cheerful goodbye to the woman, I led her away by the elbow and discussed the irresponsible behaviour of allowing optimistic gay women to believe they had a chance with her. My mother merely stared at me with wide eyes and told me not to be ridiculous. At the time, my mother’s naivety exasperated me. Over the years, as I grew to know my mother and to understand her more, I realized she must have only been feigning ignorance.

*

My mother used to sweep the gold flecked linoleum in our kitchen with her old house broom. She would maneuver the dirt and dust and food crumbs from the floor into a corner of the kitchen and

rest the broom against the wall. The broom stood like a flag announcing to everyone that the task of sweeping had been accomplished.

*

The nun who taught my mother piano at the Catholic convent school was beautiful, talented and troubled. Our mother spoke of this nun with great sympathy and great dislike. She told us this disturbed young woman had been forced into the sisterhood in a time when strict Catholic parents believed one daughter and one son must enter into God's service.

'She used to say, "put your hands on the keys," and then she'd hit them with a cane.'

My mother told us this story often and always she relayed this part about the nun's violent teaching methods without emotion. We would listen, horrified. I would try to imagine willingly placing my hands on the keys, knowing they would be struck. One day, during one of her piano lessons, my mother was filled with uncontainable fear. She rose up from the piano stool and ran from the gifted and beautiful nun only to be caught by her near the stairs that led to the next story of the convent. The nun seized my mother's head and face and beat the back of my mother's head continually into the wall of the staircase. Still, my mother would remain almost eerily calm during this part of the story. I would stare at her in outraged sympathy, trying not to imagine the little girl I had seen in a black and white photo being subjected to such sickening violence. My mother would break through my sorrow and anger as she continued with the story. In contrast with the beginning of the story she spoke with great emotion and gratitude whenever she told the next part, how the Mother Superior floated around the corner like an avenging angel and demanded in scathing tones;

'SISTER! What DO you think you're DOING?'

My mother would smile and sometimes even laugh when she told of how the music teacher rapidly unhanded her and fled the scene.

'What did the Mother Superior say to you, Mum?' I would ask, awestruck.

'She said nothing,' my mother would reply. But the smile would still be on her lips.

I always got the sense that, in that moment, my mother felt validated because of this one instance of protective behavior by the Mother Superior. Humans are, after all, motivated to protect what is considered to be precious.

*

The past lived in my mother's present. Her life was a fluid thing that was ever changing. 'I remember what your father said to me when I was twenty-one!' she would say. She catalogued the wrongdoings done to her and kept them for future reference. She would leave letters to my father lying around the house after they had engaged in particularly aggressive arguments. These letters outlined specific wrongs he had done unto her and her unrelenting hurt and anger toward him for these past crimes. There was probably not much my mother could have done to prevent herself from being enslaved to the past. She came from a family with long memories. No transgression was ever forgiven. She seemed to remember every bad behavior she was subjected to, every name she was called and, more worrisomely every good deed she had done anyone else.

*

My mother was plagued by anxiety and depression.

*

She was a great tennis player; inventive and persistent on the court. She played weekly with the Ladies Tennis Association. At these tennis fixtures, she incurred the jealousy and admiration of some of the other women. Every year my mother sewed herself a new tennis dress. At the time, I didn't realise how short were the hemlines on these dresses. Years later, my sister and I, as adults would reflect on these dresses and laugh in astonishment at the nerve of our mother prancing around the court with most of her toned, tanned thighs on display. My sister would remind me of the 'frilly panties' my mother would wear that would complete these outfits and that would be displayed generously each time our mother ran around the court.

When my sister and I went to our mother's caravan to sort through her clothing we found some of those tennis dresses. My sister pulled them out of our mother's wardrobe. Tiny dresses with bright beads or colourful ribbons sewn to the bodice. My sister and I sat on our mother's bed overcome with emotion. Seeing those dresses again brought that firm bodied, athletic and vital version of our mother into the room with us. I could see her measuring fabric and sewing. I could see her dashing around a tennis court and exclaiming, 'fault!' in the confident voice of a team captain. Before sorrow could overwhelm me, my sister said, 'and remember the frilly panties!' and we giggled like teenagers.

*

She had the greenest thumb of anyone I ever knew. She coaxed plants into life with her long, hardworking fingers. She pruned them with the care of the incredibly patient. She knew them all

by name. I wrote a sign for her to place in her nursery. The sign featured the words by Joyce Kilmer from his poem 'Trees.'

To this day the words,

*'A tree that looks at God all day,*
*And lifts her leafy arms to pray;'*

can reduce me to tears.

*

My mother loved men. They were a constant source of pleasure and pain to her. They were a mystery and a status symbol. To be desired, to be liked by them was a great source of satisfaction.

*

'You will write something one day.'

My mother squints at me, eyes pinched, the crow's feet disappearing into folds. She tucks her feet up further underneath her backside, waves her cigarette tip in the air. The smoke is caught in the lazy summer heat. Flies dip through the thin blue fog. My mother runs her free hand through her hair – dark auburn at the ends – the thick roots greying.

'I have coarse hair,' she told me once.

I nodded. She was seated before me in a shower cubicle. I was trying to shampoo her hair. She had recently ruptured her cruciate ligament and couldn't stand. I had become her primary care giver. She batted my hands away impatiently. 'You have to really scrub at it,' she said while she showed me how she raked her fingertips back and forth across her scalp. I nodded. Now she is telling me I will write something and it is as irrefutable a fact as her telling me that she has coarse hair. I will 'write something one day.' I have written from the time I was small but I have lacked the belief in myself to write anything credible or worthy. My mother's confidence on this day is unexpected, jarring and beyond rebuke.

'I think I will,' I offer and then I'm silent.

*

When she was a young woman, my mother completed finishing school with June Dally-Watkins. She and my father were both very proud of this fact. 'Never shave above the knee,' my mother cautioned me. 'It makes it uncomfortable for men.'

*

My mother and I on the beach. I at 20 and her at 47. For one rare moment, I felt one complete emotion, not many confusing and distorted ones. I felt at peace. I felt that her soul and my soul were walking hand in hand. Her shadow, my shadow, like unreal wispy things of life, elongated and beautiful – reaching for the other on the sand. I felt her mind speaking to mine, though what

the words were, I could not say. I believed I held her thoughts, her inner self in my hands, and it was the most precious jewel I have ever handled and my mother was certainly the most beautiful, most precious anything on this earth. I wish I had said the words – the words that my brain and heart and soul were so desperate to say…

*

My mother started dying at a time in my life when I started to feel okay with myself. It was strange timing. I was having a personal awakening, realizing I was not worthless and that I could live my life as an independent person without fear of other people's judgements. I had begun to realise I could function as an entity apart from others and that I did not have to please everyone else. Yet, my mother was dying and so, what should have been an empowering time of self-acceptance and peace, clashed with the indescribable grief of losing the woman I loved most in the world. This was a time when my mental health was at a premium. And for that I am eternally grateful. Being mentally healthier allowed me to visit my mother in the hospital, sleep beside her in a cold hospital bed of a night time and tend to her during the day without having to also battle my own issues. It meant, while I was finally beginning to love myself, my soul was quietened and my attention could be placed solely upon my mother. It felt like the chaos in a cluttered and crowded room was finally sorted out and everything was placed in its correct position. I felt during these days that I could really see people because I was freed from over analyzing myself. It meant I no longer felt intimidated or lessened in the company of others, including my family. It meant I began to see that the fault did not always have to rest with me. It meant I saw my mother as a distinct individual who had no obligation to mother me.

*

My mother was intelligent and obedient. She was a good pupil. Fear of earning displeasure from others and a desire to please motivated her throughout her entire life. She wanted to go to university. There was a secretarial job going in the small country town where she lived. ‘Apply for that job,’ said my grandmother, ‘if you don’t get it you can go to university.’ Ever obedient, my mother applied for the job. She was well spoken and well dressed, attractive and demure. ‘I got the job,’ she would say with a dismissive shrug of her shoulder. It never occurred to me that she was as equally unhappy with this outcome as I was until the day she told me, ‘I wanted to be a doctor.’ Then she made me promise not to tell anyone because she was worried people might laugh at her. She would have been an excellent doctor.

# RISOLUTO

## 9. Downpour

*Come on over, brave my storm*

*Oceans overhead*

*Come inside, my friend*

*Getting bad out there.*

'Summer's End' – Foo Fighters

At my wedding, a friend of my maternal grandmother's, was asked to give a speech honouring my grandmother. He told of all of the cooking she had done for her husband's employees while they were working and camping 'out west.' He told of the cleaning and care she took of the campsite as well as the management of her considerable brood of children. And, after he had concluded listing her exhausting chores he said, 'And never a word of complaint.' And by the way he said it, it was clear that this not uttering a word of complaint made my grandmother's work all the more valuable. That this set her and her deeds apart from other women. She had garnered approval. Her silence had made her attractive.

It made me wonder what would have happened if my grandmother had complained about the dirt, the heat, the dust and the lack of medical care for sick children. It made me wonder how her friend's speech might have differed if my grandmother had mustered the temerity to express her despair or loneliness or tiredness. Would her efforts have been diminished because of the breaking of her silence?

*When I was a young, flat chested girl my grandmother's neighbour's adult son asked the gaggle of kids in her yard to a game of football in his mother's front yard. Again, and again, he ran down the field throwing the ball and play tackling us. Again, and again, he picked me up in these play tackles and ran with my spine pressed against his stomach. Again, and again, in these tackles he put his hand down the front of my underwear. Though he laughed in my ear and spoke quietly to me while he did it, I sensed it was wrong.*

*I told no one.*

The idea that women should suffer in silence is nothing new. In 1882, Arthur Schopenhauer wrote in his essay entitled, 'Of Women' about 'woman' that, 'She pays the debt of life not by what she does, but by what she suffers; by the pains of child-bearing and care for the child, and by submission to her husband' (Schopenhauer, 2017, p.58). By maintaining a staunch outward appearance, my grandmother was merely repeating unquestioned, traditional expectations of behaviours that had been demanded of women in previous centuries. She was echoing and mimicking the role models of women from generations before her.

To transgress away from these expectations of women was to invite scandal or judgment and would, frequently, result in shame. The eternal shame and punishment of women traces back to the earliest tales in the bible. In the book of Genesis, Eve is brutally chastised for attempting to upset the status quo. She questions the fairness of a rule. God declares that Eve's sin of tempting Adam and listening to charming males in snake form is so great that not only must she suffer, but all women who follow must suffer. Therefore, the most miraculous part of being a female, the ability to give birth, would now also be the most painful…for all women…forever. Perhaps most significant in this story is the fact that Eve accepts her punishment and she goes on to stoically

suffer through childbirth. She accepts it as her due for being defiant. Adam accepts it, too. He doesn't defend his wife or plead her case. He doesn't argue that he ate the apple of his own accord. Adam accepts that Eve is to blame for the downfall of them both. Perhaps Eve didn't protest because she believed she had given up her right to protest? Maybe she was too humble to expect fairer treatment? Perhaps, she was convinced that she, rather than the sweet-talking snake was the transgressor of the story? And the opinions and viewpoints of transgressors have never been popular.

If Eve was the first female in Biblical storytelling to veer away from the approved path and into the brambles of transgression, then her modern sisters are now become a tribe of women who are blazing their own trails through the underbrush of public disapproval. To be fair, this public disapproval could be safely viewed as understandable based on the expectations and behaviour that has so long been associated with women in our society. Women have long been viewed as the peace-keepers, the willing martyrs, the swallowers of pain and the suppressors of rage in Western cultures. These views are underscored by a set of prescribed behaviours that women have agreed to adhere to and that society has come to expect or, even demand, of women. These are behaviours such as suffering in silence, denying the presence of rage and the careful maintenance of a 'likeable' and demure demeanour.

Years ago, I was advised by a clinical psychologist to encourage my small son with Autism to associate with the girls in his class because girls are 'naturally more caring and maternal in their approach to those who are struggling.' The message was that the boys may ridicule or hurt my son but the girls would 'mother' him. These, amongst other behaviours, are associated with the 'feminine.' And they are also behaviours that can be associated with the idea of being 'submissive.' In order to assist my son, for example, these girls would submit to his impatience at his lack of

fine motor skills and they would open packets of snacks for him. The girls' reward for this was that they were seen to be good and kind. In turn, the idea of being submissive conjures the suggestion of surrender, of giving in or giving up. So, what is it that women give up in order to be awarded the label of 'feminine'? Women give up the right to be aggressive, they give up assertiveness, they give up being contrary and they give up their voice. The most debilitating of these in the literary world, I would argue, has been the loss of their voice. Though not all writers, including women, share my opinion.

Jia Tolentino argues in her piece entitled 'The Personal Essay is Over' for the *New Yorker*, that the loss of this particular type of feminine voice in the personal essay is not a negative occurrence. Rather, she seems relieved to be able to declare the demise of 'a certain kind of personal essay that, for a long time, everybody seemed to hate' (Tolentino, 2017, p.1). This 'certain kind' of personal essay is the one that plumbs the depths of the individual. The essay that discusses 'relationships, self-image, and intimate struggle' (Tolentino, p.6).

In her widely discussed piece, Tolentino, declared that 'the personal-essay boom is over' (Tolentino, 2017, p.6). She argues that the main reason for the inevitable death of the voice of women in the personal essay is that 'the personal essay is no longer political in quite the same way it was' (Tolentino, 2017, p.7). The implication is that, if a woman attempts to explore anything of a personal nature that she is not making relevant social commentary and, thus, her writing, is irrelevant and self-indulgent. Essayists, suggests Tolentino, must be looking outward at the world and commenting rather than looking inward and ruminating.

The bigger implication of Tolentino's whole essay is that women essayists are the ones who must change their focus of writing. These women who adopted the personal essay as their chosen genre fall victim to the addiction of attention generated by creating 'the outrageous, the

harrowing, the intimate' (Tolentino, 2017, p.4). These women allow themselves to be seduced by the promise of reaching an audience and receiving, at times, miserly amounts of recognition. All of these distasteful aspects of the personal essay by women are reason enough to dismiss the genre in Tolentino's opinion. 'Personal essays have evidently been deemed not worth the trouble,' she explained to her readers. Tolentino's dismissal of the personal essay failed to acknowledge that the motivation for writing a personal essay is not always about gaining attention through 'identification and connection' (Tolentino, 2017, p. 4). To imply so is condescending and harmful.

*When I was a girl of about eleven, bike riding was our main hobby and interest. We would ride from our house, along the red, rocky, dusty, unsealed road to our grandmother's house and back. A boy who went to another school lived near my grandmother. One day he called to me to ride with him. He lured me under the house where he lived. It was dark and dirty under the house and the boy's elder brother was waiting in there. 'Look at this,' commanded the older brother. Good, unsuspecting, obedient girl I looked. It was a pornographic magazine. The woman in the centerfold had her hands between her legs pulling apart the lips of her vulva while she looked out at us, wide-eyed over her bent knees. 'Can you do this?' demanded the older brother. The image shocked and frightened me. I had never seen that part of a woman before. I backed away from the boys and ran to my bike. I rode home, trembling and confused, unsure what I had seen, unsure why my 'friend' had taken me there, unsure what the brother had been asking me to do.*

*I told no one.*

In *The Second Sex*, published in 1949, Simone de Beauvoir describes a 'true woman' as being seen as, 'frivolous, infantile, irresponsible, the woman subjugated to man' (de Beauvoir, 2009, p.12).

What de Beauvoir is describing is a woman who causes no trouble, who creates no upset and who not only defers to men but embraces the world man has forged out of his masculine ideals. This woman is grateful for protection, knows her place, and is a form of amusement and welcome distraction to men. This is the archetypal 'good woman.' To quote a more recent feminist, the woman who is '…not being demanding, loud or expressing her own needs' (Chemaly, 2018, p.xiii). This is the stereotypical great woman behind every good man, the delicate flower, the swooning maiden, the matriarch, the sex kitten, the devoted wife and mother. Women who exhibited the qualities that were so praised in my grandmother at my wedding. Patient. Committed. Saintly. Voiceless.

The right to communicate is acknowledged in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). It is recognized as a basic human right in Article 19 where it is stated that all people have the 'right to seek, receive, impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers,'(UDHR, www.un.org). Everyone has the right to communication. It seems straightforward enough until the realisation that the UDHR outlines the belief that everyone has this right but that not everyone has the ability to communicate. This stunted ability may relate to environmental, cultural or social factors. Many of these factors that affect meaningful communication have existed for hundreds of years and may include religious or governmental beliefs and systems. When we, in the Western world, contemplate this repression of communication we usually associate such acts with foreign countries or those who we consider to be 'Other.' We frequently determine that these people are oppressed in some way and it is declared that such treatment is inhumane. And, that is understandable and a valid conclusion to draw. But, what if those in the society or system have become used to the oppression because they have never

known another way? What if the behaviours that are associated with that individual's role in society are the same behaviours that feed into the oppression?

When our son was first diagnosed with Autism, it was strongly recommended to us by our GP, that we seek out the help of an experienced speech therapist. The therapist would be able to assist our son in navigating through the endless challenges of social interaction and would teach him how to express himself more capably. The speech therapist we chose was an expert in dealing with individuals with autism and brain trauma. One day, while sitting in her waiting room with a few minutes to spare until our appointment, I read some of the information she had pinned to her notice board. Much of it urged the reader to understand and promote the vital importance of all individuals to communicate. Imagine others believed you had no opinion and no ideas to express because you said nothing, one paragraph instructed. Imagine you had something pressing to communicate and others assumed your silence meant you had nothing to say, suggested another paragraph.

These very suggestions send a thrill of horror through me. But, at the time, I didn't consider that my right to communicate or express my inner truths had ever been an issue. It was when I reached my forties that I realized that my silence throughout my life had fed into the opinion that others had constructed about me. People only knew the parts of myself that I had considered appropriate to show them. As a result, I had hidden my moments of pain and I had suffered in silence. I had denied myself comfort or kindness from others. I realized my decision to remain silent may have helped me to avoid scrutiny but it had also contributed to my own oppression.

*Sometimes my parents had friends over for dinner and drinks. The friends had two children. Their son was a hulking, rough boy who rarely spoke. He was my age, though he towered over all*

*children his age. I felt equally awkward and intimidated whenever he was around. Our parents would turn all of us out into the yard to occupy ourselves whenever they had guests. One afternoon, while the adults busied themselves with socializing and the obligatory Jatz crackers with smoked oysters, my parents' friends' son took me behind the peach trees near our big, green shed. He laid me down in the damp, dark earth beside the tank stand. He rummaged in the plant debris and dug through the earth. He removed my underwear and, brutally and methodically, he penetrated my tiny vagina again and again with the various objects he had found. The objects were covered in dirt and he struggled to push some of them into my body. I could feel the rough earth scratching at my soft, unyielding insides. It felt like tearing or ripping. I lay frozen; limp and disembodied, looking through the branches of the trees at the pale blue of the sky.*

*I told no one.*

Deciding to break a silence is a big deal. It's life changing. Literally life changing. My mother used to always say, 'Don't commit anything to paper.' She had worked in a solicitor's office when she was young and understood the devastation that could be wrought by the written word. She was also a big proponent of writing 'Without Prejudice' on everything so that it couldn't be held against her later. These fervent warnings developed a compulsion in me to constantly check that I hadn't written anything inappropriate or given away personal documents by mistake. I would re-read every letter I wrote, sometimes unsealing envelopes to double check that I wasn't about to ruin myself through self-disclosure. When I started to contemplate the idea of sharing some of my stories, the idea was crippling in its terror and the task of trying to organise a life into words seemed an ungainly and presumptuous exercise. Who, I asked myself, would want to read my stories? But,

that was before I became a student in some creative nonfiction classes and before I became immersed in the personal essay.

The personal essay holds a unique place in the world of writing. There is nothing else that quite compares to these unique, impactful snippets that allow readers into the personal mind-space of a writer. There is a confessional heritage attached to the personal essay. At times, it very much resembles its bigger sibling, the memoir. It is the very nature of the relationship between memoir and the personal essay that has attracted disapproval by critics, while still being well received by readers. Miranda Sherwin tackles this phenomenon regarding the memoir by explaining, 'Whereas such confessional memoirs are devoured by the reading public, they are simultaneously derided by critics as sensational, self-promoting, and ultimately lacking in literary standards' (Sherwin, 2011, p.2). Despite this threat of being derided or dismissed, many people have made the decision to entrust their histories, their fears and their suffering to the personal essay.

The height of popularity for the work of women in the personal essay is claimed, by Tolentino, to have occurred in 2008. In the ten years that have followed it seems to be the general consensus among many high-profile writers that the representation of female identity and suffering has run its course. It is, in fact not uncommon to read commentary by females who themselves were heavily involved in the writing of the personal essay to dismiss it as an indulgent, simplistic approach to writing. There is the unavoidable suggestion that when women become more skilled at writing that they are expected to apply themselves to the writing of 'better' and more prestigious genres. This view fails to understand the intention and motivation of individuals who choose the personal essay as their vehicle for personal expression and confession.

As the popularity and validation of the personal essay increased in the early 2000s, there was a call for more work of a personal nature from women. Many of these women contributed

their personal stories for little or no financial remuneration and many of these essays were, as a result, lacking in substance and integrity. It was also feared that some of these women had sacrificed their dignity and self-respect for a paltry stab at fame. It could be said that here is Tolentino's proof that the personal essay is trite, self-indulgent and, ultimately, degrading or dangerous to the women who write these pieces.

However, there are women such as Susan Shapiro who reply to Tolentino that the personal essay did not "boom" in 2008 and that, 'it didn't fade when she (Tolentino) switched gigs' (Shapiro, 2017, p.2). Shapiro, of course, is referring to the fact that Tolentino, herself, was a significant contributor to the world of women writers of the personal essay until she decided that it had become an undignified form of communication. Shapiro also shares the view that women are chastised or corrected or lose approval when they share unladylike or unfeminine behaviour in their writing. 'Is it uncouth for a woman to admit to wild adventures without proper repentance while making good money?' (Shapiro, 2017, p. 2/3) she wonders while observing that male authors generally escape such criticism.

Out of the movement of self-exposure and confession through personal essay writing, emerged some powerful women writers. These are women such as Zadie Smith, Rebecca Solnit and Durga Chew-Bose, who are all acknowledged, respected and frequently published in mainstream media. These are well-known women writers who embraced the personal essay as an opportunity to educate, inform, entertain and enlighten their readers. There are also women writers who have taken advantage of the popularity of the personal essay and utilised it in order to conduct and explore their own personal disputes and dilemmas in a public forum. Such a writer is Melissa Broder who developed her readership on Twitter on her account @sosadtoday. On the back cover of her collection of essays entitled *So Sad Today* is a comment taken from another woman writer,

Sarah Gerard, which says, ‘With irreverence and wit, Melissa Broder confronts the most hidden and grotesque parts of herself.’ In the collection, Broder discusses her mental illness, her sexual attraction to the act of vomiting and her inability to abide by the rules of her open marriage. The contents are, at once, troubling and repellant and honest. The collection has very little, if anything to offer in the way of universal appeal to its readers. It doesn’t need to. The collection is unashamedly about Broder and her life and she writes about herself without apology and with complete confidence.

These women writers, and others, have stepped away from the traditional expectation of conventional gender roles. These writers are women who drop their façade, who do not shy away from appearing flawed, strong and unfeminine. Such deliberate sharing of information cannot be dismissed as being a simple grab for attention. Closer investigation and exploration of such essays reveal a clear desire for the unravelling and verification of the individual and a deep yearning for self-expression. These personal essays are not so much about gaining an audience as they are about granting their readers the permission to experience and embrace their existence as women.

In her harrowing essay, ‘Afterbirth’, Dana Schwartz adopts a conversational and informal tone. She describes her near perfect birth and the pride she felt in her extreme loss of blood in childbirth as if ‘bleeding signified strength’ (Schwartz, 2015, p.38). This theme of denial or of attempting to transform sorrow into something palatable runs deep through this essay. After days of suffering with a constantly crying baby, of lonely, desperate nights of hourly feeds and of frequent sobbing, Dana reveals, ‘but I didn’t ask for help’ (Schwartz, 2015, p.39). It appears at this point that the writer has engaged with and has bought into the idea of the long-suffering, silent woman. However, her breakthrough, when it comes, makes the reader want to applaud. ‘I didn’t have to suffer in

isolation. There is no prize awarded to the most stoic and miserable mother' (Schwartz, 2015, p.41). How profound those words are when measured against the words and behaviours of my own mother who strove so valiantly to be a poster-girl for perfect, serene, self-sacrificing motherhood. I simply took from my mother's tales of suffering through the long nights with a wailing baby that it was to be expected, that all women must surrender to the chronic loneliness and deadening isolation of mothering.

What Schwartz does so well in this piece is to shatter the illusion that suffering in silence is somehow noble or that it somehow increases a woman's worth. Ironically, at the end of her essay, Schwartz sums up her plight by revealing, 'All I had were stories. I thought about them during my pregnancy and then afterward; about my mom's natural childbirth, and then later, the birth of my brother, how she had such little help, her mother miles away, how she bore so much alone' (Schwartz, 2015, p.42). In this revelation is so much of the female conditioning to suffer without complaint. This denial of the plight of so many struggling new mothers is shattered when Schwartz realizes 'Endurance is not strength; hardships are not badges to be earned' (Schwartz, 2015, p.42).

Maggie O'Farrell creates a series of compelling essays in her collection entitled *I Am, I Am, I Am*; *Seventeen Brushes with Death.* Apart from the obvious topic of narrowly avoided death featuring in all of her essays, O'Farrell includes aspects, experiences and details of her personal life. Every essay orbits around O'Farrell – it is her as the individual who is at the centre of this collection. O'Farrell doesn't hedge around her topics and nor does she attempt to slide her own observations in as building blocks that support other narratives. Instead, she uses her own world as a foundation for each essay. She not only shamelessly loses herself in her own experiences, she brings the reader in like an observer in a consulting room where she is the patient showing off a

collection of injuries to a physician. ‘Look,’ she seems to say, ‘this is where I lost a baby, this is where I was nearly abducted, this is where my daughter nearly died.’ She lists the intricate details of her life in an intimate, blunt manner with no other purpose than to share her own experiences in a defiant act of self-disclosure.

In her essay ‘Daughter’, O’Farrell not only shreds the image of the patiently suffering woman, she highlights her inability to suffer with grace. She describes her frustration at not being able to conceive a second child by recalling the way she stamped across a carpark, how she snarls, mutters and snaps cynically at the advice offered by professionals (O’Farrell, 2017, pp.260, 261). O’Farrell explains her acceptance of the ordeal of injections and scans and tests but she also adds in details about hanging up on medical staff ‘without saying goodbye’ (O’Farrell, 2017, p.262). When she finally does have her precious second child, a daughter, O’Farrell describes the horrors of the child’s eczema and her lack of composure and grace when dealing with the seriousness of the skin condition. ‘I had never known anything like it. I had not thought such suffering, such torture was possible. Walking around the room of my house, holding this miserable, wailing baby, I had no idea what to do’ (O’Farrell, 2017, p.273). The essay conveys the writer’s refusal to endure patiently and gracefully but what it also demonstrates is O’Farrell’s resilience through her suffering and that of her child’s.

What is so compelling about O’Farrell’s work is that she does not shy away from the personal or attempt to make it more universal, ‘The effects of living with a child who has a life-threatening condition, of loving someone who could, at any moment be snatched from you? I think about this a lot’ (O’Farrell, 2017, p.277). O’Farrell then goes on to list the ways in which her daughter’s condition has impacted her life as an individual and a mother. The self-sacrificing,

gracious mother is not accommodated in this essay. Rather, the resourceful, fierce, impatient contemporary woman is shown taking up the reins of a very difficult motherhood.

In the introduction to *The Best American Essays*, Leslie Jamison touches on two pertinent points regarding the personal essay. On the same page, Jamison outlines that, 'the essay isn't a retreat from the world but a way of encountering it' and, 'the essay has always courted a reputation as a solipsistic genre; a mind fondling itself on the page' (Jamison, 2017, p.xix). In her collection of essays entitled *The Empathy Exams*, which was the winner of the Graywolf Press Nonfiction Prize, Jamison does use her essays as a means to document her experiences in the world while she allows others to encounter those experiences through her eyes. The key focus of the collection is on the notion of empathy and what it means to share in and encourage empathy for the experiences of others. Jamison also works hard throughout the collection to shatter the idea that the personal essay is solipsistic. Neither of these things is achieved easily in Jamison's work because she is well aware of the perils of being considered self-indulgent in her works. This vague fear accompanies much of her documentation. At times, it makes her defensive as in her essay 'The Empathy Exams' when she recalls herself as a young woman facing an abortion. 'I would tell her she is going through something large and she shouldn't be afraid to confess its size, shouldn't be afraid she's 'making too big a deal of it' (Jamison, 2014, p.11). Here Jamison tackles the mammoth task suffering women must face when admitting that everything is not alright. The reader shares Jamison's empathy for her past self and her dismay for the way she admonished her suffering self in the past.

In 'Morphology of the Hit' Jamison explores the lack of sympathy shown to women who are considered to have placed themselves in danger and who then have the audacity to complain about evil that may have befallen them. Discussing the major blow she sustained to her face one

night by a stranger who mugged her she observes, 'Afterward they said I shouldn't have been walking at night. In that neighbourhood. On an empty street, alone' (Jamison, 2014, p.70). Adding to her trauma is the humiliation that she feels regarding the vicious attack. When talking about interacting with others after the event she recalls, 'I couldn't even look them in the eye. I was ashamed' (Jamison, 2014, p.73).

In 'Grand Unified Theory of Female Pain,' Jamison discusses the deep self-disgust women endure and the loathing and fear of being labelled as self-indulgent. 'I knew better – we all, it seems, knew better – than to become one of *those* women who plays victim, lurks around the sickbed, hands her pain out like a business card' (Jamison, 2014, p.210). She then remarks, 'An entire generation, the next wave, grew up doing everything we could to avoid this identity: we take refuge in self-awareness, self-deprecation, jadedness, sarcasm' (Jamison, 2014, p.210).

My husband used to say, 'It's not about you,' whenever we would find ourselves in the midst of a particularly sticky argument. This statement would usually come after I'd attempted to express my feelings; something I had not mastered in those times. After enduring this admonishment and the shame it brought upon me for another humiliating time, something snapped in me or dawned on me. It was like waking up to the realization that I did matter. And I found myself saying in exasperation and with insistence, 'Well, logistically, at some point, something will have to be about me!' My husband froze and stared at me. He stopped using that statement to quieten me.

Jamison dares to suggest in 'Grand Unified Theory of Female Pain' that because certain pain is associated with women it is relegated to the realm of triteness. She acknowledges the pressure women feel to ensure their pain is valid or real or significant before they share it with an audience. 'I wanted to write a story so good that my hypothetical future readers would

acknowledge as profound a kind of female sadness they'd otherwise dismiss as performative, over-played or self-indulgent' (Jamison, 2014, p.206). Here Jamison is wrestling with the idea that women are melodramatic when they summon up the temerity to complain or to share their stories of suffering. She is gripped by the same anxiety many women face when considering sharing their tales of pain; will they be considered weak, unfeminine, ruined or lesser in the eyes of those who receive these stories? It is an overwhelming and troubling question that women writers of the personal essay must face. The main concern that lies at the base of this dilemma for women to share or not to share is the inelegance of their suffering.

Women who survive traumas are often not seen as noble or heroic, rather they are most often considered to be marked, inept victims. Worse, the suffering that women may choose to discuss is too often viewed as trite or hysterical or 'uncalled for.' Jamison describes her struggles with such expression in 'Grand Unified Theory of Female Pain.' She writes, 'Because this nebulous sadness seemed to attach itself to female anxieties (anorexia and cutting and obsession with male attention), I began to understand it as inherently female, and because it was so unjustified by circumstance, it began to feel inherently shameful' (Jamison, 2014, p.206). In other words, what on earth do these women have to complain about and why should we listen to them?

*When I was thirteen, a boy stalked me throughout the grounds of the high school I attended. Every day he would position himself somewhere not far from me and watch me. I was alarmed but I felt protected by the presence of other students. One day the boy got between me and the other students and he chased me into an empty classroom and locked the door behind him. I leapt to the other side of the room in order to place several rows of desks between us. I spent the lunch break that day racing between desks and chairs avoiding his aggressive lunges and the sudden flinging of the*

*furniture he tossed aside. When the bell finally rang, I ran, trembling to lose myself in the tide of students surging through the double doors.*

*I told no one.*

Philip Lopate states, 'At the core of the personal essay is the supposition that there is a certain unity to human experience' (Lopate, 1995, p.xxiii). And, it is this supposition of the unity of the human experience that seems to answer the question of why the personal essay highlights the struggle and judgment facing women writers. As Melissa Broder displays so well in her collection of essays, the view of the woman who writes the personal essay is rarely that of a universal one. It is precisely this lack of universal experience that serves to convince women to remain quiet. At the heart of the decision to remain silent lies a set of fears. The fear of being thought odd or strange. The fear of being considered hysterical. The fear of being thought lesser; of losing the feminine image so cherished by society. The fear of being judged. If we accept that the thought of being judged by an immediate circle of friends seems daunting to most people, it becomes easier to understand how difficult it must be for women to write down their words for others to read. When these writings are unleashed in a public setting, the prospect of exposing the self becomes even more overwhelming. And, when we add to this the idea that such writing may be held up against existing writing and compared, contrasted and measured, it becomes an unthinkable option. Now, imagine that those who read this work will find it difficult to accept anything that doesn't slot in with preconceived ideas of writing or that those who read this work will become irritated or even outraged that it doesn't align with universal experiences or beliefs. This is the reality for women writers who choose to write about personal experiences, opinions and emotion in a world of literature that has been shaped by men.

Writing as a woman has always presented challenges. So much so that, as is well known, women writers were, at times, obliged to change their name and assume a male identity in order to be afforded the opportunity to be published. In her book *Outsiders*, Lyndall Gordon traces the lives of five famous women writers. These writers are Virginia Woolf, Olive Schreiner, George Eliot, Emily Bronte and Mary Shelley, writers who Gordon chose because in her opinion '…they came, they saw and left us changed' (Gordon, 2017, p.2). Gordon goes on to explain how 'In the nineteenth century it was a truth universally acknowledged that nice women were quiet. They did not indulge in utterance in a public arena. To do so was immodest, unwomanly; assertion or egotistical display was thought unnatural' (Gordon, 2017, p.2). The suggestion is that it was considered unfeminine for a woman to be articulate. A woman who engaged in public forms of communication was considered an aberration, an oddity who had strayed from the norm. It is not a stretch to suggest that this view of women has continued to shuffle into the centuries that followed.

One has only to look to the United States 2016 Presidential election and to the treatment of Hilary Clinton by a rabid, opposing media who dubbed her 'Shrillary' to realise that a woman expressing herself passionately is not guaranteed a warm reception. It is interesting to note here that the voice of women sharing outrage, pain and despair in poetry has been referred to as, "the shrill voice of confession" (Louise Bogan, in Sherwin, 2011, p.25). The implication is that when a woman raises her voice in order to communicate something contentious or challenging, she becomes shrill by default. Similarly, women writers are faced with rejection and criticism when they offer up their written works to the literary world. But, unlike their male counterparts, these women writers face the prospect of rejection and criticism because the work they produce diverts from the established benchmarks and examples of writing. And, whether it is a jarring proposal or

not, (and at the risk of sounding shrill), it is true that these benchmarks and examples of writing have largely been established by men. This presents an undeniable issue for women as writers and as readers because established patterns and behaviours in society all too often become intrinsic to those individuals who inhabit society. Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche explains that this is because, 'if we do something over and over again, it becomes normal' (Ngozi Adiche, 2014, p.13). She argues if human beings only 'see men as heads of corporations, it starts to seem 'natural' that only men should be heads of corporations' (Ngozi Adiche, 2014, p.13). I would argue that the same circumstance has occurred, for the most part, in the world of written words.

In her book about sexism and science, *Inferior*, Angela Saini outlines the frustration of attempting to glean significant understanding of perceived differences between the sexes by turning to scientific studies for examples or evidence. She observes, 'The problem is that answers in science aren't everything they seem. When we turn to scientists for resolution, we assume they will be neutral' (Saini, 2017, p.4.). Saini is referring, of course, to the fact that the world of science has, for the bigger part of its history, been dominated by men. She expounds on her frustration at the absence of dependable and unbiased findings when she writes, 'If studies seem sexist, occasionally, it's because they are' (Saini, 2017, p.13). The same issue is evident when we examine the world of writing. If we, as readers and as a society, are used to seeing the perspective of men and accepting this perspective as that of society as a whole, then this perspective colours our views and becomes the 'norm.' The position of men becomes the default position when we approach words. It becomes what we expect.

Why is an emotional woman expressing herself in the written form viewed with such negativity? Perhaps, more to the point and for the purposes of narrowing this question down, we should ask why is an angry woman viewed with such negativity? Chemaly asserts that, 'It's as

children that most of us learn to regard anger as unfeminine, unattractive and selfish' (Chemaly, 2018, p.xvi). She argues that girls are taught to 'manage their anger' and to channel it into different emotions. And, if a girl doesn't manage her emotions, Chemaly explains, 'She is met with aversion, perceived as hostile, irritable, less competent, and unlikeable' (Chemaly, 2018, p.xvii). Emotional words do not become women. An angry woman is a volatile, unhinged and irrational being. The savage backlash against the #MeToo movement in the United States would certainly seem to validate this view.

The act of women sharing their personal, painful and often degrading stories of sexual abuse and harassment quickly generated responses such as #NotAllMen and #MenToo. It also witnessed the loud demands for 'proof!' and the shaking of heads at these women who were destroying the careers of 'good men'. One of the women who endured endless harassment over her decision to come forward and report her rapist is Christine Blasey-Ford. Ford testified that proposed supreme court nominee, Brett Kavanaugh had raped her when she was a teenager. Despite the obvious distress of Ford and her lack of motive to do harm to Kavanaugh, Ford was still attacked on social media by many people, including women who attempted to shame her for ruining the reputation of a decent family man. Arielle Bernstein believes, 'Women have always been criticized for sharing their stories, and the more real and uncomfortable they are, the more critics are likely to pathologize the sharer' (Berstein, 2017, p.2.). Bernstein is making the alarming point that women's silence may well be valued more than their willingness or even their ability to tell their truths and share their emotions. In the case of Ford, Bernstein seems to be frighteningly correct.

Emotions do not make a woman irrational or unhinged or dangerous. However, the repression of such emotions could well have dangerous and tragic outcomes concerning the

emotional and mental well-being of women. The dangerous consequences I am alluding to is the continuing strengthening and fresh renewal of the idea that women must fit in, that they must conform to the expectations forced upon them by prescribed gender roles. Most damaging of all is the consequence of surrendering an impassioned and unique voice in favour of being 'pleasing' and inoffensive. Rose McGowan, one of the most prominent figures at the centre of the #metoo movement discusses the importance of women lifting their voices in her bestselling and controversial book *Brave.* In her Author's Note she writes, 'We survivors have gained our power. We survivors are using our voices in record numbers' (McGowan, 2018, p.x). McGowan acknowledges that surviving alone is not compensation, women have earnt the right to speak and it is time they were heard. It is time for others to listen.

*My parents held a birthday party for my brother in the backyard of our old Queenslander. The invited kids played tiggy in the dark of night while the adults drank beer and chatted around the barbecue. I reveled in being a fast runner and hard to catch. But, one of the older boys was faster than me. Each time he caught me he pressed my spine down into the grass and sat across my hips, his legs straddling me, his pelvis pressed to mine, his hands clasped vicelike around my wrists. Only when I had succumbed to his strength and subsided into obedient silence would he remove his body from mine and allow me up. Finally, when I had lost count of how many times he had pinned me, exhausted from terror and confusion I spat up into his face and, when he took his hands from my wrists to wipe his face, I scrambled out from under him. I fled through the yard but he caught me and rammed me hard against the yellow boards of our house. Again, and again, he shoved me forcefully against the wall until my breath squeezed involuntarily out of my body. He laughed. 'You sound like a train,' he said scornfully. I broke down and sobbed. 'I'm going to tell*

*my Dad,' I said. The boy let me go as if I had become too hot to hold. He ran off. I dragged a shaking hand across my tear smeared face.*

*I told no one.*

Leslie Jamison refers to the suffering women in literature as 'wounded women' (Jamison, 2014, p.185) and she declares that we see them everywhere. Jamison asserts that these 'wounded women' are made 'radiant' by their tragedy and that 'the pain of women turns them into kittens and rabbits and sordid red satin goddesses…' (Jamison, 2014, p.186). In the personal essay written by women we see a different side to these 'wounded women.' There are no overly romanticized tales. We don't see women rendered ghost like, pale in their grief, famishing away to mere wafers of the stereotyped fragile, feminine. Through the exploration of contemporary personal essays by women we are able to see that large scars can be created by unremarkable things…we can see that suffering does not need to be enlarged in order to be excused or accepted. There is intimacy in revealing what goes against the image of the traditionally attractive woman. There is the presentation of the imperfect self rather than a manufactured and palatable version of womankind. The notion of solipsism is rejected and abandoned. Everyone's pain matters. Jamison addresses this notion when she states, '…perhaps self-destruction in the aftermath of heartbreak was a trite pain, but it was *my* trite pain and I wanted to find a language for it' (Jamison, 2014, p.206). Every scar no matter how miniscule it may appear to others is the remnant of a wound that was deep enough to permanently mar. More importantly, approval is not needed or sought.

Women don't speak through their personal essay in order to hear their own voice or read their own story. The main motivating factor that emerges in the writing of these works by women is the desire to share experiences, to cultivate awareness and to nurture empathy. There is the sense

of offering support and acknowledging the difficulties that being a woman can bring. There is the unspoken understanding that in sacrificing private moments a type of permission is given to confess, to accept what is too often deemed to be unacceptable, to acknowledge fallibility and imperfection as part of the female identity. The payoff of perhaps helping another woman in despair, of rescuing a sister from the plight of suffering in loneliness is worth the offering up of privacy.

Ashleigh Young grapples with the notion of the public self versus the private self in her essay 'Bikram's Knee.' The essay comes from her collection *Can You Tolerate This*? for which Young was awarded the Windham-Campbell Literature Prize. In 'Bikram's Knee,' Young explores the pain of trying to maintain an identity that is palatable to the public while simultaneously trying to transform the other half of the person that lies beneath that burdensome façade. Throughout the piece, which details Young's punishment of her body through yoga, running and starvation, the reader feels her pain as she struggles to join both of her identities. We understand that the reason for the creation and separation of the identities has been Young's fear that the part she keeps hidden is undesirable, a failure, an ugly part of herself that needs to be transformed into something appealing. There is a chronic sense of the writer's desperation to be at home in her skin. In bitter juxtaposition to this is the fact that the author must surrender to therapy and seek the help of others in order to find peace. Even more significant is that the author's hope in seeking help must battle with 'the guilt and loathing of spending this much time and money trying to fix something that perhaps at its heart is simple' (Young, 2016, p.167). There is the constant quest to feel good enough to rest, a diligent and painful quest to quieten the voices of self-doubt, loathing and skepticism that lie within her.

When Young writes about the arduous agony of the yoga she has become obsessed with she says, ‘Our stillness, our rigidity, transcends the human condition because it is a refusal to bow to our desire to break out of the posture, a refusal to fall back into the torrent of other states of consciousness’ (Young, 2016, p.175). Young may appear to be talking about the yoga poses she holds but she is also commenting on her reluctance to fall back into who she is at her core, that by striving daily to maintain the rigid posture of her other self she is succeeding at denying the existence of her other half. Previously in the essay, Young recalls, ‘For a second I look at my reflection. I always look at it for signs of transformation’ (Young, 2016, p.171). It is what is not said here that arises as the most powerful moments of suffering for Young. The reader understands that the transformation that Young is searching for cannot be found in a mirror. Like so many other women, Young is attempting to smother the part of herself that is unpalatable and the suffering that, if shared, may make others in her life feel uncomfortable. Later she tells us ‘I found my old self waiting’ (Young, 2016, p.178) and we, the readers, are crestfallen for her but hopeful that, in realising she cannot escape herself, she may gain relief through recognition of her hidden self.

At the end of the essay, Young describes her desire to remain suspended above her troubles as she leaps from a rock into water. The constant quest to avoid the self and to transform into something more desirable and acceptable by others and herself is abandoned when Young observes, ‘But, my feet hit the bottom and I go down’ (Young, 2016, p.184). Though there is no happy ending as such to this essay, there is a real victory. The reader is relieved that Young has stopped beating herself up for suffering. There is the hope that the author will accept herself and value herself enough to admit to the pain that is impacting her life on a daily basis. There is gratitude that Young has mustered the courage to record this part of her story because it reassures us that everyone’s story deserves to be heard.

It is interesting and disappointing how common it is that women writers of the personal essay are castigated by their peers. Frequently there is the view that these women have lost their dignity. But, who can decide what someone else has lost? And who would be confident enough to decide for someone else that their writing has left them undignified? This is the same type of arrogance we have come to expect from these protected, privileged individuals who inform others with great certainty of what constitutes racism, sexism and violence. It is easy to speak from a place of comfort and broad acceptance about what is considered inappropriate or decent behaviour of those in less fortunate positions. It is easy to demand 'proof' from an assaulted woman when you don't know what it is like to face the terror, anger and humiliation all too often associated with confession. Much as the old-fashioned notion of 'virginity' is being challenged in contemporary commentary, so too is the idea of losing the respect of others by revealing distasteful traumas, struggles and experiences that have shaped an individual's identity. And, just as the tie between reputation and the retaining of the status of virgin is dying a much-deserved and overdue death, so too is the damaging concept of the importance of a woman's reputation as a long-suffering martyr. As the great woman behind the good man. As the practitioners of the old wives saying, 'You catch more flies with honey than vinegar.' Women are raising their voices and razing their reputations. Women writers of the personal essay are putting their falsely constructed images out of their misery. Gordon said as much of her five chosen heroines, 'In a period when a woman's reputation was her treasured security, each of these five lost it' (Gordon, 2017, p.3). The contemporary writing sisters of these women are embracing the scandal of being difficult, ungracious and angry.

One of my good friends says to me, sometimes, 'you're raving' when I try to articulate my way out of situations I find to be particularly sticky or painful. I admit, sometimes I do. And, I

acknowledge that he has been patient with me. But recently I have thought 'What of it if I do rant now and then?' Have I not earned the right to rave? To rant? To tell my story? Who is to say that a story is not worth telling? Who is to say I should be quiet? Have I not been quiet long enough? Am I not proof, that suffering in silence is not helpful?

*When I was fifteen I resembled a Shakespearean waif. My eating disorder had robbed me of confidence and social skills. A boy who was two years older than me saw me out one night and asked me if I would go out with him sometime. When we had been at school I had a secret crush on him. He had been funny and popular. It was not a good time for me to be dating anyone. I was depleted in energy and self-esteem. But, I said yes. I was desperate to feel some sort of happiness again. I wore a long, white soft summer dress with thin straps that draped over my pinched hips. It hung to my ankles and hid my skinny thighs and bony knees. In it I felt light and free. My mother saw us off.*

*He spoke roughly to me when we were alone in his car. 'Do you think you look skinny enough in that dress?' he mocked me. I did not know how to answer. He drove us aimlessly, occasionally throwing disparaging remarks in my direction. I was mute with confusion. This was the boy who had told me he wanted to be with me because I was 'the cream that had risen to the top.' That he wanted to take me out because he only settled for the best and I was the best. We drove in silence for a while, me self-conscious and racked with inadequacy. Him, hunched and sullen over the wheel, driving recklessly. Eventually, he headed out of the township and hit the open road. He took me through a forested area until we came to a clearing. When the car lights went off we were in a complete darkness. He climbed out of the car and went to the boot of the car*

*to fetch a blanket. I stood, bathed in silver amongst the pine trees staring at the enormous luminous moon. It was beautiful.*

*The boy spread the blanket on the ground and told me to sit down. He did not kiss me. He did not embrace me. He did not begin the witty conversation I had imagined us having. He laid me down. He lifted my dress over my protruding hip bones and pushed it up over my stomach. He pulled my underwear off. He looked up at me and said, 'Are you on the pill?' I said, 'no;' felt the word drag and snick through my dry throat. I wondered if the fact I hadn't had a period in months would save me from the consequences of whatever was going to happen next. He pushed my skinny thighs apart and bent his head. He put his tongue into my vagina. I lay with my white dress in bunches across my bony breastbone, staring up at the dark sky and, while his tongue probed my interior, I lay unresponsive and inert. Finally, mercifully, he stopped and allowed me to put my underwear on. I pulled my dress down. He drove me home. We did not speak. For weeks, I lay awake in bed, tortured, violated, reliving every repulsive minute while I prayed to God to wipe the memory from my head.*

*I told no one.*

In her 1905 essay entitled 'The Decay of Essay Writing,' Virginia Woolf 'ranted' about the decline in quality of the personal essay. One could be forgiven for thinking that Woolf had been frustrated by the amount of over-sharing occurring in these essays when, in actual fact, it can be interpreted that she was arguing for the reverse. Woolf may have been imploring writers of the personal essay to share more of their individual selves rather than skirting around social issues through commentary on literature and art.

Lorraine Berry argues that Woolf was enraged that writers had neglected to 'tell the truth about one's life' (Berry, 2017, p. 5); that she was urging her fellow writers to 'confront the terrible specter of themselves, and to not blink, but to write fearlessly about it' (Berry, 2017, p.5). Berry interprets Woolf's essay as a call to action for women to embrace their individual lives and circumstances and to bring their truths out into the light.

Writer, Merve Emre, in her piece for the *Boston Review* titled 'Two Paths for the Personal Essay,' reviewed Durga Chew-Bose's collection of essays titled *Too Much and Not the Mood.* A major grievance that Emre discusses in this review is her belief that, 'a certain breed of personal essayist' believes that words are not enough to express their personal experiences and so they don't bother trying to find the right, or better words. The result declares Emre, is messiness. She sums this up as, 'Messy feeling, messy reality, messy relationships, the messy unfiltered stuff of life; the personal essayist evacuates all in one, big messy outpouring or repurposed clichés about love and life and pain and joy and men and women and whatever other themes readers of these essays are, by now, primed to receive as universal human concerns' (Emre, 2017, pp3,4).

Emre, of course, doesn't really believe that this 'certain breed' of personal essayist is writing about universal topics. Her concern is that readers of personal essays have come to expect such topics and intense self-disclosure. Emre interprets Woolf's essay, 'The Decay of Writing' differently to Berry. She says the crux of Woolf's essay is that, 'too many people writing have nothing interesting to say and no interesting way in which to say it' (Emre, 2017, p.4). I don't agree with Emre's interpretation of Woolf's essay. I don't find the piece to be 'bad tempered' or haughty. I do detect Woolf's disappointment but I don't believe that it is with personal essayists but, rather with the sameness of such writing.

Woolf acknowledges the versatility and appeal of the personal essay. She writes about the personal essay, 'Its significance, indeed, lies not so much in the fact that we have attained any brilliant success in essay-writing – no one has approach the essays of Elia – but in the undoubted facility with which we write essays as though this were beyond all others our natural way of speaking' (Woolf, 1905, p.2). Woolf is correct. There is a timelessness about the personal essay that she recognises in her own essay. Though Woolf is well aware that the personal essay is, 'at least as old as Montaigne,' she says, '…its popularity with us is so immense and so peculiar that we are justified in looking upon it as something of our own…' I think, toward the end of her essay is when Woolf gets to her grievance. It is in the final two paragraphs that she urges the writer to do more with the written word. She discourages the use of the predictable and expected and implores the writer to avoid allowing the reader 'timid side-glances in the shape of essays, which, for the most part, fail in the cardinal virtue of sincerity.' She wants the writers of the personal essay to reject that which is 'not interesting, not useful' and to shun the 'unclothed egoism' that the genre may invite.

I agree with Berry that Woolf could see the potential of the personal essay. I think it is possible to write a personal essay without becoming mired in egoism. I would suggest it says more about the detractors of the personal essay when they assume the form demonstrates ego or self-centredness, or a narrow gaze. Such claims, I believe reveal a lack of reasonable consideration and a tendency to dismiss a piece of writing because of its form. Personal essays may discuss unpleasant topics and describe personal experiences but there is nothing lazy or undisciplined about autobiographical writing. I would argue that there is nothing more uncomfortable and, I would suggest courageous, than putting oneself under the fierce glare of the personal microscope.

Much as the view of transgressors is not a popular one in society, the view of the rebellious woman in the personal essay has been said to be losing its gloss. The bloom is rumoured to be off the rose, so to speak. Some female critics of the genre have shared their opinion that the personal essay has had its day. That the time of female venting, ranting and over-sharing is over. There is almost an apologetic tone in some of these views…as if these female writers have 'acted out' or misbehaved. These writers are urged to move on to something more worthwhile. Something more sophisticated or complex. Something more dignified. In this way, it seems to be hinted at that women who have muddied themselves in the personal essay can redeem themselves through demonstrating that their writing has matured. The personal essay, in this way being viewed as the teething ring of writing. Something that female writers practice upon but abandon once their real choppers come through. Females, it appears, are more positively viewed when writing about more universal and less emotional content. Dignified observance on the part of the woman writer is more valuable than undignified revelation of the plight of being human.

I heard a woman say once that she found the writing of Roxanne Gay to be self-indulgent. There was a suggestion of disapproval and the implication that Gay may be a little dramatic, a little prone to self-pity. At the time, I knew who Roxanne Gay was but I wasn't very familiar with her story. Now I know that Roxanne Gay was gang-raped at the age of twelve. Michael Robbins, in a review of Louise Gluck's work wrote, 'Every poem is the passion of Louise Gluck, starring the grief and suffering of Louise Gluck,' (Jamison, 2014, p.199). For this reason, he describes her as 'a major poet with a minor range.' The implication seems to be that Gluck could be great if only her focus wasn't so stunted. In a review of Ashleigh Young's 'Can You Tolerate This?' Sally Blundell assures the reader that… 'Young avoids the pitfalls of squeamish self-analysis, self-pity or confession' (Blundell, 2016). We are meant to be relieved at this reassurance. That here is a

stoic woman who can discuss her 'troubled youth' without making the reader uncomfortable; without stumbling into the public arena while flashing her intimate issues at the world.

Jessa Crispin, in her book *Why I am Not a Feminist*, tells women that, 'We must begin again to see beyond the structures we've been given. The way we order our lives, our homes, our work, our souls – our worldviews must be reimagined in wholly new ways. This is more important than ever' (Crispin, 2017, p.150). Crispin is, of course, alluding to the treatment of women in the world as a whole. She is encouraging women to reinvent a world that is not merely a revamped version of a man-made one. Crispin believes what is needed is a new system that is indicative of all humans and is a true representation of all people in a society. She is saying we must rid ourselves of expectations and cease cleaving to the known and accepted. I believe that this can also be applied to the realm of writing and, in particular, to the genre of the personal essay. We must continue to move away from the preconceived notions of what is and isn't acceptable in the personal essay. We must stop policing content and dictating to others what is and isn't palatable. We must stop informing others what is considered pleasant reading material or desirable tone or rebuking writers who do not gently court their readers. We must stop insisting that the personal essay must offer universal experience and appeal. We must accept that because we cannot relate to someone's set of personal circumstances does not make those experiences less valid. We must see beyond the system of writing that exists and create one that represents everyone and silences no one; not even the undignified, emotional, ranting woman.

*When I was 17, an envelope was pushed under the door of the unit I shared with my brother and our best mate. The envelope was addressed to me, my name scrawled in an unfamiliar hand. Inside was a letter from a male one year younger than me. I barely knew him. I'd never had a conversation*

*with him. I would not even have considered him an acquaintance. I knew he had told my friend that he had followed me to a disco once and watched me throughout that evening. Because I lived with two males I didn't feel overly concerned at this revelation by my friend. I had no idea why he would want to write me a letter.*

*The first part of the letter was filled with nothing of consequence. About two thirds of the way down the page, there was a blob of dried goo. The male wrote in the part of the letter that followed that he had enclosed the goo because he wanted me to know what an orgasm looked like. I stood frozen behind the door of the unit, wondering if the boy was still out in the stairwell. I did not know whether to feel threatened or humiliated.*

*I told no one.*

The personal essay is not 'over'. By this statement I mean to say, the era of the personal essay is not over. Quite simply, I cannot fathom that it will ever be over. To assume as much is to assume that writers driven by the style will suddenly be rendered mute when they realise that (according to others) they have nothing to say. Or, worse, that their words are either too significant or insignificant to share with a readership. Writers of this genre would have to accept that their words are as unpalatable as soggy bread crumbs to a sated diner and that they should strive to serve more sophisticated and appetising literary fare up to their audience. Of course, adoption of such a view would imply that the writer of the personal essay somehow requires the permission of others to write. It is precisely this oppressive view that has been responsible for writers and, particularly women, embracing the genre of the personal essay in the first place.

There is an ungenerous misconception tied to the personal essay that implies that the writer of the personal essay must love the sound of their own literary voice, that such writers enjoy talking

about themselves. This puts the personal essayist in company with the over-bloated bore at cocktail parties who somehow manages to steer every conversation back to themselves. It also trivializes the intent of the personal essay. To accept such a view would be to accept that all personal essayists write for the same reason – to gain attention through any means necessary. At its ugliest this means that the personal essay may be as vulgar as a dirty joke and at its best it implies that personal essayists are obsessed with the minutiae of their own lives.

I never meant this to become a feminist piece. In fact, I've felt rather out of love with the whole thinking of this third wave of feminism. But, it can't be overlooked…it's there, insidious as cherry flavoured cough mixture from my youth. I have to take it, so do you…it is all of our medicine. If we want to recover from this intolerable condition of female infantilizing and diminishing we must acknowledge the illness, accept the cure and take the medicine, even though it is unpalatable and bitter.

I haven't enjoyed some aspects of writing this collection of personal essays. There have been times when I have hated the process and forgotten why I thought such a project could ever have been a good idea. These were usually times when I was transported to painful times in my life and the suffering came back ferociously. There were times, when writing, that I forgot where I was, so intense and strong were the memories. There have been countless times when my writing has seized completely and these have been the moments when I imagine people I don't know reading my stories and, worse, people I do know reading them. I have thought of the image of myself that I have constructed and allowed to be constructed in the minds of others and I wonder if others will now believe that this part of me is fraudulent or doesn't exist simply because another part of me does. I worry what my loved ones will think. I wonder whether my friends will find me strange or odd now that I have revealed I am not the frivolous female that I learnt was so preferred

in my childhood. I fret that my work may be discounted because it is too emotional, too self centred, too confessional, too harrowing or simply considered too much-information.

*One night, when my sister was visiting me in Auckland, she and I were lying next to each other on a bed and talking like sisters of a much younger age. My sister brought up the subject of my writing and I assured her that I was still keen to pursue writing in some form. 'You should write about your life,' said my sister. I felt a defense erect around me at once. I found such an idea frightening and repugnant. I told my sister I had no desire to write about myself. My sister listened to my words and registered my obvious aversion. 'You might help someone,' she said quietly. The idea had never occurred to me that my story might give hope or assistance to another human being. My sister's gentle persuasion worked its magic upon me slowly.*

*Seven years later, I told someone.*

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