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EULOGY

A thesis presented

in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Creative Writing (MCW)

at Massey University, Manawatu, New Zealand

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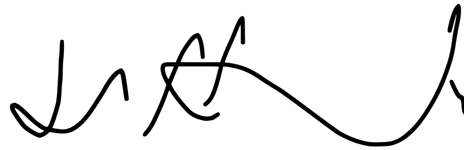
ATTESTATION OF AUTHORSHIP

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.



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Jane Holland

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I also acknowledge my family for their support – Michael and Tihema for multiple readings, and Matariki, my reading out-loud listener, who I'd also like to thank, along with her sister, Mahina, for some inspirational pun-offs.

A central theme in this thesis is loss, and I acknowledge my father, John, who always put two sugars in my tea and had a great collection of Penguins. He and my mother, Kathleen, have given me many things, but a love of books and words are particularly valuable gifts.

ABSTRACT

This thesis is concerned with writing fragmented narrative and it asks how the 'space in between' can connect the progression of fragments in fictional works. It explores how the assembling of fragments in fictional narrative can contribute to the whole becoming greater than simply a sum of its parts. Informing the writing process is a study of the effects of spatially driven narrative. The thesis consists of two parts: The novella, *Eulogy*, evokes the emotional complexities encountered by a woman delivering a eulogy for her partner. The accompanying exegesis discusses the research surrounding the writing of *Eulogy* and examines how novels by Patricia Grace and Lisa Moore also represent loss, showing how spatial form can work in the structure of fragmented narrative to convey such things as state of mind and the circularity of life-experience.

Loss is universal, but how an individual experiences and deals with it is very much the result of circumstance and personal history, and this is what I aimed to explore in *Eulogy*. The novella consists of a number of non-chronological fragments which accumulate, connect and layer, building towards an understanding of all the narrator has lost, and how these losses are experienced in relation to each other. As insight into the specificity of the narrator's response and feelings develops over the course of the novella, so too does the complexity of her relationship with Dean, the partner who has died, building towards the underlying sense that the novella is itself also a eulogy.

My supporting exegesis draws on Joseph Frank's theory of spatial form to examine how Patricia Grace's *Baby No-Eyes* and Lisa Moore's *February* also pivot around the theme of loss,. By mapping the fragmented structure of the novels, I set out to analyse how the spaces between fragments work in these works and to explore the cognitive and thematic links that bridge them. Examining a singular fragment in detail, I asked how space and time are used to propel each narrative. I then expanded my enquiry to the relationship of these single fragments

with the fragments on either side. The exegesis concludes with a discussion of how I applied this strategy to my own creative process in *Eulogy,* questioning how the connections between and within fragments could contribute to the intricacy and unity of the overall novella.

To a certain degree, the process of this thesis was itself an exploration of spatial form and fragmented narrative. The creative component and research were built incrementally and each was informed by the other. The pieces pushed and pulled, fed off and challenged one other as I progressed, making sense of both fragments and spaces to coalesce them into a cohesive whole.

In more literal terms, the sum of this thesis is:

80% manuscript + 20% exegesis = 100% thesis

EULOGY

Jane Holland

Some people say that the best stories have no words. They weren't brought up to Lighthousekeeping. It is true that words drop away, and that the important things are often left unsaid. The important things are learned in faces, in gestures, not in our locked tongues. The true things are too big or too small, or in any case is always the wrong size to fit in the template called language. (Jeanette Winterson, *Lighthousekeeping.*)

EULOGY

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EULOGY

‘On the upside, I get my ute back now, you prick,’ says Steve, a mountain of a man, one of the boys, three dots tattooed below his left eye and a tremor in his voice.

‘Rest easy, brother, rest easy.’

And then it’s me.

Sleek in black, I step forward. I am solid in my boots, earthed. I am dignified, elegant. Steve brushes his hand against mine as we pass on the steps. Next to Steve I am diminutive. I am tiny. I haven’t eaten for days. I am fragile, depleted.

I am at the microphone. I am pale and composed. I am furious.

Dean, you are a prick.

I wished you dead. When you roared off, clanking your crappy ute through the pothole at the bottom of the driveway, then planted your foot up the hill, I wished you dead. Not in a murderous way – more of a ‘now see what you’ve done’ way.

‘Don’t bother coming back,’ I screamed at the slammed door, my hand throbbing where the nails bent back when you pulled your sleeve out of my grab.

And I meant it, Dean. I did. Then, I did.

Are you happy now?

But that’s not for now. This is a eulogy. A celebration. A summing up, a full stop.

A strand of hair escapes and flops over one eye. I bump the microphone. The thud makes Steve jump. He raises his head from his hands. His face is blotchy. I am crumpled and tired. Don’t feel sorry for me.

‘He came from the sea.’

Where do I go from here? Dean trailing sand and dripping salt. Dean wrapped around me on a single foam mattress, bodies slick, hearts pounding, the possibility of a future laid open before us. Should we? Did we have a choice?

Who's this whole thing for, anyway? Mostly for them, the boys, to tell a few yarns, have a laugh, shed a tear, to remember a mate and later toast him with a Jim Beam or two.

I cue the music.

> Do You Realise, that you have the most beautiful face
>
> Do You Realise, we're floating in space
>
> Do You Realise, that happiness makes you cry
>
> Do You Realise, that everyone you know someday will die

Flaming Lips. Not a dry eye. I am controlled, calm.

> It's hard to make the good things last
>
> You realise the sun don't go down
>
> It's just an illusion caused by the world spinning round

Dean in a box. Dean static. Dean, a snapshot on the Order of Service, a piece of paper clutched with a tear-soaked tissue. What do you do with it afterwards? Leave it in the car to flutter from the glove box when you scrabble around for parking meter change? Sepia Dean, on the floor amongst scrunched chocolate bar wrappers, soaking up coffee from an old takeaway cup trampled under muddy feet after a charge around the park on a stormy Sunday. Dean, disintegrated, unrecognisable. Dean afterwards.

I chose Tulips. White. White tulips. Harvested at their most glorious.

Tulips, two lips.

Dean and me.

Eulogy.

DEAN

When Dad passed on I had no reason to stay. I dusted off Mum's honeymoon suitcase. Aged from white to yellow, it had pink taffeta lining and little pockets for bits and pieces. Stuffed in a corner I found my mother's Paradise bikini. I held the faded triangles up against me – they wouldn't go near to covering anything. Little pieces of nothing.

The plane took off, bumping through heavy clouds, engines straining, lights flickering as it fought to leave home behind. Suddenly we burst into bright sunlight and the path was clear and smooth, straight as an arrow across miles of ocean to the land of new beginnings, to the Big Smoke.

Felicity was at the airport to meet me. She was barely recognisable after nine months of big city. She'd hacked off the long brown ponytail she'd been so proud of – it grew and grew and never seemed to have split ends. Now her hair was short at the sides with a sticky up spine of dyed orange spikes on top. The gangly limbs that used to trip her up were tanned, her hip-swaying walk easy. A head-turner. Felicity? Who would have thought?

She called herself Flick now.

'Look, look over to the left. Just before the corner, you'll get to see the bridge'.

And there it was, a great grey dinosaur astride sparkling blue, and a gleaming white stegosaurus off to the side. The Opera House. Blink and I would have missed it.

'We change here.'

Off we went – another bus, more red brick, more pubs, the best nightclub, an amazing market on Saturdays. And finally, row after row of white ocean curls crashing onto a golden crescent.

We lugged my suitcase up five flights of stairs serenaded by the Three Tenors up full bore, and opened the door to a haze of patchouli and marijuana. Inside the apartment, the curtains were closed.

'This is home!' Flick yelled over Pavarotti. 'There's Sparrow!'

A stringy guy, barely recognisable as the person I'd gone through school with, stabbed with studs and draped in chains, was crashed out on the couch.

'Sorry about your dad,' Flick said into my ear.

'Thanks,' I said.

We popped the cork of the champagne I'd splashed out on at duty-free. Fizz whooshed up my nose. Already Dad dying seemed like it happened long ago. Another lifetime.

The following days went by in a blur of searing heat and pummeling waves. The newness was energising and replenishing. I explored streets on foot and learned to spot hash on the good knives Sparrow got me to swipe from a café because all we had at home was plastic. Home was full of comings and goings. I had the tiny sunroom off the bedroom where Flick and Sparrow slept in a creaking bed. Travelers, transients whose names I never even bothered trying to remember would hang out for a couple of days or a couple of weeks then toss us a few dollars, heave their backpacks onto their backs and hike off up the hill promising to stay in touch. They never did. It paid some of the rent. And the rest? Well, Sparrow got a gig that paid now and again, and we had a stall at the market.

When things got out of control at our place we'd spill out across the landing where Whizz and Amber had a room each and a sea view. They were smooth-skinned students from America with sultry eyes and shiny hair. They went to outdoor film festivals and got invited to exhibition openings and parties in warehouses. Tagging along with them, Flick and Sparrow, all spiked up hair and long legs, would be photographed for the latest 'Street Style' in the

underground fashion and music pages. Whizz and Amber popped up behind, ruining their cred by holding their fingers in peace signs above their heads like bunny ears.

On Fridays, Flick shooed out our houseguests and bubbled up big pots of lye and coconut oil to make soap. She added patchouli and citrus oils, laced the mixture with petals and poured it into long loaf tins. I printed calico squares with a set of wooden blocks I found at the thrift store; B for Bee, H for Happy and, our favourite, S for Sloth. At the market, Flick sliced the loaves with a wire cheese cutter into soap-sized slabs and weighed them on an old candy scale. $1 for 100 grams. I folded my printed cloth over the soap and tied it with a strip of coloured rag. Business was best when Whizz and Amber stopped by. They drew customers in with their poster girl smiles and effortless sales speak. Seduced by the prospect of gleaming skin just like theirs, customers hustled for our handmade, all-natural aromatic soap that was sexy and sensual, fresh and uplifting, soothing and relaxing – the words rolled from their tongues. Before long Whizz and Amber would lose interest and clatter off in their Swedish Hasbeens and cut-off denims to find a spicy bloody mary. Hair of the dog.

And then there was Dean.

Green eyes, matted curls bleached at the ends by sun and salt, a slow smile. Dean.

He'd come from the sea.

Whizz found him and brought him home for a beer and a smoke. When he left, there were little pools of salt water dried in rings on the table and a crunch of sand on the floor.

'I'm Aries, what about you?' said Whizz to Dean, her bikini strap sliding off her shoulder showing the thin white line where there had been no sun.

'Scorpio,' said Dean

'Beware of the sting,' murmured Flick and looked straight at me.

It wasn't until Dean walked into a café where I was escaping from Sparrow's song-writing session – 'wrestling with the guitar' as Flick called the painful extraction of new material – that I worked out how I felt about him. My cheeks were on fire and my hand shook so hard when I took a cigarette from his pack that I had to wait a good ten minutes before I was brave enough to tackle the lighter. I couldn't meet those green eyes so I focused on his mouth. Dean.

He'd sailed from Coffs Harbour to Fiji through the tail of Cyclone Elena. The seas were so rough that rivets shook loose and the yacht threatened to completely bust apart. At the worst of it, the six of them were holed up in their bunks with everything locked down, no food or water. When they finally emerged, an intense sunset bathed the angry ocean in purples and golds and a huge pod of humpback whales surfaced, baring their bellies and flicking their tails, their spumes lighting up like fireworks.

'Sorry, I'm late,' said Whizz, flopping down in the booth next to Dean. She'd had the craziest day. Something about a tutor, an inappropriate proposition, a phenomenal grade and an invitation from a professor to present a paper at a conference in Hawaii.

'I'll see you, later,' I said, finally managing to meet Dean's eyes. Whizz's hair brushed against his arm and her hand fluttered close to his on the table. She smelled of vanilla.

'You know, he's supposed to be an amazing photographer,' said Flick

'Who?' I asked. She raised an eyebrow.

I didn't know. In fact, all I knew was that he'd sailed through a cyclone and been serenaded by whales. It wasn't enough.

'What else do you know?' I said to Flick.

She shrugged, 'You don't want to go there.'

But she was wrong. I did.

At Sparrow's next gig I was with Whizz, a brandy & dry in my hand, my hips twitching and feet shuffling while she waved her arms above her head and shook her hair with closed eyes. It was me Dean came up behind. It was my neck he kissed.

At home on the landing, we sat on the top step and smoked cigarettes, the three of us – Dean in the middle of Whizz and me. She wouldn't leave. Eventually, I wondered if I'd got it wrong and it was me that wouldn't leave.

'I'm going to bed,' I said.

Later, much later, when Sparrow and Flick were arguing loudly about the best way to maximise the last bead of hash and our transient guests shook the floor to some headbanger song, Dean slid under my blanket and curled up around me on my single mattress.

Dean and me.

He worked on boats, relocating yachts, doing maintenance or sometimes making up the crew for a race. If he wasn't on a boat, he'd be on his surfboard, or with me. We lay entwined while Sparrow strummed and Flick berated backpackers for not cleaning up after themselves. We tasted coffee from Columbia and Ethiopia to see if we could tell the difference and argued about the pronunciation of words like almonds, salmon and liquorice. When I went walking for miles, trawling the church shops, he'd accompany me with his camera over his shoulder and a backpack for my spoils.

I was looking for crystal. You can pretty much guarantee an old person will have cut-glass crystal amongst their possessions – a precious wedding gift, an heirloom, a relic of special occasions. Glasses come in sets of six. Over the years, the likelihood of a full or unchipped set surviving was pretty much nil, so when the old person died, the person disposing of their belongings looked at what remained as incomplete and useless. Too special to bin, they'd most likely end up in a church shop where a customer might pick one up, feel the weight in their

hand, then return to the shelf, because one or two, or even five glasses is not a set – unless you reinvent the rules. I trawled the church shops for these pieces of sparkle from past lives, holding them to the light, and pinging them with a fingernail. If they were the real thing, they would sing. I washed and polished, then nestled each new set of six in newspaper to sell at the market. To make a set, I needed six glasses similar enough to go together, but different enough for it to be intentional that they weren't the same.

'He's not the kind of guy to hang around for long,' warned Flick when it was clear I'd fallen into a rhythm focused around Dean. She was right, he was always on the move, and every time he headed off on a sailing trip, I'd prepare myself for that being that, finished. But he kept coming back and each time was like starting again. Anew.

PHOSPHORESCENCE

I was worried about Dad leaving an empty space but after he died he was somehow more present than when he'd been alive. Maybe that's why I didn't miss him like I missed my mum. That didn't come out right – of course I missed him. But when he died he didn't leave me. Even though my mother was still alive, she'd left. I couldn't remember what her hug felt like or how she smelled.

Dad's being alive wasn't something I'd been conscious of on a daily basis. He was always there doing the things he always did, like saving the crossword from the Saturday paper for both of us. It wasn't until the Saturday he went ahead without me that I even realised it was a thing we did together. I was furious. He'd got 5 across wrong – it was haphazard, not arbitrary – and that meant he'd put animosity instead of hostility for 5 down. In pen! It was the same with the tea he made every morning. If he had to leave early for work, he'd leave mine with a saucer on top to keep it warm. Because I expected it to be there, I never thought anything of it unless for some reason he'd forgotten. Then I'd notice. I'd go, where was my tea this morning? But that hardly ever happened, so really, we just got on with what we did every day without thinking about it.

After Dad died, he popped into my mind all the time, and because he wasn't there anymore, I paid attention. Sweet tea reminded me of him and I started making it the same way as he did, with two teaspoons of sugar.

Felicity and Sparrow were holed up in bed full of snot and sneezes, feeling sorry for themselves. They needed some space, and besides, we didn't want to catch their bug. I made them honey and lemon with a clove of garlic. Since Dean couldn't take guests onto the boat he was working on, we decided to walk instead of sleep.

Dean called me Prickle.

‘I already have a name,’ I said, ‘I don’t need a new one.’

I shrugged his arm off my shoulder.

‘See?’ he said, putting his arm back around. ‘You are a prickle.’

I’d never had a nickname before. Well, not one I’d known about.

‘It’s not a nickname,’ said Dean, ‘it’s an endearment.’

It was dark and hot, too hot to be walking along wrapped up with someone. But I stayed there under his arm because an endearment is different to a nickname, and it was good to be there, feeling the weight of Dean.

We walked for miles – up past the sign that read, ‘Danger, no access after sunset’, and along the cliff path where, in the void far below, the surf rumbled. We scrambled down into the next bay, and on to the next where the swell settled into waves lapping onto the shore.

‘We’re here,’ said Dean and we were. Here. Arrived.

‘What are you waiting for?’ he called over his shoulder, already running, shedding clothes as he went. Splash, splash and he was gone. Under. One, two, three. I picked my way through the pebbles – ten, eleven, twelve – into the water – fifteen sixteen – I waded deeper – twenty-two, twenty-three, twenty-four. I was swimming. Twenty-eight, twenty-nine. Too long. Where was he? Something brushed against my legs and I panicked, arms thrashing, gulping water.

‘Dean!’

And he was there; his hands around me, pulling me onto my back, his body underneath, supporting mine.

‘I want to get out!’ I spluttered.

‘You don’t,’ he said, ‘really, you don’t.’

We lay there together in the blood-warm water. I relaxed, soothed by the waves and his body beneath. It became easier to float and breathe. Clouds covered the moon and Dean

released me. In the blackness, my eyes could have been open or closed, I didn't know. I was spinning, weightless, suspended. I was liquid. I couldn't feel where sea began and I ended. I was the sum of sound, of breath, heartbeat and the wash of waves.

'Prickle!'

It was Dean.

I'd never seen phosphorescence. The bay was alight, a rippling galaxy bursting on the crest of the waves. Dean's shoulders gleamed and stars dripped from his hair as he swam towards me, carving a black path into the shine.

'See, you didn't want to get out!'

We shimmered in the shallows.

'How did you know?' I asked.

'It's the sea,' he said as if that explained it.

I had no recollection of the first time I saw the sea. It was always there, not far away and all around. Perhaps that's why it was nothing special. Dad and I might buy an ice cream – boysenberry for him, vanilla for me. We'd lick grit, sitting on the sand with me turning into the wind to stop my hair whipping my face. We'd brace ourselves against the shock of cold when we went for a paddle. Dad would have a quick dip. Not me. I preferred my feet on the ground, I swam in pools where the sides were close and the volume of water finite. Back in the car, Dad would puff on a rolly, his arm out the window and I'd suck the ice cream mixed with salt off the ends of my hair.

Dean was different. He'd grown up with red dirt stretching in all directions. He had to leave home to see the sea. He stuffed a spare pair of shorts and a couple of t-shirts into a backpack and hung his dad's Leica camera around his neck. Dean hitched a ride on a cattle truck, then on road trains and utes, and made his way to the ocean.

For Dean, who'd never seen the ocean before, the play of light and relentless power, building, breaking and crashing was incomprehensible. He was mesmerised. Ever-changing yet constant, it was more than anything he had imagined. The course of his life had changed. He rang his sister to say 'I'm here', and she knew from the sound of his voice to tell their mum and dad he wasn't coming back. Why? Because awe and wonder had replaced the longing that was there before. He was sixteen.

'But what about your sister and mum and dad?' I asked.

'They're there,' he said. 'They know I won't forget.'

He sent them photos of the shack where he fibre-glassed surfboards for an old guy, Boss, in exchange for a place to sleep. Every day before work, the moment dawn broke, he dived into the ocean. He rode tiny waves on a big old dunga board and learned to swim – first breaststroke, then freestyle back and forth across the bay – until Boss said he was strong enough and took him out to the reef. Boss taught Dean to read the ocean, but he taught himself to dance on it.

'I'm scared of the sea,' I said to Dean.

'That's because you've never got to know it,' he said, and we rolled onto our tummies, glistening, rocked in unison by the waves, my body sliding next to his. I thought yes Dean, I'd like to get to know the sea.

FUEL

'I saw your mother once, you know,' said Flick.

My mother?

'Ages ago, up the coast.'

Ages ago?

'I thought it would freak you out.'

It did.

By the time Dean came home, I'd drunk quarter of a bottle of vodka straight. He rolled a joint and set about helping me to finish it. We crashed out on the balcony so smashed we didn't notice it had started to rain, but not before I'd splattered every tomato from Flick's potted plants onto the wall opposite.

Flick was furious. Not as furious as Sparrow who was so furious he was deadly calm. I didn't even remember taking his new guitar outside but a backpacker helpfully filled us in. I'd stood on a chair thrashing the guitar and screaming Highway to Hell in my underwear.

'It's stuffed,' Sparrow said, putting the guitar carefully into its case. He left the apartment and moments later we heard the outside door slam like a bullet shot.

'I have to go and find her,' I said.

JET BLAST

I imagined her up the coast where it was always summer, flip-flopping around in jandals, perhaps a sarong slung around her hips. She probably had a lover – an enthusiastic guy with a well-fed paunch hanging over the top of his slacks. He had a great tan and an even greater laugh. Maybe he was Canadian. He'd say 'cool' and think she was the bee's knees. She was a florist – no she wasn't, she'd be a terrible florist– she sold real estate. They lived in a town house with a communal kidney-shaped pool and a tennis court. Tennis? Did they play? I doubt it. They played bridge. And poker with cigars and whiskey once in a while.

Did she ever talk about me?

Mum wasn't in the phonebook. I hung out at the beach for a few days where Flick had seen her and even looked for her photograph on real estate listings. No sign. I marked up a map and started a grid search of Bottle-O stores. It was slow – three stores a day, three times a day. Eventually, I made my way over to the other side of town, miles away from the ocean where there were only a few buses a day.

The longer I looked, the more determined I became. Without Dad, what did I have to hold me together? I needed her to be my person, someone to anchor me to the ground so I didn't just float off and keep going and going. I tried the police, went to every church and as a last resort went round the florists. When I finally found her I wasn't even looking. I was half asleep in the Laundromat folding the last of my clean clothes into my suitcase when she walked in. She was smaller than I remembered. A little, shrunken lady inside baggy, over-cooked skin and a top-heavy hairdo with an orange hibiscus stuck in the middle. She peered out from under a too-long fringe.

'Is that my suitcase?' she asked suspiciously.

'It's me,' I said, and she dropped her bags and grabbed my hand.

We could have hugged but we missed the moment and were left awkward, unsure of what to do or say next.

'You're grown up,' she said.

Side by side we sipped gin-laced lemonade watching her laundry tumble round and round.

'Dad died,' I told her.

Her eyes bore into me, pain draining blue to grey, the spider web of red veins smudging pink as they glazed with tears and she looked away blinking rapidly.

Our heads bumped as we held each other tight, breathing the same air.

'I missed you,' I tried to say but the words came out as a whimper.

She stroked my hair.

The plastic tumbler slid from my hand, splashing gin and lemonade all down our legs.

'Shit!' she said, jumping up. 'Shit!'

I dabbed at her legs with the clean towel from my suitcase.

'Give it here, clumsy,' she said, scrubbing at her skin and swirling the towel through the mess on the floor.

The dryer beeped. She tossed the sticky towel at me and I shoved it into my suitcase while she stuffed her rainbow of silky underwear into plastic bags. She got me to buy more gin and we headed to her place where a shirtless guy with missing front teeth and a big belly was watching the build up to a rugby league game in a living room with the curtains closed.

'I suppose your father was still carrying on with that Esther,' Mum said pouring drinks and chucking her ciggies to Toothless.

'Thanks, sweetheart,' he lisped.

'Probably,' I said, and then because I felt disloyal, 'Esther's my friend too.'

We drank in uncomfortable silence avoiding each other by pretending to watch the league.

The hype on the TV gained momentum and a bunch of guys arrived at the house with a keg of beer and a couple of dogs. One burly man lifted my mother up and twirled her around. Toothless growled, and the man put her down.

The dogs flopped down on either side of her chair – big tiger dogs with stripy coats and smiley mouths. Watch out, I wanted to warn them, you don't know what she's capable of.

I had so many questions but the words stuck in my throat. I drank more to set them free.

'Mum,' I started.

'Who are you calling Mum?' she slurred.

'Mum. Come with me. We can do better than this. Come home.'

Well, that was the wrong thing to say. She leaped out of her chair, tripping over a dog, giving him a good nudge with her foot when he yelped. Who do you think you are? Upstart bitch. Coming over all su-pe-ri-or. We can do better. You always were Miss Hoity Toity.

I knew what to do. Tortoise. I withdrew.

Toothless pulled her onto his knee and turned his attention back to the TV where the game was beginning.

'Mum?'

No response.

'I'm going.'

No goodbye.

I left her the honeymoon suitcase.

Flick enveloped me in a patchouli hug and Dean stretched round both of us breathing spirits over my face. Sparrow strummed a guitar, the old, beaten up one he had from school. I kissed his head and he launched into a fancy lead break. Friends.

The unkempt couple who'd been staying for the last few days came back from the beach with three sleek Argentinians needing a bed for the night. Bottle caps popped, Rizlas glowed. Whizz and Amber arrived. Frosty.

'I'm going home,' I said.

'You are home,' said Flick.

There was no easy way, so I'd told Dean straight – I'm leaving. Once I'd said it, it couldn't be unsaid, and I didn't know how to explain that here wasn't enough. I'd lost my footing. I was floating. He wouldn't look at me.

'We'll miss you, babe,' Whizz smiled.

She edged closer to Dean.

The house looked sad and lonely all closed up with the garden overgrown. It was stuffy inside. I put the kettle on and listened for Dad. Nothing, of course. He was gone. I opened all the windows and set a dish of water with a few drops of Flick's patchouli citrus oil over a candle.

I knew seeing Esther again wouldn't be easy. There was no one else who spanned my life like Esther did even though it was by default. She was Dad's friend, really. Our relationship grew from being thrown together.

'You're home,' she said, and I collapsed into tears.

'Esther, for heaven's sake. I'm the one with the mess,' I spluttered when I could finally speak. She was bawling her eyes out.

'I'm a crier. You know that,' she said, pulling herself together and putting the kettle on. 'Tell me everything.'

I did.

'I don't want to end up like her,' I said, spooning sugar into my tea. 'I don't want to end up soaked in gin.'

'You won't,' said Esther, 'because you're you, not her. And as for the other – love has a strange way of being, no matter the obstacles.'

'What am I going to do?' I asked.

'No rush,' she said, 'Find your feet. Slow and steady.'

Small steps. I went through the motions of the day but even though the sun blazed outside, I found myself drawing the curtains and zoning out in front of the daytime soaps. I needed something bigger than me to hold me down, something to stand between me and the possibility that maybe I'd made a mistake, maybe I was wrong that coming home would weight me to the ground. I bunny-hopped into town in Dad's old Renault with my Art School acceptance letter and school exam results. I was going to beg them to let me in.

'Absolutely not,' sniffed the lady at Enrolments, 'you're well outside the year's grace.'

So much for Higher Education. I shoved the papers into my pocket and went for a long walk along the sea wall by the airport at exactly the time a plane was landing.

'Hold on!' yelled one of the local kids, and I grabbed hold of the railing next to him. Whoosh! Jet blast! My hair stood on end and my face was pushed up into a smile.

When I got home, there was a surfboard leaning against the house and on the back doorstep, a guy with green eyes sat eating grapefruit.

'You came,' I said.

'Of course,' said Dean.

IMPRINT

The bed looked like a battle scene after Dean slept in it. He tossed and sprawled, twisting sheets and pummeling pillows out of the little envelope that holds them in place inside the pillowcase. If it was just me, I lay still leaving barely an imprint.

What did Dean smell like? I couldn't remember.

'I'm losing him!' I thought. 'He's hardly gone and I'm losing him.'

The lounge where Flick had fallen asleep on the couch smelled of patchouli. There were roses in a jar on the bench – Esther had been. She'd tidied up and swept the floor. The dishes were done. The grains of sand Dean trailed when he came home from a surf, the grit that drove me crazy – sticking to my bare feet and leaving a sludgy puddle in the shower – was flicked out the back door and sloshed down the drain.

She had left us soup; barley and smashed up vegetables. I wasn't hungry.

'Eat,' said Flick. 'You have to eat.'

'Why?' I wanted to say. 'Why do I have to eat?'

But I didn't say anything. I pretended, pushing the soup around the bowl because it was easier than saying no. Next morning when she told me it was time, I drew kohl flicks in the corner of my eyes and knotted my hair into a bun. I put on the black clothes she'd ironed and hung on the back of the bathroom door. I pulled on my boots.

I stepped out of the house, grounded and strong, grains of sand between my toes from my crumpled bed where I'd lain awake even though she'd told me to sleep, breathing the pillow that smelled of Dean.

'Are you sure about the boots?' Flick asked.

'Yes, I'm sure.'

STATUE OF LIBERTY

If Dad was on night shift, I stayed at Esther’s house. The downside to this for me was food. Not her baking – Esther's baking was outstanding (except for Ginger Crunch which, although it used to be my favourite, I couldn’t stomach) – the problem was the stuff she set up as projects for us to do together. Junket, for example, she was really excited about, but I only managed to eat it by pretending to be a ravenous wolf. I didn’t want to offend her so I swallowed it pretty much whole. Other things we did together, like craft, were much more successful enterprises.

I watched the scissors slicing through stiff damask, smooth crunching sounds augmented by the pushdown on the oak table, and punctuated with a staccato ‘plink’ when they reached the snip at the end of a cut. Sewing scissors are not for paper. If you use them for paper they end up sounding thick and the cut is dull, so you can’t get away with it. The time I used Esther’s scissors to make newspaper doll-chains, she went pink, and her voice rose to that high pitch adults get when they are maintaining calm, keeping the words slow because if they let them out quickly they’d lose control. This is where hysteria sits, bubbling under that high note. ‘Keep a lid on it’ my dad would say to my mother when she headed up there. But all he did was send her higher. She’d flip her lid and let fly with words and whatever was in her hand at the time; be it the splodge of a wet facecloth against the bathroom mirror or the whoosh of a block of cheese as it whizzed right past your ear, out the door and thunk onto the lawn. There’s freedom in the flinging, an addictive abandonment in that moment which is blind to consequence.

As Esther cut, tears plopped, and the scissors slipped a little when they came to a wet patch.

The damask tablecloth was an heirloom. From her husband, Cheesecake's side. His real name was Charles but I only know that because it's written in brackets on the dusty Order of Service pinned on the wall next to the fridge. Like most nicknames there's no great story behind it. Cheesecake, reminiscent of his real name, Charles Lake. Simple. Nobody, not even Esther, ever called him anything except Cheesecake. When you have a nickname you don't need a first name or a surname.

Cheesecake's great aunt presented the tablecloth to Esther at their wedding, and with it came the responsibility to preserve the remnant of long-dead people she'd never known. Periodically Esther boiled the tablecloth with lemon and hung it in the sunlight to whiten, then pressed in starch with an iron on the highest setting. Very occasionally she'd spread it on the table and set out the delicate china plates that came from her own dead people. She filled the warmed teapot with English Breakfast and served slices of date loaf true to her grandmother's recipe but for the slight modification of orange rind. I'd had tea off the tablecloth only once, when the head honchos of the factory came to offer their condolences about Cheesecake. Esther asked Dad to come for moral support. It was an awkward afternoon with everyone extra-polite and keeping a lid on it. I thought it was because we were on edge about using the precious heirlooms but retrospectively, I realise it was because of money.

'A gesture of goodwill and appreciation for your husband's contribution to the factory.'

The guy had a tight mouth and protruding veins pulsing on his temples. He slid the corner of a cheque under the teapot and they left without finishing their tea.

'Blood money,' said Esther after they'd gone. We all went quiet. Dad washed the china, and Esther wrapped the rest of the date loaf in baking paper, tied it with a piece of string and gave it to me for school lunch.

I kept my eyes on the flashing scissors. Esther had let the iron sit too long and sizzled a brown triangle right in the centre of the heirloom tablecloth. There was no dignity in a grown woman crying over an old tablecloth frayed at the hem and, in my opinion, tired out even before the scorching.

'It's just a table cloth,' I mumbled.

'It's not just a table cloth, it's a piece of Cheesecake.'

I tried not to giggle.

'You know what I mean,' she smiled through her tears.

'I thought he'd be more of a plastic mat and everyday mug kind of guy,' I said.

The scissors paused momentarily.

'He was,' said Esther, and by the time she'd chopped the whole thing into 30 cm squares and tossed the middle bit in the bin, she'd cheered up.

We each took a square of damask and wet it, before stretching it over a frame and stitching it into place. It dried taut as a drum. Esther pulled out a flat wooden box that looked like it held the family silver. More heirlooms. Here we go again – more waterworks. But Esther remained upbeat and when she lifted the lid, the box revealed not silver but a riot of colour – silk threads laid out in every shade and tone imaginable. She showed me how to separate the strands from a shank without turning the whole thing into a tangle, and, using super fine needles, she taught me to pick out the outline of the flowers woven into the damask. We filled the petals in with satin stitch and used stem stitch (of course) for the stalks. Esther's fingers flew, and at first mine were slow and clumsy with spots of blood peppering the bouquets.

After a few nightshifts, I'd mastered the basics and was working on creating my own shapes – little mice with single thread whiskers. The first ones were simple teardrops with a tail at the bottom and their noses in the air. By the time I was old enough to stay at home overnight by myself, my mice wore crowns and scampered on top of the embossed flowers that

had sustained decades of tea and cake on fancy china plates. When we'd used up her table cloth, Esther and I searched St Vincent de Paul's for other dead people's prized napkins and tablecloths, and we popped faded portraits out of old frames to house our creations.

'People would pay good money for those,' said Dad. And he was right. The knick-knack shop next to the art gallery in town took Esther's roses and my mice, and we got a bit of pocket money now and again when they sold.

'She's like a mother to you,' my art teacher said when I told her where I got the idea for using heirloom linen as the canvas for my final art submission.

I'd substituted the embroidery threads for resin mixed with natural pigments and was building up delicately patterned plate-sized circles on the damask with layers of translucent colour. To get brushes fine enough to work on the tight linen, I had to trim off the outside bristles of the chunky school brushes, splayed from being left to soak for too long in jars. I was working on a cloth that I'd found buried in the hospice shop under piles of musty checked blankets. It was a beautiful, very old damask cloth peppered with black mildew spots. Moths had chewed through the folded layers turning sections into tatty lace. I was painting into the cloth as a whole. Then I'd chop it into squares and reconfigure the pieces onto another cloth, a pristine one bleached white in lemon juice and starched stiff. I'd stitch the squares of least damaged fabric at the top, then the mildew-ey ones, and then the ones riddled with moth holes at the bottom.

'It's an evolution of history, a new lease of life – an expression of heritage through a domestic object.' The art teacher was getting excited but I wasn't listening.

Her words 'she's like a mother to you' hung heavy in the air.

'I have a mother,' I said. 'I don't need another one.'

The art teacher looked embarrassed and back-tracked with I'm sorry, and I didn't mean… But it was too late, something bubbled up inside me and I sent the jar of putrid brushes flying across my artwork, splashing up the wall and strewing brushes and glass over the floor. I stomped past the teacher, out of the room and slammed the door behind me. It wasn't until I was nearly home that my brain caught up with the rest of me, and I realised I'd have to face the consequences for what I had done. But not until tomorrow.

After years of keeping a lid on it, I felt liberated from losing control. I wanted to tell Dad I'd lost it in the art room and even more, I wanted to talk frankly about my mother. But he was sick by then, and we were working hard to keep him thinking positively. I didn't want to upset him. I'd even stopped hiding his smokes because when he got agitated he coughed so hard he couldn't catch his breath. It was better to just let him smoke. The sadness that enshrouded him when my mother left had faded over the years. Now it came back. He rarely mentioned her but when he did, it was as if time stopped for a moment.

'Your mother would love these,' he said about my embroidered mice, and I'm pretty sure his eyes misted.

'Your mother would have a heart attack,' he muttered when I appeared in a cacophony of whatever clothes were at the top of the clean washing pile – his or mine.

I wanted to ask why when she left, she did it with such finality, without explanation. She was there one day and gone, completely gone, the next. I wanted to know why he didn't stop her and why he'd never tried to get her back. I wanted to know why, in spite of all the fireworks when they were together, he'd never quite let her go. The art teacher was wrong that Esther was like a mother to me. Like someone else's mother perhaps but Esther, with her dram of whiskey and home baking, her measured voice, even-temper and reliability was nothing like my mother. And Esther and Dad? Well, they were united by loss, not by love.

I held a bowl for my dad to cough into and gave him a warm facecloth to wipe his face. We drank a cup of tea together and amused ourselves making up dialogue for the Myna birds squabbling loudly outside over the last of the grapefruit on the tree.

'Bugger off. This is mine, not yours.'

'Mine.'

'or Mine, more like.'

'You treat me like a minority.'

'Moan, moan, moan. Everything's in a minor key for you.'

'Ha ha, you think you are so clef-er.'

I put the complications of my mother back where they belonged, relegated to the past. The next day I apologised to my art teacher and abandoned the ruined tablecloth project. Instead, I embarked on an installation; a mini skyscraper constructed from mousetraps, dotted throughout with one hundred shiny silver mice made out of Chesdale cheese wrappers. Perched on the top like a Christmas fairy, I placed one made from baking paper with a fancy doily crown. I called it 'Statue of Liberty'.

DEATH WISH

Losing Dean happened all of a sudden but my Dad was different. His life got smaller and smaller and when it was time for him to go everything fitted neatly onto a piece of A4 paper.

My Dad took out an insurance policy the year before he died. He started going to the red brick church in town.

‘But I thought you didn’t believe,’ I said.

‘I don’t,’ said Dad.

‘So what’s changed?’

‘Nothing,’ he said.

‘Then why are you going to church?’

‘Just in case I’m wrong.’

He was preparing. Men in his family died aged sixty-three. His father, uncle, grandfather, cousin Ed – all gone at sixty-three. Dad had a good ten years before he reached the danger zone but that was before we knew about his lungs crapping out.

More often than not, a thin roll-your-own with a wisp of tobacco sticking out the end drooped from Dad’s left hand. His index and middle fingernails were stained yellowy brown. He could roll a smoke using one hand without looking. If he ran out of baccy, he teased out the drifts from the corners of his pockets to keep him going while I ran down to the corner shop.

‘Thanks, Mister Simon.’ A pouch of Drum, a pack of Zigzags and an Aniseed Wheel were already on the counter before my eyes had time to adjust to the gloom of the shop.

‘Send your father my regards,’ said Mr Simon, as he always did, handing me the change.

By the time I got home my fingers were as yellowy brown as Dad’s and my tongue was so tingly with aniseed I couldn’t say my s’s.

'Mith-der Thighmon thendth hith regard-th.'

'Is that right?' Dad said.

He started humming.

'Did I hear you say Mister Thighbone?' he said, his hips jiggling.

'Mith-der Thighmon.' I rolled my eyes. Here we go.

'Dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones.'

Before I knew it he was dancing around me singing his version of the Skeleton Song, all wobbly head and disjointed arms and legs. I couldn't keep my face straight anymore. I couldn't help but join in the wonky dance around the house, out into the garden, around the grapefruit tree and back.

'Mith-ter knee bone's connected to Mith-der Thighbone,

Mith-der Thighbone's connected to Mith-der hipbone,

Now shake dem skeleton bones!'

I'd like to tell you my Dad passed away peacefully.

Lay off the smokes we all told him when he first got sick and couldn't shake the rattle in his chest – me, the doctor, Esther. And he did. But it didn't make any difference. Dad reckoned it wasn't the smokes that were the problem; he reckoned it was that bloody factory. He bored the world stupid with his rants about the factory.

'Gave the best years of my life to that factory,' he'd say and hack away with his raspy cough.

'Robbed me of my health.'

At the factory, he started as a regular lagger and when he'd done his time, he earned the title, Blue Nose. Laggers knew all about insulation, heat control and ducting. They were thermal experts – wrapping, encasing and protecting the machinery and the plant for efficiency

and safety. To be a Blue Nose, the guy called for tricky jobs, you had to be faster and braver than an ordinary lagger. Blue Noses crawled into tight spaces, balanced along gantries and scaled walls like superheroes. At the end of the day, there'd be a neat line where the blueish dust from the insulation material settled below their safety glasses.

Dad's best mate, Cheesecake, was a Blue Nose too. Cheesecake died suddenly from an asthma attack. It happened at smoko. He was eating a potato top pie and the guys all thought he was taking the piss pretending not to be able to breathe because he hadn't finished when the hooter went. Dad gave him a thump on the back and ambled off to get his hard hat.

'She has no dignity,' my mother said when Esther wailed so loudly at the funeral we couldn't hear anything.

At the graveside, Dad had to hold Esther up so she didn't collapse into the hole and get buried along with Cheesecake. After the funeral, Dad used to go and visit her once a week. It was the least he could do. Mum said he was spending so much time with Esther it wasn't any wonder tongues were wagging. That sent them down the path to a right old barney.

Esther came to our house when Dad got too sick to walk and couldn't go to hers anymore. He got so skinny he looked like a little alien with a big head. Even when he'd stopped eating she'd pour a tot of whiskey and set out a plate of home baking as if nothing had changed – Anzac cookies or Hokey Pokey Crunch. She was the one person that never tired of Dad's ranting because the factory was her pet topic too. There was something not right about how things went for Cheesecake and Dad. Esther cooked up the idea of a cover-up, that the bastards running the factory knew the materials the laggers used were dangerous and knowingly put the health of their workers at risk. The spineless mongrels should take responsibility. I thought it was more likely Esther just couldn't let go.

I sat there listening to Dad. His breathing didn't sound like breathing anymore. It crackled like something being scrunched up, or a packet of chippies being ripped open. And with every out, he moaned, deep and dull.

Esther did the eulogy for Dad. She talked about what a good mate he'd been to Cheesecake and how when they lost Cheesecake he said he'd visit her every week until she learned to laugh again. Well, either he wasn't a good teacher, or she wasn't a good student because even after all these years he still came. She talked about how he'd done his best for me. She said he wasn't a saint but he was a good man. And then the priest from the red brick church got up and did a spiel about how Dad had struggled with his faith and at the end, he'd found peace.

Bullshit.

AQUA VITAE

'It's not for me to say,' said Esther after we'd laid Dad to rest and I told her I was leaving.

It was stifling in her kitchen where a rank smell of fish from last night's dinner lingered. I wanted to open a window but people who live by themselves can get stuck in their ways, and Esther was fussy about getting a chill. Personally, I would have preferred to risk getting a chill than to stink of old fish.

We drank our tea in silence heavy with Esther's unspoken opinion. Our cups chinked and clanked on our saucers, we could hear each other swallow and the buzz of the tropical fish tank on the fridge sounded as loud as a lawn mower.

'I'm putting the bin out,' I said finally.

'It's not full,' protested Esther as I headed out the door, holding my breath against the remnants of the dead thing inside. The door slammed behind me. It was on a spring.

When I was little, I got locked outside. Dad finally came looking and found me hunched and angry next to the woodpile.

'There you are,' he said, breathing whiskey, his cheeks flushed red and jolly.

'I got locked out,' I said, pushing his bristly face away when he tried to give me a kiss on the top of my head.

'No you didn't, silly,' he said, showing me how to turn the handle and lean against the door with my shoulder. 'It's on a spring.'

I shoved my way back into the house with the empty bin and set it back in its place. I tapped a nail on the glass of the tank and a neon tetra went into a flashing frenzy, setting all the

rest off. Not that there was much room to flee – within the tank was another tank that housed an iridescent Siamese Fighting Fish with vermillion fins and tail.

‘How can you eat fish and keep them as pets as well?’ I said.

Esther glanced up from her tea. She looked weary.

It’s called being top of the food chain,’ she said.

‘If you care so much about the food chain, then how come you keep that one cooped up? Why don’t you let him swim with the others and have the food chain sort it out?’

Esther poured more tea. I wanted to leave but instead, I reached for the bottle of single malt next to the fish tank.

‘You’re too young to drink,’ said Esther.

‘Rubbish.’

I took a swig from the bottle. An inferno erupted in my throat and I turned from Esther so she wouldn’t see my watering eyes as I tried to swallow. I spluttered into the sink.

‘Here!’ she chucked me a tea towel. ‘Sit down and be sensible.’

Esther got two tumblers and ice from the freezer.

‘Your father drank it straight,’ she said. ‘But I like a bit of ice to cool it down.’ The ice cracked as she poured. ‘He thought that was criminal.’

We swirled the whiskey over the ice, breathing in peat and smoke.

‘To my good friend,’ said Esther, raising her glass.

There was something about the softness in her mouth as she said it or how her hand fluttered at her throat, that suddenly it struck me. Did they? Esther and my Dad? She was exposed, vulnerable in that moment with her glass raised. I looked into her eyes and she didn’t look away. Of course, they did.

‘To Dad,’ I said, raising mine, and the fire slid down our throats and roared in our bellies.

‘All I’ll say,’ said Esther when we’d sipped ourselves back to such happy times as remembering how Dad when he’d had a few, would flip up the lid of the piano for his party trick. He pushed back his imaginary coat tails, took a seat and cracked his knuckles. With more enthusiasm than skill, he banged out the only song he knew, Elton John’s ‘Bennie and the Jets’.

‘Hey kids, shake your blues together!’ he sang.

‘It goes, hey kids, shake it loose together,’ I corrected him.

‘Don’t be ridiculous, everyone knows it’s shake your blues,’ said Dad, ‘Isn’t it, Esther?’

‘It’s blues,’ she said, and he gave me a googly eye look – See! – as he plonked through the intro.

‘Hey kids, shake your blues together!’ they wailed.

‘Shake it loose!’ I yelled and stormed out the door as they continued with their rough approximation of the lyrics.

‘B-B-B Bennie!’

‘Remember?’ said Esther. ‘You couldn’t resist. You had to come back inside for that bit!’

‘I did,’ I said, laughing, ‘but you know, I was right!’

‘You probably were,’ she said.

Esther poured another finger of whiskey and we swirled and sniffed.

‘All I’ll say,’ she said, ‘is take your time. Keep your options open.’

‘I’m still leaving,’ I said.

She leaned close.

‘You need one person. Just one person to remind you you’re alive.’

We drank some more, awkward now. I knew she was offering.

‘I need to find my own person, Esther,’ I said as I stood up to leave.

‘I know,’ she said.

PARADISE

We used to have a 3-legged dog with one stand-up ear and one floppy ear. He turned up out-of-the-blue at the bottom of the garden. Shy. Like he wanted to be friends but didn't know how. Or maybe he was just hungry. I laid a trail of torn up crust across the garden to the verandah. He sidled up on his belly and gobbled one piece and then wriggled back again, turning his head and pricking his stand-up ear pretending there was something much more interesting happening next door. But his nose kept twitching and he couldn't resist. He wriggled to the next piece and the next until he got close enough to sniff my hand, and then he let me pat his head. Once he'd decided to be friends, that was it.

'You're my number one,' I whispered in his stand up ear.

I called him Spot – what an imaginative name – and made him a bed on the verandah. He smelled too much like dog to come inside. Mostly he was happy mooching around outside doing dog stuff but if he got lonely, he'd bark outside my window until I peeked out and told him to shoosh. Then I'd sneak him into my room and make space for him on the bed to curl up at the back of my knees. When Spot hopped along, his tail whizzed round and round like a propeller to compensate for the imbalance. It made him look happy even when he wasn't.

The story of what happened to Spot starts with my mother.

Competitions. There's money to be made in competitions. Well, that's what Mrs Wilson told mum, anyway. Her friend had a friend who won a brand new car – a sports convertible with all the bells and whistles. The friend of a friend of Mrs Wilson's sold the fancy car for fifteen grand. Fifteen grand! Just like that. Don't bother trying to get on the TV game shows, they're all rigged. Go for the coupon. Easy money.

My mother entered every competition she could find. Fuelled by promises of cash, groceries for a month, televisions, a city chic wardrobe, hair products, a kitchen makeover, chocolate bars. You name it, anything and everything. You have to be in to win.

All that happened was that our letterbox filled up with advertising from the companies who ran the competitions. Buy one get one free. Special offer, limited time only. Three easy payments.

Bargain.

We ended up with an exercycle, a set of enameled pots and pans, twelve encyclopedias with paper so thin the back side of the page showed through the front and you couldn't make anything out. Dad got a nose hair trimmer; I got a tummy trimmer (thanks, Mum). Even Spot got something – a whistle so high pitched only a dog could hear it. He ignored it.

My mother researched who ran the best competitions. She changed banks, bought magazine subscriptions, travelled to shopping malls to do her shopping. She filled in questionnaires and bought raffle tickets. She filed all the proof of purchases in old shoeboxes and kept a log of when the winners would be announced. My mother never did anything by halves.

Dad was getting dark on it, 'Waste of time and money for what? A 'what if' and a bigger pile of junk?'

But the persistence paid off and one day there it was. A letter arrived.

'We are pleased to announce you are **the winner**…'

And it wasn't just a chocolate bar either. Mum had won a Holiday in Paradise for a Family of Four. All expenses paid. Worth $4000.

'Good one,' said mum, 'I'll get three grand for this. Easy.'

But she hadn't read the fine print. It was non-transferrable. She couldn't sell it.

'I suppose we'll just have to go,' she grumbled, 'There's no sense wasting it.'

But then mum told me that even though she'd won a Holiday in Paradise for a Family of Four, only three of us were going. Spot couldn't come.

'If Spot's not coming, I'm not coming,' I said.

Well, that was the wrong thing to say…

She flipped her lid.

Ungrateful, spoilt, arrogant, selfish, Hoity Toity… The list went on…

And I smelled like that stinky old dog.

'Pull your head in,' Dad said to me.

So I did. Tortoise. I snuck Spot inside and went to my room to hibernate.

'It stinks in here,' Mum said later that night before she remembered she'd come in peace.

'Look, we'll get Spot his own Holiday in Paradise, right here. He'd hate flying anyway; it would hurt his ears.'

She promised Spot would have walks and treats and maybe even make a few dog-friends to play with.

And so off we went to Paradise.

At first, Mum didn't like it much. It was too hot. She frizzled bright pink when she basted her winter white skin in coconut oil and fell asleep on the beach. And she didn't care for how they infested every dish with fruit. She didn't mind a bit of cordon bleu; a ham steak with pineapple or that baked chicken with apricot, but in Paradise they used papaya and coconut willy-nilly on fish, in salads, in sauces, in dessert, everything. Pretty quickly she worked out how she liked papaya and coconut – in a hollowed out pineapple, whizzed up with lots of cream, ice and a healthy dash of liquor. Her sunburn turned brown and she teetered on her wedges in

a bikini from bar to lounger and back again. Occasionally she'd splosh into the pool but mostly she was happy sipping daiquiris and sunbathing.

The pool was shaped like a pirate ship and was the coolest thing I'd ever seen. There was a top deck with a shallow bit and a slide down to the big pool. In two days I transformed from a doggy paddler into a little fish. Dad wasn't very good at doing nothing so mostly he stayed out of Mum's hair and hung out with me. He wasn't as much fun as Spot would have been but he did his best. We played starfish in the pool but when Dad tried to get me to do it in the ocean, I wasn't interested. I never knew when a wave was going to break over my face and how would anyone ever find me if I got lost in that huge expanse of water? He tried to persuade me it was easier to float in the sea by demonstrating how his feet stayed up in the ocean while in the pool they sunk down. He said the sea was more buoyant. I didn't get what he meant – that the sea was more like a boy? Why not just say 'boy-ish'? I went back to the pirate pool to play on the slide. He'd got a touch of mum's daiquiri brain. She kept getting her mords wuddled.

'Another Yapaya Jacks-query,' she'd say to the barman who'd made so many he knew what she meant, and off she'd wobble with a refill.

Early in the day before she was too far-gone, Dad would haul himself out of the pool and make her squeal by dripping all over her. Then he'd make up for it by rubbing coconut oil onto her back, his hands going up under her bikini strap and round to the front. After a bit, they'd wander off hand in hand to the room for a rest.

I'd never seen my parents hold hands before. It was awkward. But by dinnertime, they'd be bickering about whether to go buffet, bar or a la carte and things were back to normal.

Ten days passed, and we packed our things to head home, our tans already peeling and the white skin underneath showing through. On the plane, Mum and Dad lined up two drinks at a time so they didn't have to keep buzzing the Flight Attendant. By the time we landed they

were both so sloshed Dad fell down the stairs and Mum lost her rag when she couldn't see her bag. Bourbon is the devil's drink. It loosens your tongue and sometimes your fists.

In the taxi, they sat as far away from each other as possible and when we arrived home I had to fish Mum's purse out of her bag to pay the driver.

'You thieving little bugger,' she roared in a devil voice, and I took off down the back of the garden.

She skittered after me but she was too drunk. She keeled over by the grapefruit tree and lay there till she'd slept it off. I found Dad inside carked out on the couch with the TV blaring, embracing the bulging bag of duty-free.

'Where's Spot,' I asked when Mum came to and trudged back in the house. I'd been calling for hours and hours but he hadn't come.

'He must have run away,' she said vaguely.

'But you said he was having his Holiday in Paradise here,' I said.

'He is,' she said, unscrewing the gin.

It took months – long enough for mum to go on a bender and come out the other side. It took till church for me to click but really, it wasn't difficult to figure it out.

Mum's what happened to Spot.

ZEALOT

After the trip, I'm not sure what came first, Prayer Group or sobering up. Either way, it was Mum's friend Mrs Wilson, the one that got her into competitions, who enticed her to church. She poured the last of the gin down the sink and dragged me along to her latest thing, Prayer Group. I squished myself under her chair. I made myself invisible.

Mrs Wilson was there for the singing. She had the voice of an angel and, according to Mum, her youngest daughter was a scallywag. With three big sisters, Ruth, the afterthought, was spoilt rotten. She wore a fuchsia pink fairy dress. My mother said it was inappropriate but even though I was older than Ruth, I still wished I had a dress like that with droopy wings at the back, even if it had lost most of its sequins.

Ruth was free range. She roamed from Mrs Wilson to the Missus Reverend and scuttled past my mother out to the kitchen where her big sister Kate was in charge of taking glad wrap off bring-a-plates for the cuppa tea.

We didn't have the kind of kitchen at our house that turned grapefruit into marmalade or had baking in tins. My mother used to make me carry our bring-a-plate and plonk it in the middle of everything else before anyone saw what we'd brought. Usually, it was packet biscuits – the kind that were supposed to look homemade but everyone knew they came in a bag. One time she made coconut ice but forgot to separate the mixture into two and overdid the food colouring. It ended up as blood red squares that nobody ate. She sent me to get the plate back and made jokes to all the Missuses about how I had made the bloody coconut ice, not her.

Ruth caught me watching when the Spirit came down and loosened everyone's tongues.

'Ponka wallah wallah. Ponka wallah wallah. Bat man,' her high voice rang clear above the rest of the mixed up mumbo jumbo and I couldn't help laughing.

Ruth slid off her chair and crawled across the floor to me.

'Come,' she said. 'Let's get a sweetie treat.'

I squished up even smaller.

She crawled off to the kitchen.

'Tsk!' Ruth was back, still on all fours holding a piece of ginger crunch in her teeth. She sat down against the wall and offered it to me.

I shook my head and concentrated on the Reverend who was being so moved by the Spirit the veins on his temples were standing out.

'Tsk,' Ruth broke off a corner and flicked it over towards me.

Ginger crunch.

Reverend.

Ginger crunch.

Reverend.

I stretched out on my tummy and reached for the ginger crunch.

Yum.

Ruth tossed another piece.

I wriggled a bit further.

And bit further.

And then I was next to her, and we were sitting together against the wall. A nibble for me, a nibble for her, and the last little bit was mine. The Reverend opened his eyes and his veins went back to normal. The Spirit had gone. Time for a round of Hallelujahs with Mrs Wilson soaring in the high notes, the Reverend booming down below and Missus Reverend warbling away trying to get a look-in with a harmony that didn't quite fit. We finished with closing prayer of Thanksgiving.

'Amen,' we all chanted.

'Cuppa tea,' squeaked Ruth and everyone laughed.

When Ruth jumped up to lead the way into the kitchen, there were three pink sequins left where she'd been sitting. I edged my hand over and they stuck to my fingers. One, two, three.

I got a slap on the legs for taking a piece of ginger crunch.

'The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy. John 10:10,' boomed the Reverend, his veins bulging again.

Behind him, Ruth stuck her tongue out through the middle of a cheezel and I got the giggles. Mum gave me the sharp elbow and marched me out the door.

I knew what I was in for.

Spare the rod and spoil the child.

CALENDAR GIRLS

Esther gave me a present that was half something she got especially for me and half something she got for free. It was a packet of felt pens and a calendar promoting Leonard Motors Limited with a picture of a sports car and a tiger on the front with the words in capitals, 'PUT A TIGER IN YOUR TANK'.

'Oh!' Esther went pink in the face as I opened the calendar to Racy Raquel perched on the bonnet of an Aston Martin, 'I didn't realise it was saucy!'

Each page had a picture of a girl in old-fashioned underwear posing with a vintage car. Esther tried to take the present back but I already had it in my hands and there was no way I was relinquishing it. Besides, it was time I got something out of being dragged along to Dad's cheer-up visits – I'd put up with her quivery chin and screwed up hankies week after week. To be fair, she was getting much better. She still got watery eyes when she said Cheesecake's name but she wasn't all liquid-y, and we'd moved on from packet biscuits to home baking which Dad and I were both very happy about. A present was a big step forward.

'It's a bit inappropriate for a child,' sniffed Mum when I proudly showed her my gift. I supposed she was concerned about the 'saucy ladies' Esther had got flustered about. I couldn't see their problem. I liked their heart- shaped lips and puffy curls. In hindsight, my mother didn't give a toss about ladies in underwear. She was more likely having a go at Esther for giving me a present, especially one that wasn't much use considering I couldn't read.

'I suppose it's probably about time you learned your numbers. Give you a head start,' she said.

Mum was a whizz with numbers. Well, that's how Dad put it. He was more of a words man – she left him for dust. She did the books for Mister Simon and when we joined church, she volunteered to keep the tithing ledger, a long fat book with a marbled cover and pages of handwritten columns that were all wiggly until my mother took it over. She had a jar of pencils

I wasn't allowed to use; red, blue and hard graphite ones that left an imprint in the paper even after you rubbed out. She had a sharpener clamped to a shelf with a hole to stick the pencil in and a lever to turn round and round that made the point sharp as a pin. Once I put a candle from a birthday cake in the hole because I wanted to make it new again but the wax clogged it all up and I was sent to my room with the sting of Mum's hand on my thigh and instructions to sharpen every pencil in the house (except for Mum's special ones) with an ordinary plastic sharpener.

When Mum was doing the books I was supposed to disappear, but sometimes she didn't notice me hiding behind the La-Z-Boy. I liked to watch her concentrating face. The wrinkles on her forehead danced as she worked. She held a ruler underneath as she wrote, producing row after row of neat numbers with flat bottoms. When she had working out to do, she'd scrunch her brows and mumble the sums out loud, scribbling numbers down on scrap paper. She sucked-in her lips while she checked she'd got everything right with a calculator and then relaxed her face back to normal after she'd written the correct figure neatly into the ledger.

Unless she was going to Dawn Service, Mum usually got up late and slouched around in her dressing gown with her hair all skew-whiff, maybe even watched a daytime soap on TV before getting dressed. But when she decided to teach me numbers, she was up early. Her teaching face was the scrunched brow face and, before we started, she insisted on everything being organised. We had to do the dishes and wipe away the bits of breakfast before setting up the table with the calendar, the packet of felt pens, pencils (mine, not hers), a rubber, ruler, a pile of used envelopes from her scrap paper box and a bag of dried peas.

First, we sorted out the easy stuff. She taught me how to cross off the days when they were over so I always knew where we were up to in the month. Then we worked out a code for the colours to draw a circle around the days when something special was happening. However, none of this was going to be useful until I learned my numbers.

‘Recognition first, then writing,’ she said, pointing to the first square of the month.

‘One,’ she said, placing a single pea on the table in front of me as if I was completely stupid.

‘Now you.’

I pointed at the first square and took a pea from the bag.

‘One’ I said, placing the pea, then picking up a pencil and triumphantly scored a dark line in the middle of an envelope. I already knew this.

‘No!’ Mum stabbed a finger at my envelope, making me jump. ‘Wrong! Follow the steps!’

She showed me how to hold the ruler with my left hand to keep my writing straight while the right held the pencil firm to make a hook and then a tail. 1.

‘This is how you write a proper number one,’ she said, ‘Do it again.’

When I’d perfected the point, pea, hook, tail ritual, she said we could move on. Learning is about building blocks and laying a strong foundation. Don’t rush the basics.

‘Two,’ she pointed, extracting two peas. ‘Two is a graceful swan.’ Needless to say, it took a lot of concentration and scrap paper for me to get my swan graceful enough to meet her standards.

‘Now we’re going to do a flat-top three. You do the peas,’ she said. ‘The flat top is to prevent people from fraudulently changing a three into an eight.’

The flat-top three proved even more difficult than a graceful swan.

‘It’s the ruler making it flat,’ I tried to explain, as she became increasingly irritated by my zig zag attempts.

‘Look! It’s just the very bottom that’s flat.’ Carving her example with heavy lines into the paper she said, ‘Start the curve before you get to the ruler. Only this little bit is flat where you touch it, and then curve up again.’

Easy for her to say.

It took a long time to learn all the numbers from 1 to 31. We gave up on the peas at around 22 which was a relief because they kept rolling away – my fault but try as I might, I couldn't help wiggling the table. Sick of doing more telling off than teaching, Mum eventually tipped the whole packet into a pot and made pea soup. I thought it was disgusting but Dad loved it, or, at least, pretended he did.

Mum persisted until I knew the important stuff – the numbers, days and months, and finally, the 'st', 'nd', 'rd' and 'th' that you need to turn a number into a word. By then, I knew enough to be able to do the names of the ladies all by myself. Thank God, because the whole thing of trying to teach someone with the concentration span of a gnat was doing her head in.

I started school feeling proud and confident with my head start and bag full of new stationery. I could hardly sit still it was so exciting. We opened our writing books with special lines, two heavy with one light in between, to practice 'A' and 'ɑ'. I stuck my tongue out of the corner of my mouth in my concentrating face and carefully wrote, Monday 1st April, followed by 'Enticing Emmeline' in perfect flat-bottomed letters.

The teacher used my ruler to rap me over the knuckles, then took it away and put it in her desk. She wasn't impressed with my head start. The whole class stared, then hummed with chatter – she got the ruler! She did very bad writing. My big brother got the ruler six times. The kids sitting closest to me tried to see what I'd written in my book. Eventually, the teacher clapped her hands, and they shut up instantly, giving her their full attention. No one else was going to risk getting the ruler. For the rest of the lesson I kept my arm around my work so no one could see, and my tongue poked and curled as I struggled to make a perfect round bottomed 'ɑ' the way the teacher said it should be done. At lunchtime, I kept my head down so no one

would see I was me, the kid who'd got into trouble on the very first day. Most of all I didn't want them to see that I was trying not to cry about having my brand new ruler taken away.

'How was school?' asked Dad still in his pyjamas when I got home. He was on nightshift.

I didn't answer.

'What's up?' he said, pulling out a chair for me to sit down.

I felt my cheeks going red, 'I got con-stig-ated,'

Mum and Dad looked at each other,

'That's odd,' said Mum. 'Nerves usually make it go the other way.'

'She does look a bit hot,' Dad said, feeling my forehead, 'Give her a bit of olive oil,'

Mum began measuring oil into a tablespoon.

'Because of my head start. The teacher con-stig-ated my ruler and now it's gone.' I'd been brave all day but now I was home, the excitement, the newness, the shame, of the day got the better of me and I started crying.

'She means…' Mum looked at Dad and they burst out laughing.

Mum laughed so hard she dribbled olive oil all down her front.

'Confiscated! We thought you meant constipated,' she finally managed to say, and off they went again.

Well, I didn't know what either word meant but I did know they were laughing at me. She was the one who gave me the head start that got me into trouble in the first place. I pushed my chair back so hard it fell over and stomped off to my room. I drew a black square around the green circle that meant 'start school' on the calendar, then made myself very small on the floor at the end of the bed. Tortoise.

A bit later Dad came in with his breakfast, a bowl of honey puffs for him, and one for me. I tried to stay offended but they smelled so good that I had just one spoonful, and then another, and then the whole bowl.

Dad kissed me on the head and said he had to go to work.

When he went back out with the empty bowls, Mum went off at him,

‘What are you doing giving her cereal before dinner?’

‘Calm down,’ he said, ‘keep a lid on it.’

‘Keep a lid on it?’ Mum crashed pans around. ‘It’s alright for you, sleeping all day, then swanning off…’

Stuck here, slaving away, day in day out, snotty kid. I’d heard it all before. And then she said something in a dangerous, quiet voice that made me cold.

‘I’m never going to be the one, never. It’s always going to be Good Time Daddy.’

They were silent for a minute, and then they were off again… Trapped in this shitty box, busting balls every day at work, pittance. Bang, crash and a noise that sounded like rain falling. That would be the honey puffs flying. I pulled a blanket over my head. The familiarity of their squabble was strangely comforting, and I drifted off to sleep.

ANGEL

‘It won’t last,’ said Dad

Happy clapping at dawn and 11 on Sunday morning, Tuesday Prayer Group and Friday Eventide. My mother never did anything by halves.

Wrenching me from sleep, she’d drag the brush through my tangled curls – feral child – harnessing them in plaits so tight they held my eyes wide open. There was no danger of nodding off again; my face was locked in a wide-eyed expression of wonder. Appropriate.

Church was in an old playhouse where the Amateur Dramatics used to trail feather boas and overact. Intoxicated by the fusion of fear and excitement about performing to a live audience, they’d dreamt of the big time, of bouquets hurled onto the stage and acceptance speeches.

‘I’d like to thank my mother. Without her….’

Tears.

As Dad said, the Am Drams couldn’t afford the upkeep. But the Holy Rollers could. Bigger audience. The Mister and Missus Reverend turned the velvet curtains into cushion covers to sell at the gala and built a pulpit on the stage. Near the end of every service, tithes were hurled onto the stage or tucked into collection pouches. ‘Glorification’ is what the Reverend called it.

‘More like extortion,’ griped Dad, as Mum pulled notes from his pocket and stuffed them into the pouch.

At Sunday Church,. I’d sit on the upstairs balcony with my held-open eyes and my lace-trimmed socks set neatly side-by-side. Dad sat on the other side of Mum. He didn’t believe. The price of peace – he said he was taking one for the team. But really it was me who was taking one for the team. All he did was come on Sundays. I had to do the whole damn gamut.

Sometimes my mind wandered and I'd go for a walk along the balcony rail with Spot – one two one two went my left hand for me, and hoppity hop, hoppity hop went my right hand for Spot. It was only a matter of time before I'd get the sharp elbow from Mum.

'What do you think happened to Spot, Mum?' I whispered.

'He's gone to heaven,' she hissed, giving me the sharp elbow again.

Heaven and Spot. The two words collided into a hard lump. I wrapped my left hand, the one that was me, tight around my Spot hand. When Mum said Spot would have a holiday in Paradise, she meant the one in the Bible. She meant heaven. I dug my nails in hard, so hard that the pain in my hand blanked out everything else. In that moment, even though we were in the House of the Lord and I knew it was wrong, I hated my mother.

The next Sunday I prayed for forgiveness, but I wasn't sorry. Not that week or the next.

At church, the Wilson girls could do as they liked. Their mum sat downstairs up the front leading the singing. Kate looked after Ruth, and Melody, the oldest of the three, operated the overhead projector down below. There was an even older one whose name no one ever used. She was 'the one that ran off with Rocco from the Fish and Chip shop to get knocked up and bludge off the government, no doubt'.

This Sunday, Ruth wore a rubber band around her wrist with her fairy dress and a cardboard crown on her head – probably made by Kate. It had swirls of gold glitter and stuck-on shiny foil stars. Ruth was up and down like a yoyo, bumping the bench and wiggling us all. Mum kept giving her the eye – the watch-your-step-or-else eye that always stopped me in my tracks. I suppose Ruth didn't know about mum's 'or-else' because it didn't have any effect. She kept on jiggling. She took the rubber band bracelet off and pinged it as far as it would go down the aisle, then scuttled down the stairs to hide when Mr Schmidt stretched out his gleaming pointy-toed shoe and gave it a nudge to see if it was a live thing or a dead one.

‘…and I say to you, men, you are the head,’ droned the Reverend, ‘and women, you are the crown.’

Ruth clattered back up the stairs. She’d collected daisies from outside and leaned right over the balcony to drop one down into Melody’s lap. She missed.

‘Remember, men, if your crown is crooked,’ Ruth got ready to toss another daisy, ‘it doesn’t make you look too good!’

Laughter. He was a funny man our Reverend.

Everyone shuffled to get comfortable for the next instalment but before the Reverend could continue…

‘Ruthie!’ screamed Kate, reaching out and grabbing for Ruth.

For a second her little wings spread and it looked like she might fly, then, in slow motion, Ruth somersaulted over and half way over again, to land flat on her back with outspread arms in the aisle below. Her face was still, a smile on her lips. A red halo appeared around her head.

‘She’s turned into an angel,’ I said to Kate whose face had gone white. She had the squashed up crown and a tuft of hair clutched in her hand.

After Ruth, no one much felt like church.

My mother hit the bottle again for solace. As I said before, my mother never did anything by halves.

After a couple of weeks in oblivion, she disappeared.

‘Gone to Oz’, said the note she’d written in red pencil on the back of the power bill.

‘Told you it wouldn’t last,’ said Dad.

That was the last we saw of my mother.

The Mister and Missus Reverend left town with a couple of their loyal followers in tow and the church got turned into a Bingo Hall with pokie machines where the pulpit used to be.

Still a place for dreamers.

At the end of the airport, there's a sign saying 'Danger'. To the local kids, the sign is just part of the landscape – they run right past to get blasted when a jet comes into land. They whoop and scream and scramble to keep their footing. Whoosh! Sometimes there was the added bonus of the whip of vortices, mini tornadoes spiralling down off the wingtip. Crack!

But when a plane leaves you get nothing, just a shape in the sky getting smaller and smaller till it's not there anymore.

Argumentum christus deium ballawallah whoop whoop

A NEW YEAR

Some days on the calendar that Esther gave me were multi-coloured from several different things all happening on one day, and others were plain with just a cross. If something happened to make a day a sad day, I drew a black square around it instead of crossing it off. Birthdays were pink circles, church was purple, cheering up Esther orange and so on. Ruth days, for instance, always had a blue circle with a purple round the outside because I only ever saw her on church days.

I crossed off the very last day on the calendar– Wednesday, December 31st, Divine Darlene – marked with yellow to indicate it was a special day, or, more precisely, a special evening – New Year's Eve. My calendar was all filled up. But instead of looking complete, the year was a mess of crossings off and mixed-up colours. It needed to be tidied up. On a big sheet of paper, I wrote a heading copied from the front of the calendar. PUT A TIGER IN YOUR TANK. Painstakingly, with kitchen scissors that were too big for my hand, I went through each month and cut out all the special days, the ones with a circle or a square. I put them in order according to colour, and then in number, pasting them onto the paper. Pink circles, numbers 8, 13 and 28 went first: mine, Dad's and Esther's birthdays. Mum's birthday was pink with a purple circle, number 7. Next came purple, the church days, and so on. The year was starting to make sense with the colours leading on from one another and an interesting repetition of numbers. There were heaps of threes, and eights, and because they were round threes, not flat-topped threes, it would be easy to fraudulently make them into eights. At the bottom, I put five black squares. Black square, green circle, number 1 – first day of school. Black square, orange circle, number 18 – the day Mum and Dad had an especially bad barney about us visiting Esther. There were two black squares with blue and purple circles, and the order of the numbers (5 and 19) reflected the order of what actually happened – the day I found out what happened to Spot

and the day Ruth turned into an angel. There was only one black square that didn't have a circle. It was supposed to be an ordinary day that just got crossed off and forgotten about, a day nothing special happened. It was the day Mum left us and went to Oz – number 2, a graceful swan. I pasted that one at the very end.

HOME

Dean.

Here?

Dean at my house.

Dean's green eyes.

Dean offering grapefruit.

Bitter. Sweet.

Juice running down my chin.

A kiss.

Dean and me.

Dean came home with a ute. From one of the boys.

Boys?

It was as if he'd lived here for years.

They gave him a job as well – on the fishing boats working for a guy called Steve. It was slow at the moment but the season was going to pick up soon.

'Not Dad's room,' I said.

Dean pulled up Lino and musty carpet. He stripped wallpaper and wrenched out Aakronite cabinets. We emptied crusty towels and threadbare sheets from the linen cupboard. Everything was piled into the back of the ute – the exercycle, burnt bottomed pans, chipped vases, rickety chairs – load by load my old life went to the dump.

Dean was a machine.

He hired a water blaster to scour the concrete floors and scrubbed the old crackle-glazed tiles in the bathroom that had been entombed for years under Formica cladding. He uncovered

kauri floorboards in the bedrooms, pulling out tacks with pliers and chiselling off carpet glue so he could run the industrial sander. The dust storm transformed him into a beige man, cloaked from head to toe with just a tiny bit of brown showing where the safety glasses had been. When he cleaned it all up and oiled the floors they gleamed amber like tiger's eyes.

We piled up blankets and lit candles. He poured red wine and we lay back listening to the rain on the tin roof.

'No,' I said. 'Not Dad's room.'

He said I had to let go. It was going to be a darkroom.

He pushed past me and dumped a can of black paint on the floor then started on the bookshelf – discoloured Penguins that had lost their glue, a set of encyclopaedias with missing pages, pile after pile of Reader's Digests in date order starting the year my parents married. It all went in the back of the ute.

'It's a chronicle of my father's life,' I said.

'It's a pile of old rubbish,' Dean replied. But he helped me rescue the Penguins.

When he'd gone, after he'd lurched through the pothole and roared up the road, I pulled out the old trunk from under Dad's bed with his father's name, rank and battalion painted on the lid in cracked white paint. Inside were Grandpa's war medals, my parent's wedding album and a stack of Ministry of Health pamphlets. I put in the battered old Timex watch that Dad got for passing School Certificate and a well-worn suede waistcoat from his youth when he was a man about town. I wanted to include The Old Man and the Sea, the book that got us to sleep in the months after my mother left, but it must have gone with the Reader's Digests.

'Sorry,' said Dean, and I looked away so he couldn't see how much losing the book mattered.

A life in a box

I dusted down the trunk and set it in front of the saggy roll arm sofa for a coffee table.

'It's not going anywhere,' I said, and Dean shrugged his shoulders.

I dragged Dean out with his ute to pick up things I'd found to fill up the house again. A couple of old church pews, a refectory table carved with generations of initials and an old porcelain sink from the science lab of the Catholic boarding school that had closed down. We cruised the inorganic rubbish collections, crawling down the streets with music blasting out of tinny speakers. Waiting for me in the ute, Dean channelled Wayne Coyne's falsetto, head thrown back, eyes closed – his face an expression of pure pain. Or ecstasy.

'Do you realise?'

I sifted through the piles. What was so different about other people's junk that made it treasure?

The house looked amazing.

PERPETUAL NOW

'I love dirt,' I said, digging out the Agapanthus that had clumped in a fibrous mound in the sunny patch where Esther said herbs would grow like crazy.

It's true, I did love dirt. There was great satisfaction in the slice of a spade pushing through the crust, carving into the soft stuff below. Patting the earth down to hold a new plant in place made me feel safe.

'There you go,' I said to the rosemary bush. 'May you grow and flourish, and we'll eat you with potatoes.'

I loved how dirt clumped together, how it crumbled into dust and how it gathered under your fingernails reminding you of a job well done.

'Weirdo,' said Dean, as I chatted to each herb settling it into place.

Dean didn't love dirt. For him, it was a reminder of the place he'd left behind, with its unchanging horizon and promise of sameness. Red dust coated your clothes, clogged your skin and caked your hair. When you opened your mouth to talk, dust would catch in your throat, so mostly you didn't say anything. Cattle and clay. For Paddy, his dad, it was the life-blood passed down through generations, and for his mum, it was all she knew. She'd never been further than town – she'd never left home. She'd never seen the ocean. Why would she? She had everything she needed.

Except Dean.

When he rang her every month, he knew what she didn't say in the silence before they said goodbye –come home, Dean.

'We have to go and visit,' he said, his eyes roaming as if he was trapped.

'It can't be that bad,' I said. But I knew for him there was no worse place than the endless expanse of dirt. The ocean, never the same from one moment to the next, completed Dean.

'We're going to acclimatise,' I said, slapping a hunk of red clay down on the front step.

'It's a Cow Timer,' I said. 'Every day I'll make a clay cow and when the line of cows makes it to the gate, we'll be ready to visit.'

'They're cattle beasts, not cows,' he said.

'I'll make a line of cattle beasts,' I said.

'Okay, Prickle,' he said, 'but only if you learn to surf so when we get there you know what it's like for me.'

By then I wasn't really paying attention. I was much more interested in working out the form for my cattle beasts.

I tried to back out when Dean appeared in front of me a couple of days later with his surfboard under his arm. He wasn't having a bar of it. A deal's a deal.

In fact, a dip in the ocean didn't seem like a bad idea after a morning spent stripping Boston ivy from the spindly cabbage trees across the back of the section. As we pulled the vines, clouds of lacewings and debris rained down on us. We were hot and filthy.

At the bay, the wind was brisk and the choppy water's edge was brown with churned up sand, not the inviting turquoise I'd envisaged from the safety of the back yard.

'You made a deal,' said Dean, before I could back out.

'There are no waves,' I said hopefully. But Dean said we didn't want waves. Today was about getting the feel of standing up on the board.

It sounded easier than it was. Pulling myself up onto the jiggling board was one thing, but the pop-up to standing was an undignified clamber that inevitably resulted with the board shooting out from under me, pitching me into the water without a chance to catch my breath.

‘You need to go deeper,’ said Dean, after I surfaced with blood oozing from my elbow where I’d scraped the bottom. ‘Respect the sea, don’t be afraid of it.’

No way. I shook my head.

I climbed back on the board for another try and he gave me an almighty shove, sending me into darker, deeper water.

‘I’m right here,’ he said, swimming after me.

But it was no good. I clung to the board and screamed at him to stay away. It was our first real fight. Dean insisted that if I got a grip, I’d be fine. He pushed me out further. The board wobbled in the waves, threatening to tip any moment. I kicked him away and powered my way to the shore.

‘Nice paddling!’ he yelled.

I ditched his board in the shallows and left it sloshing around amongst the oyster shells.

‘Mad bitch!’

I felt bad about that. It was more than just a surfboard to him.

In the ute we sat in angry silence. Dean pulled into the pub and I groaned. I’d forgotten the conversation we’d had on the way to the beach.

‘I’m meeting up with the boys after,’ Dean had said.

Really? He’d only just recovered from the last night out with the boys.

‘You’re out on the boats with them all day. Why do you have to go drinking with them every other night as well?’ It was, I thought, a reasonable question.

‘Because they’re mates. You can come if you want to,’ said Dean.

‘I don’t. You stink of fish and beer.’

It was true. They reeked after a day on the fishing boats and a night on the turps. Dean laughed and slid his hand onto my thigh.

'We stink, do we?'

'Yes, you do.'

'I guess that means you're coming then. They'll be scrubbed up and smelling sweet, just like me. It's a day off.'

The boys were rough and straight talking, and Steve their boss with jailbird tattoos and built like a bulldozer, was intimidating. At the bar my conversation with his on-again-off-again girlfriend Eva stalled. She had fierce eyes and a beaten-up denim jacket that smelled of sweat. I gulped my glass of raspy house red and wished for my boots to ground me rather than flip-flops.

Steve handed me a pool cue.

'You and me, against Eva and Dean?'

'Sure' I said.

Dean lined up a shot. His skin was dusty with salt. Steve clapped him on the back.

'Good shot, mate,'

Mate. Dean moved easily through the group of guys, and as he passed Eva, he said something to make her laugh – a raucous laugh, her eyes lighting up and face softening. How did he do it? Dean collected people, or they collected him. He never seemed to make an effort.

Dean and Eva played a similar game. Sharp, quick and decisive. They took risks. Steve was solid.

'A quick game's a good game,' said Eva with a fierce look as I took my time lining up, then changed my mind for a better shot.

'Slow and steady, wins the race.' said Steve.

‘Tortoise.’ I said and jumped the white over their five to sink the eight.

‘That’s my girl,’ said Steve.

‘No, mate,’ said Dean. ‘That’s my girl.’

‘I’m not like you,’ I said to Dean as I drove slowly home, too drunk to drive, but not as drunk as Dean, ‘always in motion. I need time to work things out. I can’t be in a perpetual now.’

‘Perfectual what?’

‘Perpetual now.’

‘You’re my perfect wow too, Prickle.’

‘Never mind,’ I said.

When we got home Dean stumbled inside and I stayed out on the verandah. I pulled off a chunk of clay from the block draped in muslin. I pinched and smoothed today’s cattle beast. At the bottom of the front step the line was growing and at the head, I placed my slightly misshapen latest offering.

The next day I came home and the honeymoon suitcase was on the front doorstep.

SUITCASE

My mother was curled up like a cat under the grapefruit tree. Soft with sleep and mellowed by the free booze on the plane, she got up and pulled me close. Her bony hands were freezing and her hair was the smell of a just-struck match.

'My gorgeous girl,' she breathed into my neck.

Or did she?

Perhaps she said, 'My God, it's cold.' I couldn't be sure.

She dragged the honeymoon suitcase inside.

'Place has changed a bit.'

Mum headed to the room that was Dad's and had been hers all those years ago.

'A bit gloomy,' she said of the black walls but she seemed happy enough with the cushions from the couch and a mattress on the floor.

My mother called Dean, Dwayne, but that didn't get in the way. They seemed to click. She chatted to him about her boyfriend, newly ex, as she pretended to play sous chef while he marinated and barbecued mussels. He sprinkled rosemary fresh from the garden into damper and laughed as she kneaded it vigorously muttering, 'take that, you bastard', before plopping it into a cast iron pot. Together they whipped up a feast and with the help of a beer or two we amicably sat down to dinner.

'I recognise that,' she said pointing at her old pencil sharpener clamped to the shelf with my art materials.

'I've got your pencils too,' I said, 'from when you used to do the books.'

'You funny thing! Why would you keep my old pencils?'

I shrugged. How could I say I felt it was the last bit of her she left behind. How the point of the red pencil was worn away where she'd used it to write the words 'Gone to Oz'.

‘I liked that bookkeeping job,’ she said, ‘I might give it another go.’

‘I don’t think they do it with pencils anymore,’ said Dean, pouring wine.

‘What about real estate?’ I said, ‘I think you’d be good at real estate.’

‘You do?’ she was chuffed. Sweet.

Dean brought the damper and mussels to the table and sat down opposite us. We all dived in. Delicious.

‘Well, that’s me sorted, now what about you?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well, I’m going to give Real Estate a go. What about you?’

‘She lost her place at Art School. They wouldn’t let her in,’ Dean stepped in. He knew it was still raw.

‘Rubbish!’ she said. ‘They can’t do that.’

‘They said no.’

‘Ha,’ she waved a mussel at me on her fork, ‘I don’t recall you being someone who paid much attention to no.’

‘True!’ said Dean, raising his glass, ‘To naysayers and exes. We don’t give a damn.’

‘We don’t give a damn,’ chanted my mother and I in unison. But I did. I did give a damn.

I was starting to think it might not be too bad having my mother come home when we had an impromptu visit from Esther. Mum bristled and Esther tried to back out apologetically. It was too late, Dean had already filled a plate and moved along to make space for her next to him.

We ate with stilted small talk until Dean opened more wine and things loosened up – not in a good way.

‘Here’s to men. Bastards one and all,’ said Mum, ‘except you, Dwayne darling,’

‘And Cheesecake,’ said Esther.

‘Still harping on about him!’ my mother grumbled.

Esther didn’t hear. Oiled by wine, she was a dog with a bone. Back to boring everyone stupid with her and Dad’s favourite topic – our Loved Ones (your loved ones, not mine, my mother protested weakly) had been victims of a lethal work environment and the spineless mongrels responsible should be held to account – Blue Nose! What a joke. That same blue powder that gave them their nickname had cut their lives short.

Another glass of wine, and the red heat rash on Esther’s neck spread to her cheeks. Wisps of hair fell over her face and she punctuated all her sentences with short sharp puffs to blow them back into place.

‘Asbestos,’ she announced.

‘She’s unhinged,’ my mother whispered to me. We got the giggles as Esther droned on. Acute respiratory illness, silenced with blood money, unite and fight, murderers. Blah, blah, blah.

‘Asbestos. I’d like to hear my ex say that,’ mused Mum. ‘He had his front teeth knocked out in a rugby match. He calls me Thweetheart.’

‘They were poisoned,’ Esther declared.

‘We’ve got it Esther,’ said my mother. ‘Asbestos is a beast.’

‘At best,’ I said, and mum gave me a wicked smile.

‘Esther’s asbestos.’

‘Thweetheart,’ I said, ‘you mean Ethterth athbethtoth.’

My mother and I dissolved into laughter and Esther went quiet.

Finally, Dean walked her to the door and she left.

'Dwayne darling, pour me another glass,' slurred my mother, and I held my glass up too. 'I can't imagine what your father saw in her. She's completely barmy.'

'She makes a mean Anzac Biscuit,' I said, clinking glasses.

'She lured my husband with her Anzac biscuit,' said Mum.

'You should listen to what she says,' said Dean, pulling Dad's pamphlets out of the trunk and slapping them on the table. 'Your dad knew.'

But we were too far-gone. We drank the last of the red, then started on the hard stuff.

'Go and apologise,' Dean told me when I woke mid-morning with a dreadful headache.

I would. But first, if I really was someone who didn't take no for an answer, I had something else to do. If Art School wouldn't take me, then maybe someone else would.

The receptionist at the Community College hummed and ha-ed over my application form and school exam results. She went away and consulted, then came back with a warning – all the other students had already completed a semester. There'd be catching up to do. My heart beat faster. Painting was full. My face fell. But I could do 3-D. I drove away elated. 3-D! Perfect.

'It's fine, dear. Your mother never had much time for me or for Cheesecake.'

'I know,' I said, 'but it's no excuse.'

I put one of Dad's pamphlets on the table. I'd been shocked to read asbestos had been linked with cancer long before they outlawed its use in the factory. I had never seriously considered Esther was right and the company might actually have known about the danger.

'I'm sorry Esther. I never paid much attention. I thought you and Dad were trying to find someone to blame. Dean and I, we're going to take on the spineless mongrels with you.'

'Well,' Esther poured the tea. 'About time!'

'They used to light up the room, your mum and dad, you know, said Esther. 'They had smiles like movie stars and the silliest things would make them laugh.'

Something flickered deep inside, a memory of a long forgotten trip in the Renault. Windows wound down in cloying summer heat, my mother driving – tense – Dad nodded off in the passenger seat, me in the back feeling a bit sick on the long steep climb way up high into the ridges. We were blasted by a burst of bright sun as we hurtled over the crest, the hills cascading below onto vast plains stretching to a distant blue haze of shimmering ocean. Fresh air rushed through the car as we swooped down the straight, jolting Dad awake and lifting my nausea. Mum's shoulders relaxed and she turned to Dad, her hair blowing back off her face, her skin gold in the sunlight.

'Lets have a pun-off,' she yelled over the roar of wind and motor.

His eyes crinkled and he smiled like someone had given him a present.

'I moustache-cue a question. Beard-you going?'

'Just Fruity-s hills,' she laughed, 'to the peach!'

'Hang on deer, I'm coming too. Alpaca my bag!'

'I know it's cheesy,' said Mum, 'but I feel grate!'

I didn't understand what was funny but their laughter was so happy that I laughed too.

'What do you call cheese that's not yours?' Dad asked.

'I don't know,' said Mum.

'Nacho cheese.'

They were delighted with themselves.

'I don't get it,' I wailed from the back seat.

'Nacho cheese. Not your cheese,' Dad said, and, for them, it was funny all over again.

I still didn't get it.

Esther touched my arm, ‘Things were never the same for them after they lost the baby.’

Baby?

‘Oh dear heart,’ said Esther, seeing my face.

She moved towards me but I stopped her.

‘What baby?’

‘I’m so sorry, dear,’ she looked scared, small.

‘Esther, please tell me.’ I felt dizzy and unsteady.

Esther shook her head. She wouldn’t say anything more. She told me to ask my mother.

‘Tread softly,’ she said, as I launched myself backwards and out the door.

I tripped over a battered overnight bag with an airport tag dumped in the doorway. When I stormed into the darkroom, I found my mother happily snuggled into the bulk that was Toothless.

‘He came to get me,’ she simpered.

‘What baby?’ I demanded.

Her face clouded. ‘Get out.’

‘Tell me about the baby,’ I insisted.

Her face shut down, her neck and shoulders contracted.

‘Esther said there was a baby. You have to tell me.’

‘Of course she did. She’s trouble, that one,’ she growled.

‘You can’t unsay something that’s been said,’ I said.

‘Come on sweetheart,’ Toothless was tender. ‘You need to talk about it.’

‘You know?’ I was hysterical, as the largely naked Toothless clad only in loose underpants shepherded me out of the room.

‘Calm down, she’ll come.’

Out on the verandah I didn't feel real, I was floating. Dean tried to comfort me but his arms were a prison and I pushed him away. After an age, my mother emerged in a towelling bathrobe, her hair scraped back in a ponytail. She'd attempted to cover her blotchy skin with makeup but her red eyes showed she'd been crying.

She said quietly, not looking at me.

'The baby died. She was born far too early, too little to breathe by herself. She was silvery white, an angel, a tiny perfect thing.'

I didn't know what to say. A sister. I had a sister. A warm current ran through my body.

'It was my fault,' said Mum. 'I was drinking. I didn't know it would harm her. Her name was Amelia.'

Amelia.

'Your father thought another baby would make it right. But, it didn't. It wasn't the same.'

That was me. A replacement baby.

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I didn't mean…'

But she did mean…We both knew what she meant.

'Mum,' I said, wanting to hold her, to feel her bony body, wanting to take the sadness from her heart.

She was already gone, melted into the darkroom into the waiting embrace of Toothless, the man who already knew.

Dean found Amelia next to Dad. How had I not seen her there before? A small, marble plaque, grey with lichen, marked where she lay – Amelia, my sister – the first one. The perfect one. The one my mother gave all her love to. And even though she was gone before I began, I loved her too.

When we got home Toothless was reclined on Dad's La-Z-Boy. He had glasses perched on his nose and was a good way through a disintegrating Penguin, *The 39 Steps*.

'Good book,' he said.

'Not my thing,' I said and made myself busy at the kitchen bench.

Toothless pulled a pack of cigarettes from his breast pocket.

'Can you not,' I said. 'At least not inside.'

Toothless carried on with what he was doing. He tipped out the smokes and pulled out the foil. Tearing off a strip, he carefully placed it in *The 39 Steps* to mark his place, and then scooped the smokes back into their pack. I was surprised. I would have picked Toothless as someone to dog-ear the corner to mark his place for sure. No, that's not true, I wouldn't have had an opinion about how he'd treat a book because I would never have picked Toothless for a reader in the first place.

'Cut your mother a bit of slack,' he said. 'She's not good with the past.'

'She should have told me,' I said.

'So she should,' he said, 'but she's so busy running, she doesn't see what's underfoot.'

I crashed the cups into the sink and Toothless picked up his smokes.

'You might not so different from your mother as you think,' he said, heading out the door.

CAPITULATION

I'd already decided to give up my claims on my mother to my sister, so when I saw the honeymoon suitcase and the overnight bag packed and ready to leave, I was able to not care too much. She was never mine anyway. She buried the mother in her before I was born.

They were waiting for their taxi on the verandah steps, smoking and drinking coffee with Dean.

'Great coffee, Dwayne sweetie.'

She was all smiles for him and cuddles for Toothless but when she saw me she retreated behind the invisible divide.

'You're off?' I said.

'Yes,' she said, not looking at me. 'We've got to get home.'

'Oh well, at least you waited to say goodbye. You could have just left a note!' I meant it as a joke, kind of, but it came out all strangled and angry.

Toothless put a hand on her arm as she prepared to attack.

'Thanks for the book,' he said, passing me *The 39 Steps* and putting himself in between me and her.

'You should finish it on the plane,' I handed it back and was surprised to find myself enveloped. A real hug.

'I'll look after her,' he said into my hair.

I'd like to be able to say I still didn't care, seeing I'd given her up, but perhaps his hug reminded me of what I didn't have.

'Don't take her away,' I said. But the taxi horn sounded and he didn't hear.

Dean bustled them down the steps with the bags, and Mum and I did our stiff embrace thing. Then they were gone, joggling down the driveway with the honeymoon suitcase strapped to the roof rack because the boot was taken up with a spare tyre.

‘That went well,’ said Dean with an accusing glance.

‘It was meant to be a joke,’ I said.

We sat in silence finishing the coffee and I smoked the rest of Mum’s cigarette, squishing the butt covered in her lipstick into the overflowing ashtray. It tasted horrible.

‘Amelia,’ somewhere deep in my memory I heard Mum whisper her name. I wondered if maybe I did know after all.

HALO

There's something I never told anyone about that day in the church. When Ruth's feet scrabbled to keep on the ground, her hand reached out grasping air and, as she tipped forward, her eyes met mine – a bit further, I urged, just a bit further.

I sat with my ankles pressed together and my hands clasped, left over right, in my lap. My hair was tight and sore from the roots being pulled the wrong way. I could hear cicadas singing outside about what a beautiful day it was. The Reverend droned on, and I was bound to be silent, stilled by my mother's sharp looks and elbows. When Ruth's eyes met mine I wanted her to lean further, I wanted her to get into trouble.

Ruth clomped up and down the stairs, bouncing around while indulgent adults smiled at how sweet and quirky she was. It wasn't fair – Ruth could ping elastic bands and launch daisy helicopters without any danger of being marched home and given what for. When she leaned over the railing, my heart beat faster and my cheeks warmed. The last thing Ruth saw was me, egging her on.

That night my mother came into my room and I thought she'd found me out, that she knew it was my fault Ruth fell. I was lying in bed, freezing cold, with my eyes wide open because when I closed them, Ruth came with her blood-red halo, laughing and calling out for me to play. I thought my mother would haul me out of bed and march me off to stand in front of Mrs Wilson and the Reverend. I thought she'd make me confess. It was me. I made Ruth fall.

But my mother didn't get me out of bed. She climbed in next to me. All I could feel was heat. My mother was on fire, her whole body zinging with energy. She cried and cried, and I wondered if the scalding tears would turn to icicles as they slid down my frozen neck. Or

perhaps they'd sear holes into my skin. After a while, Dad climbed in too and my single bed creaked and groaned.

'Amelia,' whispered Mum.

'I know,' said Dad.

At the cemetery, I visited Ruth. I picked daisies to scatter over her and went to see my dad. I thought I was angry with him for not talking about Amelia, for not sharing her and letting me know my sister, but in truth, I was sad for him. He had lost two precious people and he'd kept it all inside. He might have been broken but at least he had space for me.

I stretched out in the sun between Dad and my sister and watched the straight line of a vapour trail high above spread and distort, then fade into sky.

THE OLD MAN AND THEE

Dean found it at the Community Gala at the bottom of a pile of mouldy books.

'I thought you'd like this,' he said.

A faded dust jacket, blue ocean and red ochre landscape bleached to grey and beige. A bit was torn out from the title so it read:

The Old Man

And

The e

Handwritten on the inside cover: $1

It was my book, the same book Dad and I read to each other all those years ago. One night, I'd found angel sparkles secreted away in my pocket. And here they were, tucked into the spine of page 105, three pink sequins – tarnished but still with a glint of shine.

> PAGE 105
>
> You did not kill the fish only to keep alive and to sell for food, he thought. You killed him for pride and because you are a fisherman. You loved him when he was alive and you loved him after. If you love him, it is not a sin to kill him. Or is it more?

ROYAL

There is a big difference between being alone and being lonely but after a while, one can become the other.

Everyone wanted to know about the new girl but no one wanted to go first, so at break, she was left alone on the bench by the leaky water fountain eating a brown bread sandwich while the rest of us played Bullrush, fast and rough.

'Bullrush!'

We tore across the prickly playing field on toughened bare feet and slammed into the wall of defenders. Skin slapped skin sending us thunk! sprawled on the ground. A lucky few stayed on their feet, wrenching t-shirts from grasping hands before lurching to victory in the safe zone. Simon Gee sprinted so fast he was a blur, weaving, tricking and sidestepping through the human barricade. James Rattrey, the speedster from Room 9 took off after him, arms pumping and head bobbing with all the sinews in his neck popping, but even he couldn't quite get a hold. Simon zigged and zagged, emerging triumphant, untouched.

Robbie got a blood nose and Dallas got winded so badly she had to go to sick bay. Grass burns stung our legs and tender spots promised more whopper bruises than usual. We were going extra hard – we all had one eye on the new girl.

Jostling and slurping at the water fountain, Simon sprayed water over her shoes and Robbie wiped his bloody hand on her duffle bag on his way past.

Everyone wanted a piece but I wanted the new girl most of all. I was ready for a friend. I was ready for someone to be more mine than anyone else's. Someone to share a giggle over the angry pimple straining the skin on the back of Mr Bradley's neck, someone to escape the rowdy playground to the sanctuary of the kowhai tree. Someone who'd come hunting the giant furry caterpillars on the gorse bushes down by the creek, who'd help build a house and feed

them leaves until they grew fat and slow. One morning they'd be gone and we'd accuse each other of being careless, of not taking good care, but then we'd find them hanging in corners bundled up tight in chrysalis sleeping bags. Together we'd watch the bags stretch and bulge and one of us would spot the faint outline of wings. One day we'd open the house and butterflies would flutter out, brushing our cheeks and flit randomly, then with certainty, somehow knowing they should head back to the gorse. And together we'd pull apart the empty bags to find out what we really wanted to know: Were they soft or brittle, strong or fragile, rigid or flexible? Were they sticky, rough or smooth?

I wanted someone to give me a leg up into the fig tree, because once you got to the first branch, the rest of the way to a feast was easy.

Back in the classroom, the boys christened Simon 'Arrow'. Head high, fluid and beautiful, he circled the new girl's desk. The rest of us fell back. Arrow got to go first.

He helped himself to the ruler sitting neatly under the groove at the top of the desk. He flexed it, then plucked an eraser from her brand new pencil case and pinged it all the way across the classroom, whizzing over the head of the girl called Invisible D, and plop! into the aquarium.

'Shot, Arrow!'

'Way to go, Arrow.'

Arrow squared his shoulders. He was ready. The new girl raised her head.

'Dickhead,' she said looking Arrow straight in the eye.

'Um…' Simon lost his swagger.

He looked away and slipped the ruler back on her desk.

'Sorry,' he muttered and shuffled off.

Silence.

'Arrow? More like Sparrow!' yelled Robbie. And we were off again, laughing and buzzing about what a gutless wonder he was.

Sparrow drooped in his seat, his sweaty face that a moment ago had glistened sleek and sculptural, now looked plain greasy. Sparrow. It stuck. Simon, Arrow for a minute, became Sparrow forever.

In the end, Francesca was the winner. She fished the eraser out of the aquarium and moved her desk next to the new girl's. Mr Bradley called the class to attention and in no time, they were whispering their way through maths.

By the end of the day, the new girl was Cindy.

A couple of weeks later Cindy handed out invitations to her birthday party – to Francesca, of course, and Dallas. And I guess because I was standing there too, she handed one to me.

Cupcakes and Cola, Thursday 4:30-7.

I pulled down a box of chocolates left over from Christmas from the top shelf of the pantry with a picture of a serious girl with plaits holding a grumpy bulldog on the lid and hung my party dress on the line to blow away the musty cupboard smell.

After school on Thursday, I ran home to get ready. I scraped my hair into a high ponytail and squeezed into my dress. I tucked the present under my arm and headed out the door.

Hang on a minute! I went back inside and checked the invitation. 4:30. It was only 3:45. I'd be way too early.

I drank a glass of water, tossed my school clothes in the washing basket and tidied the bookshelf in my room. 4 o'clock. I hunted through the box-of-useful-stuff at the bottom of the wardrobe for a ribbon to tie around my present. Nothing. I pulled out the third drawer down in the kitchen full of things that didn't have a home. Rubber bands, a bit of string but no ribbon. Then I spotted the cord in my dad's pyjama pants hanging on the clotheshorse on the verandah. The bow covered a bit of bulldog face but apart from that, it did the trick. 4:10.

I went to the bathroom and washed my hands. Glancing in the mirror I noticed a few strands I'd missed from my ponytail. I wrenched out the hair tie and started over. It wouldn't go right. First there was a bulge, then it was off to the side and then it had a baggy bit at the back. I was getting hot and my dress was tight under the arms, choking me at the neck. I couldn't breathe. I took off the dress and started all over with the hair. This time, it went up perfectly. I put my dress back on and stood on a stool to see me full length. The hair was spot on but the dress was way too short. I hopped down and stretched it over my knees the way I got my old t-shirts to grow but it wasn't that kind of fabric – it wouldn't budge. I scrabbled around in the cupboard for the nail scissors and snipped at the stitches holding the hem. There was a good 5 cm. I would need an iron. My hair was pulling. It was 5 o'clock.

The next morning Cindy wouldn't look at me. Dallas and Francesca bore right through me with narrowed eyes. Francesca slung an arm around Cindy's shoulder.

'Well?'

'Where were you?'

I could have told them how I walked it through, swinging hips and practicing a pout in the mirror like I was the cat's whiskers, sorry I'm late, babe. I could have told them there was no hiding from the too-small dress and the too-tight hair. No matter how much I wanted to be the girl who goes to parties, I was the girl who just happened to be there when the invitations were passed out. I'd seen the look between Dallas and Francesca, I'd seen Cindy's face when she saw them and realised her mistake – but it was too late, the invitation was already in my hand.

I could have told the truth, but instead, I had a better story. About how I was late and I'd taken a short cut through next door's paddock. I climbed the fence and got caught on the barbed wire ripping my dress and slashing my knees. I was trapped for ages till Dad got home

and cut me free with pliers. Ooh they went, aah, and slipped their hands around my waist when they saw the web of plasters crisscrossing my knees.

'Poor you.'

At lunchtime, we tucked our skirts into our underpants and swung upside down on the monkey bars. Cindy taught us how to do pin wheels and then she climbed up to the high bar and did a Dead Man's Drop. Pink-faced and fizzing we flopped down on the grass. Then the giggles stopped. The plasters on my left knee had come unstuck on one side and flapped open. Underneath for all to see – healthy, unbroken skin.

They didn't say anything. They just got up and left.

When the bell rang I went and sat at the back of the class in the empty desk next to the aquarium and Invisible D. Half way through maths, Invisible D lifted her arm and held open her sleeve for me to see. There in the dark something moved and twitched. It was a nose and whiskers. A tiny brown and white patched mouse.

'Marie Antoinette,' Invisible D whispered. She put her ruler at the edge of her sleeve, making a bridge from her cuff to my desk.

HEARTBEAT

Bulldogs were originally long-legged and used for bull baiting. They'd sneak up on the bull and latch onto the nose and head. Sometimes they baited bears. Over time, they evolved from blood sport animals into a lethargic family favourite. Your typical modern day Bulldog is likely to be found asleep on a sofa, a loyal companion appropriately depicted, for example, on a chocolate box lid.

And here was such a box. Here was a grumpy looking face with velvet eyes upturned to the prim girl with plaits, stiff and straight, posed for a formal portrait, her arm firmly around his stocky body. Best friends, stoic, an odd couple. They promised something reliable and perhaps a little grand under the lid. And so it was.

'You first Invisible D,' I said.

'It's Felicity,' she said.

I hadn't known. She had always been Invisible D, sitting at the back of the class, speaking so quietly that teachers gave up asking her questions – they couldn't hear her answers over the whirr of the aquarium tank. At lunchtime and break, she melted away.

Felicity carefully removed a blue wrapper with gold stars. She placed the chocolate back in its nest and smoothed out the foil. I chose red with swirls and did the same. When all the chocolates were naked, she broke open a hazelnut whirl and stretched her sleeve down. Soon enough, out scuttled Marie Antoinette. She nibbled some chocolate, then picked up a piece of hazelnut with her paws and got stuck in.

Felicity chose then I chose. A bite for her, a bite for me until all the chocolates were gone except for the mint crème. Not even Marie Antoinette wanted the mint crème.

Marie Antoinette had picked her own name. At one end of the kitchen table, Felicity put a few breadcrumbs, some cake crumbs and a piece of cheese. At the other end, she put her new little brown and white mouse aka Mousie. Heading straight for the breadcrumbs, it looked

certain that Mousie was to become Jesus Christ but at the last moment she swerved to the cake. Marie Antoinette, it was. Contrary to expectations, Marie Antoinette didn't like cheese so there was never any chance that she might have been named Cheezel.

'Wouldn't calling a mouse Jesus Christ amount to blasphemy?' I asked.

'Only if you're a God Botherer,' said Felicity. 'Are you?'

'No,' I said, but I didn't mean it, not then. If I did, then poor Ruth wouldn't be an angel – she'd just be dead in the ground.

With the starry blue foil, we made a crown for Marie Antoinette, and then set about constructing her royal court. We made cones from the chocolate wrappers for the bodies and gathered seeds from under the Bangalow palms for heads. Well, to tell the truth, I made them and Felicity told me what to do. Her fingers couldn't get the hang of creasing and pinching for such tiny figures.

'Their faces are bright red,' I said, 'they all look embarrassed.'

'Maybe it's their wanton extravagance. They've been drinking too much champagne,' said Felicity.

And so it became Marie Antoinette's Drunken Court. We lined the inside of the chocolate box with cooking foil to make the Hall of Mirrors and called it the Palace of For Sales. Louis XVI was a former hard caramel in his emerald green cloak and a tiny gold crown sitting askew. The red swirl went on the Cardinal.

'Who's this for?' I asked, holding up a piece of orange with a rip in it.

'That'll be The Prostitute,' said Felicity.

'The Prostitute?' I was dubious.

'Yes, The Prostitute from the Affair of the Diamond Necklace. The Countess Swindler hired The Prostitute to pretend to be Marie Antoinette to trick the Cardinal, who fancied himself

as a fancy man. The Cardinal bought a diamond necklace, which he gave to The Countess Swindler to give to The Prostitute who he thought was Marie Antoinette. But The Countess Swindler, who wasn't a real Courtesan, scarpered with it off to England instead.'

It all sounded a bit far-fetched to me but Felicity was deadly serious so I just said, 'No wonder the Cardinal's got a red face.'

I made The Prostitute, followed by The Countess Swindler.

When we'd used all the foil wrappers, we set up our figurines in the Hall of Mirrors and popped the crown on Marie Antoinette's head. She wandered into the palace checking out the mirrors, then her crown fell off and she went straight to the Countess Swindler and started nibbling her head.

'Finally the Countess has got her comeuppance,' said Felicity.

'I'll show you something,' Felicity lifted her t-shirt. A large scar ran down her sternum, from below her neck straight down her chest.

'I'm a miracle,' she said. 'There's a hole in my heart. Feel.'

I placed my hand under her left breast and felt her heartbeat.

'Is it normal?' she asked.

'I'm not sure,' I said, 'Feel mine.'

I took off my shirt and we compared heartbeats, my hand on hers and hers on mine.

'Completely normal,' I surmised. And we pulled our t-shirts back on.

Just before the figs were ripe enough to eat, Felicity told me she was moving to the Gold Coast.

'But what about Marie Antoinette,' I said.

'She's coming too.'

'I'll never see you again,' I said, my throat constricting, making my voice high and not mine.

'We don't need to see each other every day to be friends. Our hearts beat in unison,' said Felicity. 'Nothing will change that, not the Gold Coast. Nothing.'

She kissed me. On the lips. A seal of our friendship.

I gave Felicity the Palace of For Sales as a parting gift and Marie Antoinette travelled to the Gold Coast like she always did, in Felicity's sleeve.

Felicity sent me two letters in quick succession, then nothing for ages. Thin paper in a light blue envelope with red and navy stripes around the edge and a plane on the top left corner. Underneath it said *Airmail Par Avion.*

I would have written back. I would have said that without her I'd lost the shape to my day, that a piece of me was missing, but she didn't send her address. Perhaps she knew that if I climbed inside myself to say it, I'd go into hibernation. Perhaps that's why she didn't write anything on the dotted lines after *From*:

The first letter said:

Marie Antoinette is happy as a pig in shit. The French bakery on the way to school makes sweet buns called brioche. She loves them more than cake.

At school, they call me Fleecy Dee. All in all, it's a step up from Invisible D.

So far, the Gold Coast is mostly a 6-lane highway. I have to cross it to post this letter, so if you don't get it you'll know I perished.

Or perhaps a pigeon will pick it up and deliver it.

Nothing is what it seems.

Felicitations

E

L

I

C

I

T

Y

P.S. As well as being songsters, birds are, not surprisingly, flighty.

I am becoming quite interested in birds.

Soon after, the second letter came.

News from the Palace of For Sales.

Marie Antoinette has run off with a commoner!

The pair reaped destruction on the Palace in a final rampage and it is my duty to report that the Countess Swindler did not survive.

Louise XVI has lost his head.

The Prostitute has taken up with the Cardinal and disappeared forever.

Marie Antoinette:

In the end, more Mouse than Queen

We are who we are.

The Palace of For Sales it has been recycled into a nest.

For pencils.

Fraternité

Eégalité,

Liberté

I

C

I

T

Y

I admired Marie Antoinette's brazen abdication. The Palace of For Sales had run its course, all in all, an appropriate repurposing – it was probably always destined to be a pencil box after the chocolates had been eaten. But I worried for Marie Antoinette, how she would fare fending for herself after a pampered life in the safety of Felicity's sleeve? Certainly it made my dilemma more poignant. There was a mouse in our pantry. I was the one who noticed it was there. I picked up a loaf of bread and the corner had been nibbled.

'Jesus Christ,' said Dad, when I told him we had a mouse.

Well, I thought that was hilarious but, of course, he had no idea what was funny. As if to pay me back for leaving him out of the joke, he came home from work with a trap.

'It's barbaric,' I said.

There was no way I was going to condone the trap.

'It's called being top of the food chain,' said Dad.

‘If it was about being top of the food chain, you’d eat it. It’s mindless killing.’

‘So, you’re happy to share your honey puffs with a mouse?’

‘I hardly think eating someone else’s honey puffs is a crime punishable by death.’

In spite of my stand, I hadn’t really worked out my position. There was a difference between a wild mouse and a pet one. I now picked up the bread with some trepidation in case the mouse had eaten his way inside with his sharp little rodent teeth and was still in there. If Felicity had been there, she would have tempted Jesus Christ out of the pantry, and released him outside. I’m ashamed to say I was not successful.

‘It will never know what hit it. Bam. Over. Gone.’

Dad set the trap – with cheese as bait, behind the fridge where I couldn’t see it. Knowing it was there meant I was drawn to look, to check whether there was a little pool of blood or a tail poking out from behind the fridge confirming I was a traitor. I avoided the kitchen as much as I could and took heart in three facts:

1. Marie Antoinette was safe across the ditch gallivanting with commoners.
2. Not all mice like cheese.
3. The trap went off when Dad was setting it and caught him by the thumb. Bugger!

You think when someone leaves, it’s going to be the end but it’s not. Things keep going. School carried on. Esther and I got busy with our cottage industry. Time passed. I supposed Fleecy Dee’s heartbeat on the Gold Coast was still the same as mine, slow and steady, seventy beats per minute. Thirty-six million seven hundred and ninety-two thousand per year. By the time we saw each other again our collective heartbeat was around three hundred and thirty-one million, one hundred and twenty-eight thousand.

Out of the blue, a postcard arrived with a picture of a meter maid in a bikini wearing a sash emblazoned with ‘Surfer’s Paradise Progress Association’.

On the back:

<u>NEW NEWS</u>

It turns out the 6-lane highway is not paved in gold after all.

Goodbye Fleecy Dee.

I'm returning home to roost.

Aut viam inveniam aut Faciam

E

L

I

C

I shall either find a way or make one

Tweet tweet

Y

She was there, at the back of the class, the same as she'd always been except she had a brush of gold – her skin matched the sun-lightened streaks in her long ponytail. Sparrow lounged next to her, his greasy quiff hiding half his face. He'd spray-painted an anarchy symbol on the back of his school bomber jacket. Instead of a bag, he carried a charred guitar rescued from the skip after the music room burnt down. He spoke without moving his lips. They were engrossed.

I circled away, back to where I always sat now – at the front, by the door. Close enough to catch all the interesting stuff, just off the radar for quick fire questions, and near the exit.

Felicity found me at lunchtime under the kowhai tree with my nose in a book. I'd started at the top of Dad's bookshelf at the beginning of summer and had worked my way through the orange Penguins. I was now onto blue – Ariel by Andre Maurois. I had been anticipating something exotic, perhaps a bit ethereal, definitely romantic from the title, and was perplexed to find myself instead caught up in the network of tragedy that made up the life of the poet Shelley.

Felicity had shot up. Her school skirt sat high on her thighs revealing a long expanse of knobbly leg. She'd be able to reach the figs all by herself if she stood on tippy toes. She flopped down next to me.

I ignored her. Harriet had just drowned, Shelley's first wife, who may or may not have been suicidal all her life. Her husband's infidelity undoubtedly tipped the balance.

Felicity chucked a box of sweets called Koala Poop into my lap. Irresistible.

'Charming,' I said, 'You're too kind.'

The poop tasted like liquorice.

'What's with Sparrow?' I asked.

'Just picking up from where we left off,' she said.

You could have fooled me. Well, she did. They did. Who would have thought? Invisible D and Sparrow. Things are never what they seem, although if you look, there are clues.

For example, as Felicity pointed out, if Maurois went by his real name, 'Herzog', as noted in the foreword, my expectations for Ariel may have been different. But a more glaring clue might be that blue Penguins are biography, not romance as I had presumed, although most biographies involve, you would hope, for the sake of the one whose life it was, at least a smattering of romance. I hadn't read any of Shelley's actual work, so I was still in the dark about what kind of genius the guy might have been to elicit such melodramatic antics from those around him.

'He ends up in the sea,' said Felicity of Shelley, tipping the last of the poop into her mouth.

Killjoy.

WHEN SOFT VOICES DIE

Felicity and I slid back into friendship as if there had been no interruption, and Sparrow grew on me. He was incredible on the guitar, his spidery-fingers clambering so fast you could hardly see them. On stage he was the frontman, arresting, elusive and exuding something of the swagger that had caught Felicity's eye all those years ago in the brief moment he was gloriously 'Arrow'. Sparrow spent less and less time at school and Felicity was selective about the classes she turned up to, so I wasn't surprised when they decided to bail altogether.

'We're taking off,' she said gesturing to Sparrow who was waiting at the bus stop, his guitar swaddled in a blanket and a bulging army duffle bag at his feet.

'What about school?' I asked. What I really meant was – what about me?

'There's more to education than school,' she said and slipped a battered anthology of Shelley's poetry into my hand along with a bar of Coconut Rough and a spliff.

'Come if you like.'

She knew it wasn't an option. I had a couple of A's in my sights and a ticket to Higher Education. Besides, there was Dad.

All those years ago when I handed Dad my mother's note, he stood for ages blinking as if he was in bright sunlight and couldn't quite make out the words.

'It says, gone to Oz,' I said helpfully.

'So it does,' he said. 'And so it is.'

He ruffled my hair, which was odd because he didn't do that kind of thing.

'Told you it wouldn't last,' he said.

He went into his bedroom and closed the door. It grew dark and he was still in there. I knocked on the door but there was no reply so I made myself marmite on toast for dinner and, with no one to talk to, watched an inappropriate show on TV about a trusted cop who, when he

was off duty, turned into a serial killer. It was the perfect crime because he was the head of the investigation investigating himself.

That night I lay awake terrified that a policeman turned murderer was outside my window, and listened to my dad crying on the other side of the wall.

It was the same the next night and the next. After three nights of crying, I decided enough was enough. I opened Dad's door. He was a big lump of blanket turned to the wall with a tuft of sticky out hair.

I pulled a book off the bookshelf and sat on the edge of the bed.

'He was an old man,' I began, 'who fished alone in a skiff in the Gulf Stream and he had gone eighty-four days now without taking a fish.'

I read until Dad had stopped crying and I grew sleepy. Then I got my pillow and duvet and made a nest on the floor. We fast asleep. In the morning, he got up and made us tea with two sugars and crackers with marmalade for breakfast. He pulled on his overalls and I put on my school uniform, and we went our separate ways just like a normal day.

In the evenings, we ate dinner and it would be his turn to read and then mine and then his again.

'But man is not made for defeat,' Dad read in his crackly Old Man voice. 'A man can be destroyed but not defeated.'

And so it was. He cried and I laughed our way through The Old Man and the Sea, and by the time we got to the end we'd got used to it just being us in the house.

After I came home from Paradise, I'd hear Spot bark, but when I looked out the window the garden was empty. I heard the clickety-click sound his nails made on the Lino when he sneaked inside. At night, I'd feel his weight on the bed when he jumped up, and even though his body kept mine warm, when I reached down to pat him, he wasn't there. Because it took a long time for me to realise he was gone, the sadness started small and grew bigger, and then

just settled into a hard thing that was always there. With Ruth the sadness was huge and then went quiet, sitting in the background in the shadow of the big black box that had Ruth inside. If I let her out with her crimson halo and sparkly wings, she'd smile her sweet angel smile and throw me crumbs. I wouldn't be able to resist.

I didn't feel sad when my mother left. I didn't feel hot or cold. I felt empty, light enough to float away. All she'd left behind was space.

Dad had enough sadness for both of us. He became smaller when Mum left, like he'd lost a bit of himself. I didn't really understand why, because, to be honest, we were both much happier without all the fireworks and crashing around that went with my mother.

If Dad got smaller when Mum left, I couldn't bear thinking about what would happen if I went away too.

'Thanks, I'm good,' I said to Felicity. 'Someone's got to ace English if you're not around.'

With Felicity's leaving again, I already knew I'd be lonely. There'd be no one to make silly things funny and no one to make funny things silly. I fixed my eyes on the book in my hand.

'Bysshe is an unusual name. I wonder how you say it?'

She hugged me.

'I'll still be there,' she said, 'just not here.'

'I know,' I said.

I squeezed her hard.

'Silly Bysshe,' she said, laughing through tears, and ran off on her gangly legs to catch the bus.

Music when Soft Voices Die

BY PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY

Music, when soft voices die,

Vibrates in the memory—

THE LITTLE THINGS

I was making a cup of tea, waiting for the bag to steep before adding a splash of milk, when it hit me – this is what it was going to be like, it would be just me. I'd be making tea and I'd hear Dad call out like he always did.

'While you're there...'

I'd stop for a second and listen, before remembering he was gone. It was my ears playing tricks because they were so used to having him around. That's how it was going to be. Listening for someone who wasn't there and tea-for-one.

My exam results arrived in the mail.

'I aced English,' I said to Dad. His eyelids fluttered. 'And Art.'

I didn't tell him about the rest of my results – good enough but unremarkable. When it became clear that Dad's cough was more than just a niggling flu or acute bronchitis I lost interest in amoebic reproduction and fossils in the Gobi Desert. Instead, I looked up the names of the drugs accumulating on the bedside cabinet and made it my mission to decipher the notes the nurses made when they came, at first once a day, then twice and then in shifts. 24-hour care. They'd asked me to hammer a nail into the wall to hang their clipboard on. They exchanged earnest medical speak with the doctor in hushed voices. From their lofty perch, they'd deliver abridged updates to me and Esther, loud and slow to compensate for our ignorance. What they didn't know was that my hours in the medical section of the library had equipped me to decode their jargon. I knew the most important thing, the thing they never said and that needed only simple words to explain. Dad was dying.

I told him.

'Dad, you are dying.' His nails dug into my wrist.

'Don't be scared,' I whispered. He opened his eyes, focused and clear. His concern was not for himself. It was for me.

'I'll be okay, Dad.' His eyes glazed and closed, and his hand around my wrist relaxed, 'I'll be okay.'

And that's when I told him about acing English and Art.

'I got into Art School,' I said and he smiled.

The half moons his nails had left in my skin filled with tiny spots of blood.

It was funny that Dad was proud of me while the Careers Advisor at school looked like she'd smelled something bad when she saw I'd written 'Artist' at the top of my list.

'An artist is more of a hobby than a job,' she said, and recommended with my brains I think about Lab Technician, Middle Management or perhaps something in Journalism.

'What about Shelley?' I asked. 'He was an artist.'

She covered her confusion by busying herself finding pamphlets about proper jobs. It occurred to me that she didn't know who Shelley was.

If you were an enormous being looking down on the world, people would look like ants at work. Little creatures climbing into things then getting out again. Piling things up. Digging holes. Knocking things down. Amassing in groups – sometimes harmonious, sometimes to fight. If an event disrupts things, like weather, for example, all but the brave or foolhardy hurry to the safety of shelter, and when the sun comes out again they venture out, busier than ever, restoring order. Some take advantage of the chaos to take a bigger piece of the pie than is rightfully theirs. In a human context, ants have no emotions or empathy. If you were high above looking down, not close or small enough to join in, you might think humans also operate by instinct, without emotions or empathy. You might suppose that, like ants who gently touch each other when they go past, we are not communicating on any deeper level than merely determining friend or foe.

When James Rattrey and I touched, the feeling was so electric I confused instinct with both emotion and empathy.

‘Wanna come?’ he muttered in reference to the flyer sellotaped to the window of the takeaway bar by the school gates.

Amp-li-fire, a bunch of bands playing a free concert in the park. Although he was looking away, the invitation seemed to be directed at me, so, with nothing to lose, I said okay.

I watched the fire-eaters at the entrance not really sure whether he would turn up or not but he did. At seven on the dot. He’d slicked his hair back and was wearing new sneakers that squeaked. He greeted me with a half smile and I fell into step beside him. The band on stage with more bluster and hair-tossing than skill was Sparrow’s old band.

‘They’re shit without him,’ said James as we bypassed the stage and found an oak tree to lean against.

‘Smoke?’ he asked, tapping the end of a Rothmans up out of the pack.

My fingers felt fat and clumsy as I took the cigarette.

Strange that this boy who’d been around my whole school life was so unfamiliar. His skin was smooth and his long fingers a little shaky. We were both nervous. It took a couple of goes to get our cigarettes alight and a few puffs to get past the disgusting taste. I’d smoked before – a sneaked rolly or two – but not tailor-mades. We leaned back against the tree blowing smoke.

‘I got offered Sports Academy,’ he said. ‘A scholarship.’

‘Wow!’ I hadn’t realized he was that good. ‘For sprints?’

‘Yeah,’ he said, ‘Up North, and maybe overseas. Dad doesn’t want me to go. He thinks I should work in the shop.’

His dad was a mechanic who turned up to school events in a sharp suit, but with his hands ingrained with black. There were deep hollows under his eyes. He’d grown the business

from a converted shed to a proper workshop with a pit and scissor-lift and there was framing going up to double the space. I imagined James's long fingers ingrained with grime.

'Is it a good idea to smoke if you are a sprinter?' I asked.

'Probably not,' he said flicking his butt away before prising mine from my fingers, dropping it on the ground and grinding it with a squeaky heel.

We kissed. A proper kiss, his tongue pushing my teeth apart, zapping the strength from my legs, turning them to jelly and my belly liquid. I leaned into him. His body flexed against mine. Body heat. Electric.

I could have stayed like that forever but the kiss had to end. Of course it did. A new band came on.

'Let's go,' said James, and we pushed our way into the middle of the pulsating throng in front of the stage.

We jiggled with the crowd, whistling and whooping our appreciation and turning our hot faces to the sky when it started to drizzle.

At the bus stop, we kissed again.

'James,' I said as my bus came round the corner.

He laughed, 'No one calls me James.'

It was true. He was Jimmy or Rat.

'Carpe Diem, James,' I said.

'Carpe what?'

'Seize the day. Your Dad's shop will be there in a year, in two or even five.'

'You're kooky,' he said, and we kissed one last time as the bus pulled up.

Kooky! I wasn't exactly sure how I felt about 'kooky' but it didn't stop me grinning for the whole bus trip. What I was sure about, with my lips on fire and my body new and light as

a feather as I sprinted through the rain, steady now, down the shortcut towards home, was that I loved James. I loved him. How had I not realised that before?

I sent a postcard to Felicity made from five pages torn out of different sections of the Encyclopaedia. The first page was J, followed by A, then M, E and S – glued together in that order to make card. Then I cut it down to postcard size and in black ink drew a circular Chinese horoscope on the front. On the back, I wrote Felicity's address on a piece of plain white paper stuck to the right-hand side so it would be clear to the Post Office where it was going. Opposite, I wrote:

> DEAR FELICITY,
>
> MY MIRACLE FRIEND, AS YOU KNOW, MY OWN HEART BEARS A GAPING HOLE OF A DIFFERENT KIND TO YOURS. I AM DELIGHTED TO INFORM YOU I HAVE FOUND A REMEDY, IF NOT A CURE.
>
> WHO WOULD HAVE THOUGHT THIS WOULD INDEED TURN OUT TO BE THE YEAR OF THE RAT?
>
> CLUES LIE WITHIN.

James was a good boyfriend. Attentive but not overly so. He was even romantic, pulling candles from his pockets and laying down his jacket for us to lie on when we found a boathouse down by the river that wasn't already taken. He brought the dregs of the wine casks his parents drank – heavy, sweet Riesling that dulled the current between us so we relaxed and took our time. It gave me a hell of a headache in the morning. Sometimes after an evening of training, James fell asleep and I'd carry on drinking till my head was stupid and my limbs belonged to someone else much more forward than me.

'Is this okay?' said James sleepily as we slid out of our clothes.

I nodded. It was. My tongue was incapable of producing comprehensible words. Just in case, a couple of weeks ago, I'd got six month's supply of foil sheets with twenty-one tiny pills

imbibed with the power to change the course of nature, and seven pills the Family Planning Nurse said were sugar that didn't taste of anything.

In the end, I only used up two sheets. It turned out I didn't love James.

'James,' I said one night as we lay, our foreheads touching, our fingers intertwined. 'Do you think we have a meeting of the minds?'

I felt his shoulders shrug.

'Or do you think our relationship is mainly physical?'

He shifted back so he could see me.

'Probably,' he said, with a half-smile. 'Is that a bad thing?'

'No,' I said, thinking of his lean sprinter's limbs. 'It's amazing.'

I kissed the soft place on his neck above his collarbone.

'But is it enough?'

After a while, he asked, 'Are we breaking up?'

'I think so,' I said and laid my head on his chest.

We stayed like that for ages until we got cold and it was time to walk home, his hands in his pockets, a new space between us.

After we broke up I thought about how easy it was to be with James, how he'd hold his cigarette to a candle looking at me sideways to see if I was going to hassle him about smoking and sprinting.

'It's the little things,' he'd say with pleasure, leaning back against a row boat, blowing smoke, with the flickering candles lighting up his half smile.

I missed him but it was never going anywhere.

The first time I went to the library with words like mesothelioma, osteopontin and pleurodesis scribbled on the back of a power bill, I slammed into James on my way out.

‘Are you okay?’ he asked.

I wasn’t. He was kind. I cried.

We found ourselves in the gloom of the boat shed. He said he was sorry; he couldn’t get involved again because he’d decided to take the scholarship. I didn’t tell him that suited me fine. I wasn’t after a relationship. It was all about body heat.

THE DARK ROOM

After Mum and Toothless left, Dean got stuck into the darkroom and I got stuck into school. The fishing season had picked up and he'd gone long before I woke up, either to fish or to surf. In the evening, he came home smelling of sea and guts, with fish scales glinting in his hair. He'd slap a Snapper or a couple of Trevally down on the counter, their eyes still bright, then head back to the ute to bring up the latest thing he'd tracked down – trays, lights, an antiquated enlarger and gleaming white tubs with the names of chemicals scrawled in permanent marker.

I helped him position an old concrete twin laundry sink in the room, rolling it on fence posts like the Sumerians, lugging it up the steps, then dragging it on the doormat into place. He jacked it up, slid blocks underneath, and then connected up the water pipes he'd run through the wall from the bathroom. He was ready.

'Watch,' he said, and sat me on a stool in a corner for a demonstration, then promptly turned the lights off.

'I can't see anything,' I said.

'Shhh, I'm concentrating.'

Things clicked and popped. There was a clatter, 'Shit!' followed by scrabbling and sloshing. Silence. The tap dripped. Then more scrabbling and another click. The amber light came on.

In the gloom, Dean tipped and poured and swirled and timed.

'How do you know how to do this?' I asked.

'My dad taught me,' he said.

'I thought your dad was a country hick,' I said.

'He is,' Dean smiled. 'So am I.'

‘I love you,’ I said. It was the first time I’d said it. The words came from nowhere, hanging heavy in the half-light.

‘I know,’ he said. ‘Come here.’

I stood close and as he gently agitated the blank paper, an image appeared.

It was a self-timer from a day soon after Dean first arrived. Me, posed in front of the ute piled high with junk destined for the tip, dressed in one of Dean’s shirts and a pair of Dad’s gumboots, my hair knotted into a nest on top of my head. Dean slipped in next to me in the nick of time, his arm flung around my shoulder throwing me off balance. We were looking into each other’s eyes, caught in a moment of laughter before we fell into a heap on the ground. Dean grazed his shoulder on the way down.

‘How’s this for a couple of country hicks?’ he said.

‘Magic,’ I said, and ran my finger over the scar on his shoulder. It needed another summer for the skin to match.

BLUE MARBLE

From a million miles away, the earth resembles a small blue marble. If you were up there, floating in space, not knowing anything about Earth, you would, in fact, probably name it Ocean.

In the following list of ten words, six are known carcinogens with different levels of toxicity, and four refer to people living reclusive lives: chrysotile, amosite, anchorite, eremite, crocidolite, cenobite, tremolite, anthophyllite, actinolite, troglodyte. What normal everyday person could possibly know which is which?

I was regretting my promise to Esther to support her crusade for retribution over Cheesecake's death. The research she'd amassed was riddled with baffling multisyllabic terminology.

'Such is the power of language,' she said when I said it was impossible to understand. 'It's their cover. Incomprehensibility.'

'So where do we start?' I asked.

'Small steps,' she said, 'and we'll adopt the KISS approach. Keep it Simple Stupid. I'll sort it according to relevance.

I left her shuffling through the files and went to see the doctor who'd treated Dad, armed with a list containing words pertinent to his working life and health; amosite, crocidolite, chrysotile, asbestosis, malignant mesothelioma, lung cancer. His response was simple.

'He was a smoker. Your father's illness was complex. It's impossible to identify whether the carcinogens that poisoned him originated from smoking or asbestos.'

'They were all smokers,' said Esther, when I told her the Doctor was a dead duck. 'Why else would smoko be called smoko? We should go after them for that as well.'

What's the point? It won't bring them back.

At Dean's suggestion, I tracked down people who'd worked at the factory. Workers plagued by respiratory illness, widows, children – people connected with Dad, the ones who turned up to his funeral and I hadn't known who they were. People with a loved one they'd waved off to work every day, tucking an orange into a pocket for smoko, or hurling abuse because they hadn't put the bins out. Some were nervous about rocking the boat, others wanted to firebomb the fancy pants mansions built with blood money. What they all agreed was that what happened to their men was wrong. They all wanted justice.

'I don't know how you're going to do it, Esther, but however it is, you've got to come out from under that pile of paper,' said Dean.

Twenty-five people turned up to Esther's first public meeting, sixty-three to the second. Such is the power of small steps. There was a lawyer at the second meeting who'd lost her dad when she was a teenager. Afterwards, she brought a scientist and a couple of nurses back to Esther's for tea and Anzacs, and they left with the piles of papers.

'It's going to be a long journey,' said Esther, but she looked younger, brighter, lighter – she was on her way. Energised.

Crocidolite is insidious. To the eye, it looks benign but when you breathe in the needle-thin fibres, they become embedded in the lung lining. The mechanisms designed to dissolve and flush out the lung are ineffectual against crocidolite and over time the fibres cause inflammation and scarring, triggering genetic changes in cells. These cancerous cells grow fast and uncontrollably, forming tumours that wrap the lungs. The prognosis for malignant mesotheliomas is typically poor.

Under a microscope, crocidolite fibres are vicious-looking and barbed. Under polarised light, they are delicate and beautifully kaleidoscopic.

'There aren't enough hours in the day!' I complained, stroking blue paint onto a placard for Esther's picket.

I had a pile of books waiting in the wings with pages marked by torn up bits of newspaper sticking out like whiskers. When I'd finished the placards, there was an assignment to be written.

I was sceptical about what we'd achieve with a picket. Who would pay attention to a motley bunch of ordinary people with a few hand painted blue signs? I was in the Lawyer's camp. Her aim was to target the upper echelons, to find someone in the top tier who was prepared to talk, someone who could legitimise our claim that the factory knowingly sacrificed the health of its workers. Esther, however, was adamant. A picket was how Cheesecake would have done it, and if it was good enough for him, it was good enough for her.

Steve was coming early, with Dean, and then they'd have to get out on the water to make up for lost time. Solidarity, he said, and besides it would be a lark. Maybe a bit of argy-bargy like the old days. I told him that wasn't likely. Most of the protesters had grey hair and wore hand-knitted cardigans.

'You can't do that!'

Dean had pasted a photo of Dad in the centre of his placard. Above it, he had written D(E)AD. No way.

'It's not finished yet'

Underneath he wrote KILLED BY ASBESTOS.

'It's just a bit blatant,' I said, but really I was confronted by the idea of re-identifying my dad as a dead guy on a placard.

'It's good,' said Dean. 'We have to personalise. If it's not personal, who's going to give a shit?'

I finished my sign:

UNCOVER

the

ASBESTOS

COVER UP

It looked lame, safe, tentative.

‘Just change it to fuck,’ said Dean, ‘Fuck the Asbestos Fuck Up.’

‘It’s Esther!’ I said, ‘I can’t say fuck in front of Esther.’

‘Why the fuck not? If you give a fuck, use fuck.’

‘Well, dear, that pretty much sums it up,’ said Esther when we met in the morning. She took my placard from me and turned on her megaphone.

‘Fuck the asbestos fuck up!’ she chanted in her high, proper voice, and the rest of us joined in… A photo of a cluster of grey-haired protesters, dwarfed by Steve giving it his all, made the front page of the newspaper and even a snippet on the TV news.

The best thing to come out of the protest, though, was not that we made the news. It was the guy coming out of the factory gates who slammed on the brakes of his sleek black car when Steve planted himself in his path. The guy was fuming. I recognised him but couldn’t place him. Esther knew straight away. He met her eye and it was clear he remembered her too. Anger shifted to shame as he wilted under the scrutiny of the faces crowding his car. He looked old. Steve banged his hands twice on the bonnet and stood aside for the guy to drive off, and I worked out who he was. He was one of the head honchos who came to tea that day. The one who’d left the blood money.

Esther was elated. Whatever happened now, whether we ended up in court or not, the most important thing was acknowledged in the look that passed between the head honcho and Esther. She knew he knew.

My assignment wasn't going well. I had to write an analytical essay about techniques specific to a movement in art. The words on the page could equally have been the names of neurological disorders or characters in an opera for all I knew. Dean thought I was crazy.

'You don't need a bit of paper to tell you who you are.'

'It's not the point,' I said, but actually, it was.

I needed time to consider, to develop and expand. I needed the bit of paper to help me work out the big picture, and then I could bust it apart and make sense of it in my own way.

'What is the point? You started your sculpture before you started school.'

'I did. But that was when it was just a Cow Timer.'

'And now?'

'Well, it's still a Cow Timer. Eventually, it will become a Herd, and it will say something about the herd, about weather, and red dirt, and you Dean. It will say something about you.'

'It would always have said whatever it's going to say. You'll just have the fancy words to legitimise it for you. For me, it's cool. That's enough'

He went into his Darkroom to work on his 'secret' project.

'Arrogant jerk,' I said under my breath, pulling the dictionary down from the shelf, more than just a little bit excited to find out what those words meant.

Epigenesist, Contrapposto, Mimesis. Tenebrism, Sfumato.

DAY 5

Flick came.

I couldn't remember calling her. But I must have, because how would she have known? Within hours she was on the red-eye, surfing thunderclouds and wrestling crosswinds in the kind of landing where every passenger goes silent, convinced they are facing death. When the plane is finally earthbound and safely taxiing, strangers spontaneously erupt into cheers and engage in hyped-up chatter with the neighbour they've just studiously ignored for the whole flight.

It was the night of day five of the search, the night Flick came, the day the sea gave Dean up.

'I have to go and say it's him,' I said before she even got in the door.

The Taxi graunched into reverse, spotlighting blood-red rivulets lacing the pathway. On the doorstep, Flick and me, raindrops running down her face, or were they tears?

I knew on day one. I knew when Steve found the ute where Dean had left it on the headland, when I looked out at the surf pumped with storm barreling into the bay below. His board was gone.

Dark clouds weighted the horizon, bruised purple and black, with sunlight breaking through in shafts like searchlights. Here, over the bay, the sky was clear. It was just the sea that was angry. Fluorescent Search and Rescue vests blipped along the high tide line, then disappeared amongst the rocks around the point. A fleet of boats marked out a wobbly grid, searching, searching. Steve was out there at the helm of his fishing boat along with the boys, fuelled by hope and fear. Later, a helicopter would lick foam from the lip of the waves, swooping back and forth, back and forth, out to sea.

I was questioned by a uniformed man with a female offsider. His perfectly composed professional face reeked concern and competence. If you woke up to that kind face every day, it would make you feel sure about the day ahead. Yes, he can swim, yes, of course. His middle toes are webbed. A competent surfer? No, not competent – he's an artist, a choreographer of waves, he's a maestro, the sea is his score, the board his instrument. I watched the offsider write 'competent' and I lost interest. They weren't looking for Dean; they were assessing a missing surfer, male, slight, wiry build, early 20s. They were reconstructing the scenario. Did he have any medical conditions? Asthma? Was he intoxicated? Was his mind sound?

I scanned the waves, looking for a swimmer, a survivor. Looking for Dean to appear above the swell and catch a wave into the bay, then rise from the water and shake the sea from his tangle of curls. But already I knew he wasn't coming back that day. Or the next.

I drove the coast road, further afield. Just in case. I drove to where bays became harbour and a jetty jutted out far enough to claim the ocean as a highway, a transport system, a commodity. Usually, you'd spot the odd fisherman trying their luck sitting on a collapsible stool, a flask of tea and peanut butter sandwiches nestled next to a tub of stinking bait. But today the jetty was empty. Empty, that is, except for a little figure in a red raincoat looking over the edge. I stopped the car.

I walked briskly. I didn't want to run, to give him a fright. The jetty was so long and he seemed so far away.

'Little boy!' I called. I was going to startle him. He would lose his footing. He would fall…

'Little boy!' I called again. Light voice, calm, friendly, fun.

He pointed over the edge and leaned further to show me something, and I was there, almost near enough to touch him. Should I reach out to him? Would he move away? Would I tip his balance?

‘Shall we find your mummy?’ I said.

The boy was about two – tiny, but sure enough on his little legs to move quickly.

‘Coming?’ I asked over my shoulder, taking a few steps back towards land. He came, and we walked side by side.

A woman was running across the park. She ran as fast as she could, across an endless distance.

‘Is that your Mummy?’ I said, and the boy started running too. Running towards his mummy, running towards the road with trucks flying past on their way to the dock.

‘Stop!’ I screamed, panicked and sprang after him, grabbing the red raincoat.

I scooped him up and he clung to me, frightened now, crying.

The mother reached us and her little boy fell from my arms to hers.

‘He was on the jetty,’ I said.

She said nothing.

Her eyes were wild, she and her little boy held onto each other so tight they were one. She buried her face in his hair and walked away. When I got back into the car I saw her marching to a figure I hadn’t noticed before, a guy stretched out on his tummy in the park. Asleep, I suppose. She shifted the boy to her hip and started booting the guy, laying into him. He had his hands over his head and offered no resistance.

Back in the bay, it was almost dark. Torches flashed in the distance, the lights from the boats bobbed wildly. The horizon was dripping red. I ran down to the beach dragging a piece of driftwood I could barely lift and hefted it into the waves. More, I needed more. Whatever I

could find – rocks, bottles, the carcass of a seagull – I pummeled the ocean until my body gave up. The sea roared and the waves pounded, engulfing everything I threw, churning it around and spewing it back out again.

On day three, the official search was called off but Steve kept going. Steve and the boys, determined to find their mate. On day four Steve came, and on day five – wherever I was – the headland, the jetty, the bay – and shook his head. We sat together for a few minutes, a few hours, watching the waves toil and bubble, watching the storm come closer. We had nothing to say.

It wasn't Steve, and it wasn't me who found him. It was someone who wasn't even looking. A dog walker, braving the weather to run her border collie.

The Uniforms came to the bay and told me – the man with his kind eyes blinking against the whip of the wind, and the woman bracing herself against the cold, extending an arm of support. I pushed them away and drove home with the windscreen wipers on full as the storm hit and the rain finally came.

I ran the bath. I was freezing. My heartbeat sent ripples lap lapping against the sides. I slid deeper. Water filled my ears amplifying the relentless throb – ba-boom, ba-boom. I forced my eyes open against the sting of water and slid right under. And there I stayed; heavy, enveloped in my heartbeat. I could sleep. What would it take to take a breath? I tried. My body revolted. I fought to stay under but I burst to the surface gasping for air, water sloshing over the floor.

HAPPY MEMORIES

A grey horse, its ears pinned back, legs a blur, galloped flat tack alongside a brimming irrigation channel. The girl on its back trailed a rope, and hanging onto that rope was a boy with a face full of joy. A plume of water arched up behind his makeshift surfboard, the mirror-smooth water split into a perfect V. Around and beyond, red dirt dotted with scrub stretched into the distance then dissolved into a heat haze.

Flick had found it in the darkroom.

'Don't go in …' I'd started, but it was too late – she was already in.

She emerged with something I'd never seen before; a dusty album, the kind with a padded vinyl cover embossed with *Happy Memories.*

On the same page, another photo of the girl and boy side by side in bleached shorts, heads close, their scraggly hair blended together in a single knotty mass. Laughter lurked in their eyes but they frowned in concentration, their lips pouted and cheeks puffed out. On the next page, the explanation, two fountains of water arching from their mouths – a water spurting competition. And here was just the girl, water shining on her chin and wet patches dribbled down her t-shirt. Her limbs were lean and brown with pink Band-Aids patching her knees. She crinkled her eyes against the sun. Green eyes. Dean's eyes. Now here was the whole family – Mother, Father, Sister, Dean – posing behind a birthday cake with candles and a blobby-looking surfer in the centre. The father was muscular but he looked worn out, his skin parched by weather into burnt driftwood. The mother, pink as a Christmas ham, had one hand reaching towards the sister who was leaning forward looking sideways at her brother, ready to blow out the candles, and the other clutching at Dean already launched into mid-air to stop her. Birthday Boy. Eight years old.

His whole life ahead.

‘Have you talked to them?’ Flick asked.

‘Not since I told his mother he was missing. The police said they had to.’

Flick dialed the number on the pad next to the phone. Who would answer the phone? Paddy? He wasn’t doing too well, Dean said– he’d grown too stiff to unbend properly – what do you expect after a life handling heavy machines and 3000-pound cattle beasts? Or would it be his sister? Or mother? The mother would be tidying up the evening meal, carrying on as normal, in spite of the dread gripping her stomach and rising in her throat. She’d brush off her wet hands on a tea towel and fix her hair in the mirror even though it was only a phone call. Then she’d pick up the phone.

Flick closed the door. Even if I’d wanted to listen I wouldn’t have heard – the rain was pounding so hard on the roof.

‘They want us to send him back,’ Flick said. Had I fallen asleep? It felt like hours ago that she made the call. ‘They want him buried in the red dirt where he belongs.’

In the red dirt? Not here with Dad and Amelia, with Cheesecake, with Ruth? And me, one day me.

‘She’s nice, the sister,’ said Flick, sitting next to me on the couch.

Too close.

I went back to the album, turning page after page full of strangers with greater claims to Dean than me – strangers who’d take him as far away from the sea as it was possible to be. The father on a bony brown horse, the sister on the Grey, red dust creeping up their legs like they’d been walking in blood. Dean on the roof of the barn in the early morning light, toes clinging to the ridges like a monkey, gazing out at the land going on and on, so vast there’s nothing to see. A contrasty black and white photo, a country hick, stylish enough for a magazine – the mother, soft and young, on a lounger in the sun, a motley gecko basking on her chest.

And here, the four of them, straight-faced, with their arms around each other, three sets of green eyes and one brown, interrogating the camera.

‘She said she knew,’ said Flick. ‘She knew as soon as you said he was missing.’

A bunch of loose photos were at the back of the album – glossy with a white border. A different kind of photo, a magic moment captured, photos of the ocean – turquoise curls encasing indigo hearts topped with ghostly crests, vast shimmers of green with trembling translucent peaks. Here, stabs of mercury flashing through black and granite under a foreboding sky. And this, the morning after – purples and golds, and a huge pod of humpback whales baring their bellies and flicking their tails, their spumes lighting up like fireworks. Dean’s photos.

Stuck to the back cover of the album, the last photo was face down.

Flick peeled it back with a nail and flipped it over. It was Whizz in a white bikini with a glass of champagne in her hand.

‘Bastard!’ I said.

Flick pulled a bottle of Jim Beam from her duty-free.

‘Okay,’ she said, ‘Spill. What’s up with Whizz?’

THE PORTABLE DOROTHY PARKER

I found a book.

On the shelf.

Amongst the Penguins.

The corner of a page was turned down:

Nocturne

Always I knew that it could not last

(Gathering clouds, and the snowflakes flying),

Now it is part of the golden past

(Darkening skies, and the night-wind sighing);

It is but cowardice to pretend.

Cover with ashes our love's cold crater-

Always I've known that it had to end

Sooner or later.

Always I knew it would come like this

(Pattering rain, and the grasses springing),

Sweeter to you is a new love's kiss

(Flickering sunshine, and young birds singing).

Now you are finding a new joy greater-

Well, I'll be doing the same thing, too,

Sooner or later.

Handwritten on the inside cover;

Whizz x

WHIZZ X

I said I didn't know you read poetry.

You said you didn't.

And I believed you.

I said what's the deal with Whizz and you.

You said there is no Whizz and me.

Not now, not ever.

I said what about the book? What about the poem?

You said what book?

The book on the shelf amongst the Penguins. This book. With the corner of the page turned down.

You said you'd never seen it.

How did it get here if you'd never seen it?

How did it get Whizz x on the inside cover?

Did she slip it into your bag without you knowing?

Did she slide it into your hand and whisper in your ear?

Page 132.

Did she spread her shiny hair over your naked torso and bathe your chest in tears?

Did she say the words?

Gone are the raptures that once we knew.

Did she smell of vanilla?

You said don't be stupid. It's just a book.

But what about the poem? It's pretty clear what the poem says.

Whatever it was, it was all in her head.

You pulled me close.

Your lips tasted of salt.

You poured Jim Beam.

You said I was being ridiculous.

I said I just want to know the truth.

You said you do, it is.

I said I don't believe you.

Bourbon is the devil's drink.

SKIN

The thwack of skin hitting skin is short, sharp and finished. There is no resonance or reverberation. It's a distinctive sound, not easily confused with anything else except perhaps when flesh, say a hunk of raw meat or a fish, is slapped onto a marble slab.

Dean and I made up after the argument about Whizz and the poem marked (lovingly?) with a dog-ear fold, and I should have left it alone, given him the benefit of the doubt, moved on. But there was a line stuck in my brain going round and round.

'Gone are the raptures that once we knew.'

We had spent hours saying nothing, keeping our distance, gradually circling closer till we were side by side, more polite than usual, mixing up batter to make corn fritters for dinner. While I was washing the dishes, he slid an arm around my shoulders and told me I smelled of fresh air. I slipped my soapy hands under his t-shirt.

He poured us both a bourbon.

We leaned against the kitchen bench as if it was a bar, together.

That's when I should have left it alone but notes of vanilla swirled in my mouth with every sip. The bourbon slid easily down my throat. I felt warm, lightheaded. Dean drank the way he always drank, slow and steady. He turned up the music.

'Come on, babe, we need a blowout.'

He was right, we did. We'd been blasting, scraping, clearing and transforming for months, fixing this and patching that until we had enough money to do the job properly. It was even more pressured now that we were saving for Dean's trip home. Steve had Dean working like a demon on the boats – the more fish they caught, the bigger the bonus. Dean carried his

board in the back of the ute, ever hopeful of catching a wave, but he hadn't been surfing for ages. He may as well have been caged, pacing at the bars, eyes roaming, trapped. I was working hard too – it was much tougher than I thought it would be to catch up with my classmates, with a whole new language and way of seeing things to learn. It wasn't enough to produce artwork, you had to analyse, question, justify. Analyse, question and justify. I was fighting to control the piece of me that wanted to scream out, 'Why can't it just be?'.

'I'm making a trail of cattle beasts from red clay, one every day,' I told my tutor when she asked about my plans for a sculpture.

'And?'

'And making a trail from the front door. When the line gets to the gate it will be time.'

'Time for what?'

I didn't say anything. It sounded silly, now I was putting it into words. Time to collect up the cattle beasts, and to turn the line into a herd. The old, the weathered, the new, the survivors. There would be an order for them to fit naturally together. The ones that hadn't hardened sufficiently to withstand the elements, that dissolved into a blood-coloured puddle would have to be scraped off the ground. They would be the back of the herd, behind those only partially dissolved or misshapen. I'd leave a space between these and the others, the ones that were whole, the strongest and best at the head, because it is true that cattle baulk at the smell of blood and offal. When the trail of single cattle beasts reached the gate it would be time to turn the Cow Timer into an Artwork. And time for Dean to leave the sea behind, for us to head inland to the tract of red dirt where we'd find Dean's mother and Paddy, his sister and her babies Dean had never met.

'What if we get there and you want to stay?' he said.

'I won't,' I said.

'You might,' he focused his camera on my hands in the clay slip I was stirring to smooth the clay cattle beasts, 'given your affinity with red earth.'

'Idiot,' I slapped his arm leaving a red handprint. 'I just want to know where you come from.'

'You do,' he said and headed off for a surf.

In bed at night in the dark when there's no horizon and it is easy to be honest, Dean told me he was scared. The relentless birthing, fattening and killing that consumed his parents invigorated them but suffocated him. How would he say goodbye again, knowing he was responsible for the pain in his mother's eyes and the disappointment in his father's?

'We won't say goodbye,' I said. 'We'll leave a note. And because they love you, they will be hurt and disappointed, but eventually they'll understand.'

We pulled the sheets tighter around us and slept.

We needed a blowout, to give us a break from work and responsibility, to remind us we were young and free. Reckless. The bass reverberated through the floor, buzzing the windows and I let myself go, flinging my body around the room, bouncing off Dean, and picking myself up when I tripped over the trunk that was the coffee table. Dean downed another glass and belted out the chorus at the top of his voice.

I poured more bourbon. Gone are the raptures. The taste of vanilla was overpowering. The smooth, golden liquid slid down my throat and ignited. Sun-kissed skin and honey-coloured hair. Her limbs, his limbs. Whizz and my Dean. I should have left it alone

'What raptures?' I said.

He didn't hear. Or he pretended not to hear. Prick.

When I was a child there were different kinds of slapping, the kind to admonish a child to make them a better person and the kind you hear muffled through the wall, the secret kind that you pretend never happened. These days slapping a child is frowned upon but growing up, it was par for the course.

‘No!’ I said.

Mum’s arm was raised over my leg. She faltered and looked at my father. He looked away. Although she was the one more likely to deliver the blow, he was complicit in that he didn’t intervene.

‘She has to learn,’ she said.

I did learn. But not whatever it was they intended to teach me. I learnt I could shift the power in that moment of uncertainty when I stood my ground.

From then on the sting from my mother’s hard hand was not a punishment. It was a battle of wills. It was a test to find at what point a slap moved from being a socially acceptable punishment to a secret. I looked my mother straight in the eye daring her to hit me when her hand was raised. She faltered, then struck, then looked away, guilty, and I knew I was gaining traction.

At school, we traded stories about hidings, and between us playground scuffles were commonplace. Getting the strap was a badge of honour, although it was a different kind of hiding, preceded with a whoosh, the smack on skin invariably masked by the teacher’s grunt. Sparrow had a little wooden ruler with a tally of strappings, and James carved his into the kowhai tree where later he added a heart and me. The blows behind closed doors, the adult kind, however, remained secret. We never talked about them.

Bourbon is the devil's drink. It slides down your throat and explodes in your brain. I should have seen Dean and me. Together. Now. But the words of a stupid poem swirled about my head.

I pulled the stereo plug out of the wall.

'What raptures?' I yelled into the silence.

Golden limbs. Dusky brown limbs. Whizz, Dean. Rapture.

I hit first. Me, him, me. Thwack, thwack, thwack.

'Fuck this.'

Keys, grab, wrench.

Slam.

ME

'Come,' said Flick and pulled me by the hand towards the darkroom.

'I can't,' I said pulling away. It was Dean's room. It was full of him.

'You have to see this,' said Flick, dragging me in.

He'd kept me out. He was working on a surprise.

'Look,' said Flick.

There were photos pinned to the wall and pegged to the drying wire. Photos of me.

'It's you,' she said. 'It's you.'

It was me. Me in the La-Z-Boy, dust particles suspended in the sunlight, a book on my lap. I glared straight down the lens, the cracked leather of the chair imprinted on my cheek. Me under an umbrella in the rain making cattle out of clay. A close up of my hands in clay slip that looked like a bucket of blood. Raindrops soaking like tears into a little dog sculpture (Spot). Me under the grapefruit tree, the late season fruit mottled and knobbly. Me and Esther framed through the window, a teapot between us. Me untangling a butterfly from a spider's web. Me in the early days, far across the ocean when we were right at the beginning, light diffracting across my face from the crystal glass I held up. Me, me, me.

I had a headache. The syrupy taste of spirits made me feel sick. I wanted to tear down Dean's darkroom full of me, and pull the batting off the windows to let the outside in. I wanted to rip Whizz in two and burn her white bikini. I wanted Flick to piss off back home.

I said it out loud, 'Piss off back home.'

'I'm not going anywhere,' she said.

'Piss off back home,' I screamed.

Flick was calm and cold.

‘No,’ she said.

You’ll never get it, Felicity. Why? Because you’re a miracle, not a replacement.’

‘Look,’ she said, ‘look at what’s here. It’s you. Not your mum or your dad or any of the other dead people in the cemetery. Not Dean. You. Whatever the fuck did or didn’t happen with Whizz is irrelevant.’

‘Just piss off,’ I said and pushed past her. I went into the bathroom and vomited.

‘You’re so busy running, you can’t see what’s in front of you,’ she shouted through the door.

When I came out, she was gone. I threw Whizz in the bin, shut the darkroom door and fell asleep in the La-Z-Boy.

Flick came back in the middle of the day. She was showered, her hair wet and flat. She’d brought coffee and painkillers and had made some notes.

‘I’m taking you to say it’s him,’ she said. ‘And then you’re going to do the flowers and the eulogy. We’ll do the photos together and I’ll do the rest.’

I saw the first thing on her list was ‘coffin’.

TIME

I had to leave the house, our house, filled with the air we'd both breathed. I held onto the doorframe. If I let go, the wind would lift me up and sweep me away. Up past the Bangalow palm, the leaves sliding through my hands, slicing flesh and dripping blood onto the path below. Tossed and buffeted I'd collide with clouds, leaving far behind the scurrying black specks going about their daily business. Soaring higher still higher, I'd ride crests and tumble into troughs, gliding along currents, to a place of calm, of caress. I'd close my eyes, weightless, suspended, not knowing where my body began or ended. I would be the sum of sound, of breath, of heartbeat. And far below, a tiny blue ball would spin round and around.

Felicity touched my arm.

I let go of the doorframe and pulled on my boots.

'Are you sure about the boots?' Flick asked.

'Yes, I'm sure.' I said. They were the only thing to weigh me down.

On the verandah, I reached under the muslin cloth and scooped up a handful of clay. Feeling its weight and sticky grit, I pinched and pressed, then smoothed it with slip – a bath in blood.

I stepped from the house and followed the trail of clay figures, some whole, others eroded. At the gate, I placed my final offering, today's red earth cattle beast.

It was time for Dean to go home.

EULOGY

I stand at the microphone. Steve's leaning forward in the front row, tears rolling over his stubble and onto his shoes. Eva pats his back like she's soothing a baby. Behind him, the boys have their sunglasses on. Esther sits a few rows back, well rehearsed in grief, with a packet of tissues and spares for the guy next to her. It's Sparrow, fresh off the plane, zipped into his leather jacket, his arms wrapped tight around his guitar. His back teeth are clenched making hollows in his jaw and there are dark rings under his eyes He looks like a skeleton. The hall is full. How did Dean collect all these sniffing and weeping people? It dawns on me that they are not all for him, many are here for me.

'He came from the sea,' I say, clutching the book I'm going to read from with one hand, and the lectern with the other.

Dean, you are sea and I am earth. Seven nights ago when we had a choice, we could have chosen a moment together with my feet on the ground and your eyes on the horizon. Instead, we chose to bust apart and fight. We chose momentum. I lost my footing and spiralled away from the earth and you forgot, Dean, you forgot to respect the sea. If only we had chosen the stillness of the space between us, the place that belongs to you and me.

My legs lose strength. Flick is beside me. Was she there all along? She puts her hand on my waist.

'Everyone needs something to make them alive, to make them more than just a speck in the universe,' I say. 'For Dean, it is the sea.'

I can do this. I can talk about Dean. Dean who can tame the wildest wave, and harness a moment of beauty forever through his camera lens. Dean who lies under the stars saying 'this is my forever' one day, and is restlessly scanning the horizon the next. I can talk about the trail of sand, and the milky rim left behind from dried drips of salt water. I say the things I'm supposed to say, about his red dirt family and how Dean may have left but he's never forgotten

them. I say thank you for coming to celebrate, but I don't mean it. I'm not celebrating. My legs go weak again, and Flick coaxes the book from my hand. It's her book anyway. The book for a silly Bysshe.

'Music, when soft voices die,' she begins. 'Vibrates in the memory –'

Steve drives the ute from the hall to the airport with Dean covered in tulips on the back and me, Flick and Sparrow holding him steady.

The rain slows to drizzle and the drizzle turns to mist. Everything has soft edges through the haze.

'How do we check him in?' asks Sparrow, with a panicked look that makes me smile.

I catch Flick's eye, and we get the giggles.

'I forgot his passport,' I say.

'Maybe they'll think he's a VIP instead of an RIP.'

'At least he'll get an upgrade.'

'He'll be the happiest man alive.'

Hilarious.

Sparrow is horrified, 'Have some respect.'

'It's just a hunch, Sparrow, but I don't think he can hear us.'

'Give the guy a break, can't you see poor Sparrow's mort-ified.'

'He wouldn't think it was funny.'

Sparrow's right, Dean wouldn't think it was funny. At best, he'd roll his eyes and give us one of those here-we-go-again smiles. At worst, he'd get the pip about being excluded by our silliness. But even his dark look wouldn't stop me getting the last word in.

'Oh, I'm sorry. I made a grave mistake.'

We're here.

The funeral directors are waiting, standing sentry with straight backs and smart suits. They're going to drive Dean in their shiny hearse through the gates marked 'Restricted Area. Authorised Personnel Only'. They'll package him up and slap a label on saying 'Human Remains'.

'I can't watch him go!'

I sit in the cab picking at the red clay under my fingernails. There's a jolt followed by scraping and a shudder, then the ute raises slightly as Dean is lifted off. That's the last I will feel of him.

Steve climbs into the driver's seat and we both hold our breath. Behind us, the hearse purrs and the gates clang closed. We exhale together. Steve's eyes are streaming, darkening the dots on his cheek, black as fresh tattoos.

'It's the wind,' Steve says, wiping his nose on his sleeve.

We drive down the road to the end of the runway and bump up the bank, past the danger sign where the kids find their thrills. No kids today. Just Flick and Sparrow and Steve and me on the back of a beaten up old ute on a bed of bruised and battered tulips. Sparrow pulls out his guitar and we crack open some beers.

Remember when he used honeycomb to wax his board and got covered in bee stings carrying it down to the beach?

Remember how he'd turn the music up full bore and get lost in a song.

Remember that time he was drunk and surfing the bonnets of cars in his socks, he got his little finger stuck in that Mercedes badge and we said we'd just leave him there for the owner to find him.

Remember how he'd stand for ages looking at the sea.

Remember his eyes.

Remember the flash of his smile, his lips, the taste of salt.

A loud rumble drowns us out and the ground shakes. Through the mist, a shadowy plane appears like a ghost. Steve gets such a fright he sends his beer arcing over the roof crashing a dent into the bonnet. The plane is almost close enough to touch as it flies over the top of us and then, Whoosh! We're screaming with joy, jet blasted flat on our backs in a whirlwind of tulips.

I was wrong about getting nothing when a plane leaves.

Crack! Crack! Vortices whip from the wingtips.

The plane melts into the mist and is gone.

In the phosphorescence, a million stars sparkled on our skin as we rocked back and forth with the waves.

'Let's fall,' whispered Dean. 'Let go. Let's see where we end up.'

I laid my hand on his heart to feel it beating. I was already falling.

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THE SPACE IN BETWEEN:

MAKING SENSE

OF

FRAGMENTED NARRATIVE

MCW Exegesis to the Thesis *Eulogy*

We shall not cease from exploration

And the end of all our exploring

Will be to arrive where we started

And know the place for the first time.

(T.S Eliot, Four Quartets)

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INTRODUCTION: APPROACHING SPATIAL FORM AND THE SPACE IN BETWEEN

Fragmented narrative is a literary structure I have been interested in for some time, and in my novella, *Eulogy*, the creative component of my MCW thesis, my objective was to write a series of individual pieces that collectively make up a single complete work. Mimicking the gradual process of getting to know a person, accumulating extracts of memories and experiences over time, the order of the fragments was determined organically, driven by character and emotion, rather than by events or chronology. Indeed, in the completed novella the narrative jumps around in time and the beginning is also the end.

In a fiction writing workshop while discussing fragmented narrative, I once said that I thought fiction was a visual medium. My statement was met with derision. I had nothing to support my claim, nor had I thought it through – it seemed self-evident, and I was genuinely surprised when no one else concurred. What I was referring to as 'visual' was an effort to describe the effect of what happens between fragments when a reader infers meaning beyond words on a page.

Another workshop, another attempt and a slightly more sophisticated approach. This time I had backup: 'spatial form', a term extrapolated from the visual arts by literary theorist Joseph Frank, and a succinct description of its effects: 'a third order of meaning'. Unfortunately, it wasn't the tidily bundled summation I had hoped for. My claim that spatial form resulted in the creation of a third order of meaning was interpreted as grandiose, giving too much weight to a problematic theory and dismissing temporally driven narrative as being somehow inferior. I hadn't intentionally relegated linear narrative to second place, but certainly I had failed to take into consideration counter arguments to Frank's. It seemed my interpretation of 'a third order of meaning' had simply highlighted the fact that telling a story out of order gives the reader another job to do – to work out what happens when.

How *do* you describe what happens in this space between sections of a fragmented narrative? Is it empty space? A chronological structure has its own logic, but surely configuring the narrative building-blocks a different way with unique connections and juxtaposition must have its own effect.

One of the intrigues when writing a fragmented style of fictional narrative is how the over-arching narrative shifts and solidifies as the structure builds. The order of events does not dictate the order of fragments; rather, if the impetus for transitions is psychologically driven, the spaces between sections become an opportunity to make links and build complexity through the thematic or cognitive links. Over the course of the fictional work the separate fragments jostle and settle into place and the associations and connections between them accumulate.

It strikes me that this effect resembles the processes psychologists talk about when discussing how memories are layered over time and how imagination works. Indeed, the novels I chose to examine, *Baby No-Eyes* by Patricia Grace and *February* by Lisa Moore, as well as the novella I have written for the creative component of this thesis, *Eulogy,* have a sense of uncovering story through memory. Cognitive psychologists describe memory as an assemblage of recollections rather than a cataloging. In *On the Origin of Stories*, Brian Boyd explains; 'we think, remember, and imagine by mentally simulating or reactivating elements of what we have previously perceived, understood, enacted, and experienced' (Boyd, 156). Memories, therefore, are not exact, but selective and 'partially reconstructed, reshaped by the mind at every stage: in initial perception, in encoding, during storage and in retrieval' (153). In much the same way, the fragments in a fragmented narrative can be seen as individual elements to be reassembled, reconfigured and re-experienced. It is the reader's ability to mesh the layers and envisage bridges between fragments, in *the space in between*, in what is left unsaid, that transforms fragmented narrative from being a series of individual fragments into a cohesive whole.

In *Baby No-Eyes*, Grace reveals different perspectives of the same event, rooted in the concept that the present is a sum of past. Although she engages multiple narrators rather than a single narrator, this novel promised to be an appropriate text for a comprehensive exploration of the fragmented structure I was experimenting with in *Eulogy*. In *February,* Lisa Moore employs one predominant narrator with a secondary subsidiary narrator and a minor third narrator. The parallels between fragments in *February* across different timeframes serve predominantly to progress the narrative of the central character, Helen.

Perhaps the most compelling reason to select these two novels was their thematic link to *Eulogy.* All three works employ a nonlinear structure and at their heart is a single tragic event with loss as a central theme. There is no formulaic response to loss, and it follows that narrative exploring loss might reflect this. In the same way that grief infuses lives, with the past colouring, the present, narrative with emotional or psychological impetus as the driving force blurs temporal lines. Weaving backwards and forwards in time, separate fragments accumulate and, as they layer and build, connections and associations between the fragments create something new.

Departing from the temporally driven realism of narrative prevalent in his time, Marcel Proust, concerned with what he called 'lost time', explored the way that memory shifts between timeframes and how such associations create new meanings. Richard Lehan refers to Proust's obsession with 'lost time' as 'a means of illuminating the present' proposing the connection between past and present creates another level of interpretation, a third order of meaning:

> The connection between past and present creates a third order of meaning, each allowing insight into the other and out of this interpretation of meaning

> comes a sense of epiphany, the unfolding of a concealed meaning, which is what the modernist believed was the ultimate function of art (Lehan 147).

This ‘concealed meaning’ was also a concern of novelist and theorist Joseph Frank. In 1945, he coined the term ‘spatial form’ in his essay ‘Spatial Form in Modern Literature’. Frank’s exploration was, like his modernist cohort, concerned with psychologically driven narrative and is described by Lehan as follows:

> The work unfolds by narrative leaps that involve emotional rather than temporal connections…The reader collapses meaning in the mind filling in the ellipses of text’. (Lehan 145)

The most common objection by critics to Frank’s argument, as summarised by W.J.T. Mitchell, was that his theory of spatial form ‘denies the essentially temporal nature of literature’ (Mitchell 273). Frank himself responded to this objection, albeit it more than thirty years later in 1977, refining his definition in ‘Spatial Form: An Answer to Critics’. Although this quote refers to ‘the poem’, he applied the same principle in a more general sense to modernist fiction. Frank argued that:

> …the synchronic relations within the text take precedence over diachronic referentiality, and that it is only after the pattern of synchronic relations has been grasped as a unity that the ‘meaning’ of the poem can be understood. (Frank 75-76)

Here Frank concedes that specific chronology is relevant in narrative, and temporality needs to be established to fully interpret spatiality. Mitchell takes the position that rather than spatial form being unique to some forms of modern literature, it is 'a crucial aspect of the experience and interpretation of literature in all ages and cultures' (Mitchell 273). With Mitchell proposing spatial form is a characteristic of all fiction and Frank conceding time is an essential component, it follows, then, that space and time both have an important role in narrative form. It might, therefore be more accurate to suggest that it is the balance between the two that determines whether a narrative is primarily spatially or temporally driven. This balance is key to deciphering the difference between a spatially-driven transition between sections, and analepsis (flash back) or prolepsis (flash forward) which are time jumps 'with respect to the present moment' (Prince 5, 79). Gerald Prince provides a useful definition of spatial form as:

> …an arrangement obtaining in narrative where the usual logico-temporal modes of narrative organisation are abandoned in favour of modes traditionally privileged by (nonnarrative) poetry. With spatial form, the temporal movement of an episode stops: attention is drawn to relations of symmetry, antithesis, gradation, repetition etc., between the episode constituents, and meaning springs from these relations...' (Prince 90).

Spatial form, then, involves consideration of fragments from the perspective of how they connect in ways that are not driven by a relationship with time. In linear narrative, one event follows on from another, whereas in fragmented narrative, one event sits next to another. The gaps between fragments present the possibilities for interpretation in spatially-driven transitions. H. Porter Abbot defines 'gaps' as: 'The inevitable voids, large or small, in any narrative, that the reader is called upon to fill from his or her experience or imagination'

(Abbott 234). In fragmented narrative, these inevitable voids occur between fragments and are what I refer to as ‘the space in between’.

By the time Frank proposed his theory of spatial form, the modernist movement in writing was well underway. As one of the foremost literary modernists, Virginia Woolf maintained that while the Victorians were masters of melodious sentences, they said nothing they didn’t already know how to say. Conversely, the modernist emphasis was to delve into the psychological insight of characters as stated by Woolf: ‘Our ambition, on the other hand, is to put in nothing that need not be there. What we want to be there is the brain and the view of life…’ (Woolf, 341). Frank and Proust along with Woolf used memory and stream of consciousness as the impetus for narrative. Their resulting works contributed to solidifying spatial form as an essential component in understanding modernist literature. A hundred years on and this approach to narrative has become commonplace.

In my study of *Baby No-Eyes* and *February,* I set out to make sense of the patterns and links between fragments. I created a visual map to represent, decipher and learn from the complexity created between fragments and worked to identify the bridges that connect sections and span the gaps. I explored how the synergy in the transitions between fragments opened up the kind of complexity Proust described as ‘third order’, the kind of alchemy in the ‘space in between’ I was seeking to understand.

After examining the whole, I focused on individual fragments in each novel. I selected a sample fragment to explore as a ‘single entity’ reading before expanding my inquiry to include the relationship between the selected sample and the sections either side of it. Through close reading and mapping, I was able to identify how spatial form expands and links the fragments in the narratives of *Baby No-Eyes* and *February*. I found this thinking resonated with

creative processes I employ in other disciplines and that it became significant in the way I developed *Eulogy.*

From an original intention to write a series of linked stories, as my creative and critical research evolved, my approach to *Eulogy* became more specific and complex. Rather than stand alone stories, it became clear my impetus was a psychologically driven single work. I changed my thinking from writing a series of stories to writing individual fragments. Rather than separate entities, I viewed and developed them as parts of a single larger work pivoting around a single event. As the fragments of *Eulogy* accumulated, I created a map which enabled me to see how the fragments linked, and to identify further opportunities to develop the narrative spatially. Consideration of the space between fragments, how they interacted spatially, meant that far from being stand alone, they were the opposite – they were dependent upon each other.

This thesis shows some particular ways in which spatial form works structurally in fragmented narrative, how in the space between, links and bridges are formed, and how temporally and spatially driven transitions are balanced. It explores how this narrative form can be used effectively to evoke particular states of mind and experiences of the world.

THE ETERNAL THREAD: WEAVING FRAGMENTS OF *BABY NO EYES* BY PATRICIA GRACE

'The past is ahead of you. The ancestors have gone ahead of you. They're ahead of you on the road, they've gone,' says Patricia Grace in a Listener interview with Diana Wichtel. She is referring to a Maori way of thinking that embodies a similar kind of temporal fluidity to that which she exhibits in her work. 'Weave' is a word commonly used to describe Grace's multi-stranded style of storytelling and interconnectedness of past, present and future. In a statement nominating Grace for the 2008 Neustadt Laureate award, author Joy Harjo described Grace's

work as a ‘brilliant weave of Maori oral storytelling contained within the more contemporary Western literary forms of the novel and short story’ (quoted from the publication World Literature Today). Perhaps appropriately traditional Maori weaving lends itself as a metaphor to describe Patricia Grace’s work, in particular, *Baby No-Eyes*, and serves to illustrate the reader’s engagement in the process. Renowned weaver Erenora Puketapu-Hetet describes Maori weaving as being:

> …full of symbolism and hidden meanings, embodied with the spiritual values and beliefs of the Maori people…from the simple rourou, food basket, to the prestigious kahu kiwi, kiwi feather cloak, weaving is endowed with the very essence of the spiritual values of Maori people (Hetet, 2).

Similarly, *Baby No-Eyes* is full of symbolism and hidden meanings. The discontinuous multi-narrative creates space between fragments, demanding the reader follow the path and connection of the strands, to enter, to interpret and to experience the whole. Puketapu-Hetet speaks of the importance of mauri, of her responsibility to honour life force in creating another dimension after she’s taken the flax leaves from where they belong. In *Baby No-Eyes,* fragments are transformed as they are viewed singularly and then considered collectively creating a new dimension that links past to present, spirituality to reality and connects characters through heritage and experience.

Sequential narrative is a straightforward way to arrange elements of a story, where time and the order of events move forward chronologically from beginning to end. It follows that to disrupt sequential telling introduces a level of difficulty. Lehan maintains that since spatial form is not temporally driven, it is ‘only after a text has been read at least once that we can read it spatially because now a reader can hold in memory the narrative connections that make

up spatial form' (151). Extrapolating from Lehan's claim and returning to the weaving metaphor, the first reading of *Baby No-Eyes* enables the reader to see the narrative woven together in completion, but in subsequent readings the reader is in a position to understand the intricacy created by the strands, the patterning when they come together and move apart, the collaboration and contrast of colour and texture. It is only after the piece has been viewed as a whole that the complexity of its composition and depth of meaning can be fully appreciated.

Lehan maintains one of the characteristics of spatial form is that it can only be understood spatially after it has been read. This definitely applies to *Baby No-Eyes* as indicated in this review by Reina Whaitiri:

> This novel may bewilder, confuse, and perhaps even irritate some readers. Those familiar with Patricia Grace's previous two novels Potiki and Cousins will find Baby No-Eyes a very different and challenging work. On a first reading it is difficult to follow the narrative shifts, although the chapter headings are reliable guides… On a second reading however, the reader, at least this reader, becomes a member of the whanau, extended family; the characters are familiar, their relationships, problems, secrets, idiosyncrasies, part of everyday life. It is like being welcomed onto a *marae;* we arrive as *manuhiri*, visitors, but after the *powhiri*, official welcome, and *hongi*, the mingling of breath, strangers become *tangatawhenua*, people of the land. (Whaitiri 1)

It is true that it is challenging to hold in memory all of the narrative connections of *Baby No Eyes*. The vast number of characters, their thematic links to each other as well as the importance of whakapapa led me to the idea of creating a visual map. The true depth of the novel is revealed

when each section is weighed against another. And certainly, when I understood where everybody fitted and who they were, I was, like Whaitiri, able to enter further into the life of the novel and to unravel, appreciate and experience the complexity of this novel.

Creating a map of *Baby No-Eyes* (See figure 1) enabled me to identify the patterning of fragments and the connections between them. In constructing the map, my approach for selecting the most appropriate anchors was to identify the driving force behind the structure of the novel, what Boyd describes as the 'principal agent':

> Experiments show that in understanding stories our minds keep extraordinarily close track of events especially of a principal agent, and especially of his or her goals. We simulate the focal agent's situation, taking what psychologists call either an observer (outside) or field (inside) position, as we can in our own memories and dreams. (Boyd, 158)

Identifying the principal agent in *Baby No-Eyes* as whakapapa, I mapped the connections between characters. Within the map, I pulled out some recurrent themes – the hospital, school, eyes and land – noting connections between theme and character. The resulting web of intersections and cycles is a visualisation of the kind of connections the reader automatically seeks to make over the course of reading a novel such as *Baby-No Eyes*.

Coupled with keeping track of the principal agent, the mind naturally seeks to order the fragments. Boyd says that 'we sort events so rapidly into sequence and causal sense that both children and adults recall events in chronological order even if they have been told them out of order and instructed to recall the information as presented.' (154). While the order of the fragments in *Baby No-Eyes* is not consecutive, the reader will unconsciously reorder them into a chronological pattern.

Figure 1. Map of *Baby No-Eyes*.

Understanding the capacity of the mind to comprehend, recall and reconfigure supports Mitchell's claim that all narrative is both spatial and temporal. In *Baby No-Eyes* the mapped interwoven network goes some way to representing the creation of a myriad of invisible bridges and relationships between fragments, inviting them to be read spatially. The events arranged and mapped consecutively, would be a more straightforward, linear patterning.

That the narrative of *Baby No-Eyes* is unlikely to unfold in the linear shape of temporally driven sequences is signposted by Grace through Te Paania early in the novel:

> There's a way the older people have of telling a story, a way where the beginning is not the beginning, the end is not the end. It starts from a centre and moves away from there in such widening circles that you don't know how you will finally arrive at the point of understanding, which becomes itself another core, a new centre (Grace 28).

Evoking the oral tradition of storytelling, the cultural background to *Baby No*-Eyes is significant in this structure where what is unsaid is as important as what is said. Tina Makereti in her PhD entitled *Stories Are the Centre: The Place of Fiction in Contemporary Understandings and Expressions of Indigeneity* states:

> Just as families are woven together in life, Grace has woven them together in the structure of the book, and these identity narratives inform and influence each other. In this case, the problematising of history is explicit, for each character struggles with the chasm between what they have been told, or the reality they have accepted, and the possibility that they have been deceived in some way. (Makereti 36-37)

The chasm Makereti mentions is something akin to my reference to 'space in between'. In order for the narrative to progress, it must reach back into the past and stretch into the future.

Baby No-Eyes is divided into fragments most of which are between five and ten pages long and are headed with the name of one of the four narrators, although one of these actually represents the voice of two, giving a total of five narrators. The novel pivots around loss following a shocking and tragic event. Baby-No-Eyes, a premature baby, is killed in a car accident that also claims the life of her father. Mutilated by the hospital who harvested her eyes, she is a restless spirit joining her whanau as they struggle to understand and come to terms with their loss. Each narrator recounts and responds to this loss from an individual perspective. The novel begins with the unborn Tawera and follows him through childhood, finishing with an epilogue when he is a university student looking back and looking to the future. Baby No-Eyes, the unborn child who lost her life and her eyes, is Tawera's older sister. Tawera can see Baby No-Eyes and through him, she is given a voice and everyday existence as they grow up together. Interspersed with Tawera's present, is his mother Te Paania's narrative, concerned with her personal history, spanning her childhood, her relationships before Tawera's birth and the subsequent rebuilding of her life following the accident. Mahaki, as a character straddling Maori and Pakeha worlds, is equipped to instigate change and is a voice of the future, while Kura's stories stretch back, spanning not just her life, but also the lives of her ancestors. There are thirty-seven fragments alternating between narrators and shifting time frames.

The multiple narrators of *Baby No-Eyes* mimic the patterns of traditional Maori oratory, whaikōrero, as noted by Michelle Keown in *Postcolonial Pacific Writing: Representations of the Body*:

> The concentric model also encapsulates the way in which Grace views the act of storytelling which – as is the case with her other polyphonic narratives – is

> specifically linked with Maori perspectives in history and oral narrative. (Keown 162)

This concentric model, like traditional oratory, presents a series of orators revealing individual perspectives exploring the same topic. While the structure of *Baby No-Eyes* draws on cultural roots, spatial form theory is also useful for understanding how it works. Although the concept of ancestry is chronological, understanding the true meaning and value of whakapapa demands a spatial approach. As Grace describes it, the past is already ahead, the ancestors have already gone. This traditional Maori mindset is reflected in the characteristics of spatial form identified by Ivo Vidan in his essay, 'Time Sequence in Spatial Form'. Speaking of appropriate identification of a deliberate construction of distorted chronology as spatial form he states:

> …consecutive narration has been broken up or distorted by the authorial voice or a fictional narrator, or complicated by internal or external relationships between two or more voices. In any case, the inner time continuity does not proceed in its natural order and is instead problematized both by the order substituted for it and by the way the reader's consciousness experiences the problematization. (Quoted in Daghistany and Smitten, 134-5).

For Grace, the present in itself is not her concern, what is of interest to her is the present as a sum of the past and the future, connected to the notion of whakapapa. In *Baby No Eyes* there are multiple connections, both between fragments sharing the same narrator, and adjacent fragments with different narrators. Themes are explored, mirrored, contrasted within and between fragments. Running throughout, shown through symmetry and parallels between fragments, is the backdrop of the cyclical nature of failure within the system. The ability to

sustain and move forwards rather than be defined and trapped by loss is linked to identity and the familial connectedness of whanau.

With Kura, the grandmother, the image Grace uses at the end of Chapter 7 when she is compelled to 'let the secrets free (66)', of a ball wrapped in layers and layers that need to be unwrapped in order for her to speak, describes the impossibility of doing this in a completely straightforward way. In order to go forwards she needs first to go back, and in peeling away layers, she not only reveals her personal history but connects to the generations that came before her. Grace describes why she has to do this: 'She is unwrapping the layers from inside herself. She looks upon it as a poison that she'll get rid of so that she will be a good person again. She will be someone who sees herself worthy of her descendants' (quoted from an interview with Fresno Calleja, *Atlantis Journal*). Considering only the fragments that are Kura's, this unwrapping could be viewed sequentially. However, nestled as they are amongst the other narrators, they demand to be viewed collaboratively, in conjunction with the other narrative threads as opposed to purely single entities or a single strand. Kura's stories are not just so Kura can again be the person she was born to be, but for the rest of the characters to also find their way.

It is useful to examine a single fragment of *Baby No-Eyes*, as well as to explore how it is balanced against other fragments in order to get a sense of spatial form in the novel as a whole. While Kura is required to reach back into the past, Tawera is the voice of the present. Reading spatially, Tawera's story is not isolated; his story is not just the sum of his own past and present, but the sum of the past and present of the other narrators as well as of his dead sister, Baby No-Eyes. This idea of being connected to the past is evident from the outset as Tawera's consciousness begins in the womb already knowing, but at the same time with everything to learn:

> ‘I want you to know you’re not an only child.’
>
> ‘I knew there was someone,’ I said.
>
> ‘You have a sister four years and five days older than you.’
>
> ‘Now I see her,’ I said, ‘Shot. Two holes in her head.’
>
> ‘You mean she has no eyes,’ my mother said. ‘You mean her eyes were stolen.’
>
> So, I made a mistake about the bullet holes. 19)

Giving Tawera an adult voice and the ability to articulate as a newborn baby, and even a voice pre-birth, allows Grace the opportunity to balance wisdom, a kind of spiritual knowingness with the naivety of a child full of questions. Similarly, Baby No-Eyes is given a voice and a physical presence through Tawera who can see her. Within this unique relationship, set up as a tuakana-teina relationship where the older or more experienced sibling mentors a younger or less experienced sibling, Grace explores and articulates questions of identity, responsibility and value. In early childhood, Baby No-Eyes, the older child, takes the role of tuakana, Tawera the teina, and their relationship is mainly harmonious as they both learn and grow together. However, by Chapter 16, which I want to focus on here and which marks a changing point for Tawera, things have become more complicated. The relationship becomes unbalanced as the younger Tawera becomes more experienced than his sister. Their roles are flipped as Baby No-Eyes struggles to keep up with her brother and he has difficulty keeping her involved in everything he does. Tawera is aged eight and the two have developed the fractious relationship of squabbling siblings. With growing awareness of how others perceive him, Tawera becomes self-conscious about his demanding sister who is visible only to him:

> ‘They’ll hear us,’ I whispered.

> 'So I embarrass you now that you are eight years old, now that you're so clever?' she said in an awful voice, 'You want to be the only educated one in the family. I'm rubbish am I? Wastecare, am I? Little jerk.' I felt bad (134).

Within this fragment, the difficulties of the relationship for Tawera are evident. On a personal level, he is aware that his relationship with Baby No-Eyes is becoming isolating since none of his peers can see her, let alone understand her existence. He tries to downplay her presence, but Baby No-Eyes has no interest in being sidelined. She is demanding and manipulative, placing him in the tough situation where he is conflicted between his individuality and his obligations to his sister.

Looking at this fragment in the context of the novel as a whole, however, presents a more complex picture. In Kura's day, the sister who did not conform to the expectations of an oppressive schooling system could not survive. Kura as the one charged to look after her forever feels loss, burdened by her failure to fulfil her responsibility, and guilt for conforming to a system that effectively took her sister's life. This theme of children taking responsibility for their siblings with enduring pain is also explored in Te Paania's stories. Within this context, and considering that whanau is more than just family, it is the conduit and connector of history and the traditions of ancestors, Baby No-Eyes seems less petulant and more of an activist, demanding to be given her place and to be valued for who she is, not who the system perceives her to be. This further reiterates how inconceivable it is to this whanau that the authorities in the hospital should presume to harvest her eyes and then discard her as an unwanted byproduct of the accident.

At the same time, Tawera is embroiled in a tug of war between duty to his sister, and acceptance at school. Through the course of the day Tawera continues to be torn. His acceptance of her is unquestioned – 'You're my sister, I'm your brother, I'm your eyes' (134)

– and there is a moment showing remarkable insight when Tawera finds a way to explain colour to his sister: Grey, for example, 'is like putting your tongue out and licking a window, starting from the bottom and going right up to the top' (135). This heart-warming moment is set against the heart-breaking moment when Tawera is admonished after another child reports that he was up a tree at morning break with no clothes on. He hadn't been able to refuse Baby No-Eyes who wanted to play tree-climbing elephants. As he grows older, points of difference and unusual behaviour become less likely to be tolerated as expressed by his teacher:

> 'I'd better explain that it's something you can't do at school without there being trouble.'
> 'It's how we play elephants,' I said.
> 'I see, but still you can't play that game at school. People – children, parents, teachers – will complain about anyone who's without their clothes.'
> 'I understand,' I said.
> 'And you need to work more quietly. Who do you talk to, Tawera?'
> But I couldn't answer that. (136-7)

The conventional world is starting to close in on Tawera and Baby No-Eyes, and what drives the shape of this fragment is the emotional development of Tawera. The considerable burden of responsibility for his sister is becoming more complicated as he is growing up, and the wider social implications of being bound to someone invisible at age eight is starting to become apparent. Tawera has a moment of triumph when he discovers he can communicate with Baby No-Eyes silently, but later that night the frustrations of the day get the better of him. He 'suddenly felt niggly and tired' (140). Finally in the safety of home, he defies his sister, excluding her from the conversation with his mother. Uncharacteristically challenging, Tawera

questions his mother about how valued he is in the family, accusing her of using him as a way to keep Baby No-Eyes occupied:

> All that sideways looking. All that thinking and planning and having to remember to talk in my head. All that being pinched and poked and shoved and squeezed. It wasn't fair at all, I had to blame someone. 'What do you care Mum,' I said,' You didn't even have a very good reason for making me. It was only so I could babysit my big sister, keep *her* off your back, out of your hair, out of your eyes, your head, your ears.' (140-141)

While he has been content to be defined by Baby No-Eyes up until now, Tawera has reached an age where his own identity is important. He wants to know about himself, beyond Baby No-Eyes and, in particular, to know about his father. A week later when Te Paania affirms for Tawera the integrity of his father and opens her arms to him, he takes the moment for himself and his mother: 'I climbed onto Mum's knee, leaned against her and put my face on her neck. I spread myself on her lap. deliberately taking up all the room' (142). Taking up all the room is significant because it further reinforces the fact that Tawera is able to claim his own place and is learning how to navigate his relationship with Baby No-Eyes on his own terms. By the end of the chapter this particular narrative arc is complete. Tawera has reached some resolution, he has taken another step towards growing up, towards independence. And Grace marks this development by declaring one of her circular narrative arcs has run its course:

> 'Mum, you're right up with the telling of it now,' I said. 'You've caught up to me – that boulevard, bumping along, those aliens, those reversible dancers. I know the rest. But tell me about this work you do with earphones clapped over

> your ears, eyes bugging out behind your glasses making you look like a creature – not a mother, not even a frog. Like something more than frog, beyond frog.' (142)

Having gone full circle in narrative arc, the imagery used to transition from this fragment to the next, also mirrors the Prologue. At the end of Chapter 16 Tawera asks his mother what it is in her work that has given her confidence and drive, that has made her 'something more than frog, beyond frog' In the Prologue, the unborn Tawera talks of his mother the frog, and the image, which originates well before his birth, is picked up again by Te Paania at the beginning of Chapter 17 where she becomes the narrator. As well as Tawera having completed a circle, so too has Te Paania. Chapter 17 marks a new phase for Te Paania, where she begins 'to understand what Mahaki meant when he said it was all becoming one – the old stories, the new stories…(149)'. In transitioning to 'beyond frog' Te Paania begins to connect the threads of her own life in a wider sense in the context Kura's stories of whakapapa and finding a new sense of purpose.

If Chapter 16 is a fragment concerned with growth, then the preceding chapter is the transition that facilitates it; not in a chronological sense, since Chapter 15 leads up to the birth of Tawera, but in a circular sense. Chapter 15 is the last part of Te Paania's story pre-Tawera's birth. She has reached the end of the part Tawera doesn't already know. With a pattern of movement between sections going forwards and backwards in time, chronology is fractured like this throughout the novel. Michelle Keown, in her essay 'Language and the Corporeal: Patricia Grace', discusses this ebb and flow style of patterning in the multilayered narrative of *Baby No-Eyes.* She describes Grace's storytelling as leaping back and forth between key temporal moments and perspectives creating 'ripples and reverberations' in meaning:

> Grace's approach to narrative therefore offers an alternative method of understanding memory, time, and indeed narrative itself: instead of emerging as a linear thread, each section of the narrative operates within a spiralling structure, constantly returning back to its source and pulsing outwards again (Keown 162).

The structure in Grace's *Baby No-Eyes* is a journey towards meaning; in exploring the *whakapapa* of the characters, she is anchoring them in the world, linking them to their past with layers of meaning and experience that allow them to locate their place in the present, and to project forward into the future. In describing the shape of *Baby No-Eyes* in these terms, it is easy to envisage the initial challenge to the reader (as identified by Reina Whaitiri) to keep track of the threads, to follow their path constructing the fabric of the novel in order to connect back to the beginning. What also becomes clear is that having experienced the whole, exploring *Baby No-Eyes* spatially unlocks layers of richness and complexity.

AN EVER-PRESENT PAST: CIRCLING LOSS IN *FEBRUARY* BY LISA MOORE

'Have you ever tried to figure out the difference between what you are, he said, and what you have to become?' (Moore 5). Johnny is on the brink of a sunset or sunrise – he doesn't know which. He has phoned his mother having just found out the woman he had a brief affair with in the perpetual day of Icelandic summer is pregnant with his child. A tragedy or a blessing? A beginning or an end? In this novel, the answer is likely, both. Like his mother Helen, John is shadowed by the past and struggles to grasp an elusive present, let alone embrace the future. Gabriel Weston in her review of *February* in *The Telegraph* notes that Moore's writing is reminiscent of the state of mind of her characters:

> At one stage, John muses that 'the present was always dissolving into the past', and Moore's writing reflects this, running together memory and reported speech, with observations from the present, emphasising the dynamic nature of memory and how it enables us to rewrite our lives.

This style and structure employed by Moore is consistent with Lehan's discussion of spatial form, and the emotionally-driven concerns of narrative explored in modernist writing:

> The past intact can never be regained, but it can be relived as a new experience involving the fusion of past and present, the present as a prism through which to interpret the past (Lehan 147).

The flow between past and present, and the constant reflection of the past through the prism of the present, creates a chronologically-fluid evolution in Lisa Moore's *February* which is more of a layering than a progression. Triggered by linked memories and experiences, emotion is shown as complex, and memory subjective. Some details, arguably unimportant, are microscopically exact; others more significant – like the childhood of her three daughters – are vague and at times inconsistent.

A real-life tragedy, the sinking of the *Ocean Ranger*, a Canadian oilrig, and the loss of all on board after a Valentine's Day storm in 1982, is the central pivot of *February.* Through a lens of loss, Moore examines Helen, whose husband Cal was amongst the dead. Over the course of *February,* there is a constant shifting between timeframes balancing the past against the present, where the imminent birth of John's child galvanizes a new phase in Helen's life. A map of the fragments of the novel shows they oscillate constantly between past and present suggesting the tragedy of 1982 is never far from consciousness. With Helen as the main

narrator, and John as secondary, the parallels in John's fragments provide insight into Helen's life. Inextricably the two characters are linked by not just blood, but by loss. Rather than a novel focused on leaving the past behind, of moving on, *February* is an exploration of how the past infuses the present and how loss and love are absorbed into life's continuation, because, after all, it is difficult to separate one from the other.

February is divided into five sections. Each section comprises a series of fragments, many of which fall into the timeframe denoted in their title although the fragments themselves are not necessarily bound exclusively to that timeframe. Most fragments evolve with the dynamism of memory, where one moment leads on from another, not necessarily because it comes afterwards chronologically, but because it is connected as a progression of thought. I used this clearly delineated structure as the basis for mapping *February,* driven by Helen and her exploration of loss as the principal agent:

The map of *February* (See figure 2) provides a visualisation of how the novel not only moves across timeframes, but shows the concentration of attention given to two main time periods: 1982 and late 2008/ early 2009, the present day of the novel, and the interconnectedness of the two. The distinct structure in *February*, shown in the heavy straight lines, results in a map that looks quite different to *Baby No*-Eyes where present, past and future are treated as a continuum. In *February*, there is a strong temporal context, with the narrative seesawing backwards and forwards between specific timeframes. What drives the order of fragments, however, is psychological rather than chronological. Consequently, the map shows an organic networking of overlapping connections and concentrations around and between specific events and timeframes. This networking provides a visual representation of the invisible bridges, ordering and connections I made as a reader when considering the novel spatially.

Figure 2. Map of *February*.

Positioned towards the end of the second section entitled ‘Renovations’, ‘Helen Makes Wedding Dresses’ is one of only a few undated fragments. Although it begins in the present day of the novel, rather than featuring a specific event, this chapter is more generally observational. I want to focus on this fragment because it illustrates how the novel’s present day dissolves into the past and emerges contemplating the future, something that happens on a wider level between fragments throughout the novel.

In contrast to the preceding chapter of John’s high flying risk-management job interview, ‘Helen Makes Wedding Dresses’ refers to Helen’s home-grown Wedding Dress business. The narrative swiftly moves from her individual pursuits into reflections about parenting, revealing her subversive attitude to the ‘bitter rules’ her daughters impose on their children: ‘…my girls are frugal and shrewd, but they know how to have fun. When her girls were young, Helen had an idea she wanted them to be free of guilt.’ (Moore 149). Helen herself is demonstrated to be free from guilt in this chapter as she flouts her daughter’s rules. She indulges her grandchildren, spoiling them ‘as much as she can’. She gives them pacifiers against the wishes of their mothers and joyfully watches their faces when she feeds them ice cream for the first time at five months old. Helen’s own style of parenting is portrayed here as somewhat different to the indulgent relationship she has with her grandchildren: ‘Helen had called her own children *little Christers* and told them she would lash their arses or skin their hides if they gave her any sauce, or she’d threaten to horsewhip them.’ (141). This sudden revelation of heavy-handed parenting is at odds with the hands-off approach suggested elsewhere in the novel. Certainly at times in their upbringing, it seems the girls were left to their own devices, a self-contained unit scrapping and protecting, sorting things out in their own group. On one page the girls might be described as ‘compliant’ on the next they are wilful. The effect of such inconsistencies gives a sense of the confusion and disconnect of Helen’s life in the years following Cal’s death as she navigates profound grief while trying to bring up a

young family alone. Supporting the sense that Helen is, as she describes herself earlier in the novel, 'outside', the chaotic lurching from one extreme to another, of life passing in a haze, collectively builds a picture of a mother on the one hand functioning, and on the other barely holding on. In this fragment, Moore references this but also progresses Helen beyond the role of parental responsibility to her daughters, if not to Johnny, by presenting her flippant disregard to their rules and her obliging attitude to her grandchildren.

Balanced against the blurry energetic collectiveness of her three daughters, Helen recalls her son, Johnny, in absolute clarity and detail. There is a sense the girls look after each other (and look after Helen) while Johnny is isolated and more troublesome. Moore settles down to a deeper, more serious layer when Helen remembers Johnny, the one who didn't fit in as a kid, admitting he might have been her favourite. She recalls a moment filled with possibilities; Cal overseeing Johnny playing in the ocean with a pair of Styrofoam Jesus boots that promised a miracle: 'Cal told Johnny that with these boots on, he could walk on water' (142). Juxtaposed with this joyful activity, is the mundane, the squeak of polystyrene that 'had gone through' Helen, tempering the moment of hilarity when John's legs scissored and the boots floated off 'sailing on their way in the wind'. With Johnny, as with Helen, tragedy always lurks behind happy memories: '… after his father died, Johnny was afraid of water' (142). Such remembrance in *February* results in an inevitable circle back to loss – the past intact can never be regained. For Helen in 'Helen Makes Wedding Dresses', the fragments of the past are not simply things that happened before or after one another, they become inseparable from the undercurrent of loss that permeates all memories.

In spite of Johnny being the 'favourite', he is of greatest concern to Helen. While he has climbed the career ladder to a well-paying job that takes him to exotic locations, he is detached, without an anchor. She may not have his education, but Helen has the measure of Johnny, and as he faces the fact a stranger is about to be the mother of his child, Helen's

observations about him raise questions about how equipped he is to cope. John is capable of hard work, but he sometimes drinks – a lot. He forgets to call, sometimes he is remote, and there is one raw and somewhat blatant observation that leaps starkly from the page – he can lie easily when it suits him.

Moore times the dynamics in her narrative style to be hard-hitting. Out of a seemingly benign domestic scene concerned with making wedding dresses and grandmotherly indulgences, she laces a happy childhood memory of Helen's favourite son with the tragedy that shapes their lives, and as these fragments within the fragment rub up against each other they culminate in exposing him as scarred and vulnerable. Helen may not agree with her daughter's rules, but there is the sense they are truthful, resourceful, and resilient. With Johnny, she recognises he is damaged and this complicates how he will navigate impending fatherhood.

Directly preceding 'Helen Makes Wedding Dresses' is a fragment told from John's point of view concerned with his interview for a well-paid, sought-after job in risk management. 'John's Job Interview, 2005' explores John's relationships with the oil industry, as well as his personal relationships. While the chapter is framed by the interview, it shifts from the interview room to family, to John's failed relationship with Sophie and the loss of his father. A kind of stream of consciousness is triggered by associations – the pineapples on McPherson's tie, his mother's upside-down pineapple cake, haute cuisine, love, heartbreak, the flashing light on McPherson's phone, the messages on the hotel phone and so on.

Throughout the novel there is a sense of John being special or favoured – certainly he is explored in more depth than his sisters who generally feature more as a group or a force than as individuals. In 'John's Job Interview, 2005', Helen has to defend herself and John against accusations from the girls that she fobbed them off with secretarial school, nursing, retail and marriage while encouraging John to go to university. She protests: '…I said education… I said it to Cathy and I said it to Lulu and I said it to Gabrielle and I said it to John. I said education

to all my children.' (134). However, while the girls have their own successes, and Gabrielle is at Arts college, John is the only one to date who has graduated with the degree highly-prized by his mother.

The degree that sets John apart from his family also sets him apart from the men on the rig. He says: 'Oil was like the military – they trained their own, and they wanted you to learn their way. On the rig, if you had a degree they thought you were full of yourself' (137). In unexpectedly graphic imagery, John's previous job of selling drill bits is described in sexual terms: 'The bits were hard and the sea floor wet and it resisted and finally gave, and there was nothing a good bit couldn't penetrate…' (139. Implicit in this imagery is a sense of something primal about the oil industry and that John is not accepted implies a more fundamental problem than simply the attitude to his degree. The truth is, he does not have what it takes. It's his fear of water, related to his father's death, that kept him off the rigs. Such contrasts swirl throughout the chapter demonstrating that the loss of his father remains significant in John's present, leaving him vulnerable and detached. Facing the opportunity to enter a highly-paid elite and the community that goes with it, he is mindful of a night spent in a hotel listening to hundreds of messages on the answer phone – a lonely and bleak image, glimpsing snippets of humanity, of other people's lives. Loss and loneliness go hand in hand and are an undercurrent for John, and the impressive salary does not make up for his father's death.

That there is a divide between John and his roots is further explored in the suggestion he has risen above the rest of his family. John's observations of McPherson's novelty tie depicting pineapples on skateboards peppers the interview, an unexpected, distracting and crass element undermining McPherson's credibility and suggesting this job might not be all John had hoped for. Pineapples are also associated with his proletarian upbringing. Helen had made one cake her whole life – a pineapple upside-down cake. For her the cake was a matter of ease and efficiency, fulfilling a requirement and this foolproof 'crowning culinary achievement'

was a cake that could be made over a campfire or 'if you had to, you could make in a bomb shelter' (132). Even though Helen had kept John out of the kitchen as a child, he has risen above her utilitarian approach to cuisine;

> You grow up with a mother whose specialty is pineapple upside-down cake and you learn to cook. He had a two-hundred-dollar bottle of truffles in his kitchen. (135)

John's pretensions, exposed in his attitude to his mother's cooking, are further exacerbated by the fact her advice on the merits of a good education was delivered while she whipped the cake batter. In spite of Helen's encouragement, it was Sophie, the ex-girlfriend, who persuaded him to go back to university, not his mother.

The effect of all these fragments appearing in the same section is to build a more complex narrative going beyond a series of anecdotes. Superficially, the chapter is about a job interview with flashbacks to John's upbringing and his breakup with Sophie. Viewed spatially, however, considering how the fragments impact on one another, this fragment reveals a complex representation of John's psychological state, which in turn can be extrapolated into a more general consideration of the effects of loss. Having realized the academic aspirations expounded by his mother while remaining gripped by the loss of his father, John is revealed to be highly qualified but isolated. Here, finally, with a company who appreciates his degree, the integrity that John had hoped for is compromised, as echoed in some of the few words he utters in the interview:

> There was a culture of safety, Mr. McPherson told John, that was detrimental to efficiency. That's what we want to trim.
>
> Trim, John repeated.

Absolutely, Mr McPherson said. (138)

While John's words indicate he is on the same page as Mr, McPherson, his affirmation is hollow, positioned as it is before the carnal associations about drill bits, and before envisaging his father's death. McPherson may be satisfied with John's allegiance to the values of the company, but beneath the surface, John's personal discomfort and conflict is further confirmed.

Characteristically, as she moves towards a visceral moment, Moore hones in on mundane detail. Confirming to Mr. McPherson that his father died on the *Ocean Ranger*, John focusses on his father's glasses. They'd found his father's glasses tucked in his shirt pocket and, therefore, presumed that he'd taken his glasses off and folded them away in his pocket before he jumped. This commonplace consideration of the glasses leaves the reader unprepared for the hard-hitting brutality of what comes next:

> … and then he probably jumped. His father would have had all his bones broken if he jumped from that height. But he might still have been alive when he hit, John thinks. John imagines he was alive. He has always imagined it that way.
>
> My father knew they were going down, John said. (139)

Against this stark and raw observation, the job offer is made. More money than he had imagined. While the culmination of 'John's Job Interview, 2005' can be seen as his success – he is offered the job with spectacular pay – it can also be seen as John's ultimate betrayal of his father. John, who has risen to educational and financial opportunity far beyond the reach of his parents, now occupies a position where he will be required to view safety from the perspective of financial efficiency rather than the impact on lives.

The short chapter that follows 'Helen's Wedding Dresses', 'Helen and Louise Are Lucky, August 2008' represents a departure in style. In an interruption to the fluid movement

between past and present in most of the novel, this chapter is immediate and unusually emotionally removed. Moore reports the traumatic event of children nearly drowning as if Helen and her sister are telling their story to newspaper journalist who will write up the story along with a photograph of Louise, her 'white hair smoothed down and the zebra towel and a big smile' (144).

Sprinkled with colloquialisms, 'have a few swallies' 'look at the old lady go', 'She better Jesus make it!' there is a strong sense of two adrenalin-fired women telling what is likely to be in years to come, a good yarn about what something someone else's mishap – the mother 'gone cracked' running up and down the beach screaming as her children drift out to sea – and Louise, the determined old lady who saved the day. Consequently, this is a more removed perspective than the emotionally-connected style in the rest of the novel. Certainly Helen is shown in a different light from a parallel fragment from four pages into the novel when she charges into the ocean, challenging the bullying boys who lured her seven-year-old son into the surf. In 'Helen and Louise Are Lucky, August 2008' Helen takes a back seat to Louise, the heroine, and even seems emotionally disconnected from the plight of the mother and children.

> This poor young mother was racing up and down the beach screaming for help. She had two small children – what were they Louise? Eight and six years old maybe, and they were on an air mattress and the undertow had carried them out, and there was Louise. (page 143)

The result of 'Helen and Louise Are Lucky, August 2008' is a change in focus. It is concerned with the heroism of Louise, rather than the near-death experience of the children and a mother's anguish. By itself, this is a brief, isolated fragment, a potentially grave event recounted in a light-hearted tone. Perhaps when viewed in conjunction with the rest of the novel, at this point

almost half way through, and chronologically just before Barry, the carpenter who will form an important relationship with Helen, begins the renovations on Helen's house, this chapter is a signal of a change in perspective, of survival, of triumph, a sense that it is not too late.

The fragmented structure of *February* lends itself to the circularity of grief and loss. While life continues, the *Ocean Ranger* disaster of 1982 will forever haunt Helen and her family. How it shapes their lives, however, as time passes bringing new life and new love, is an evolving process. Sarah Crowne in her review in *The Guardian* describes *February* as:

> …. a novel which takes a moment of catastrophe and focuses not on the moment itself but on all the moments that surround it; that are altered, subtly or dramatically, by it. 'Forty thousand died in an earthquake in China,' Helen reads in the paper; she 'cannot conceive how that many can be lost at once. What does her life add up to in the face of that?' Moore's gift is to show us, in a novel that stands as a candid atomisation of mourning in all its endlessness and banality.

Moore's fragmented approach is both internal and external, an exploration of inner pain against the external continuum of life, a juxtaposition of lucid moments imprinted with detail against the blur of recollection. While John's situation provides momentum, the sum of the fragments is an examination of Helen, and the complexities of loss coalescing with the discovery of new love which frees her from the confines of grief, but does not deny what came before with Cal. Mapping *February* provides a visual demonstration of spatiality in this narrative; in the dynamism of memories, the circularity of life and death, and how emotional progression is not linear, rather a constant rubbing up of experiences, anchored in this case, by a singular catastrophic event.

EULOGY: FRAGMENTATION, AND THE CREATIVE PROCESS

In the workshop when I made my grandiose claims about spatial form, I was challenged about what I perceived to be the 'complexity' resulting from fragmented narrative. A conscious muddling up of time frame, it was mooted, served only to give the reader the additional challenge of working out the chronology. That in itself was surely more of an annoyance than a complexity. I hastened to clarify that my exploration of fragmented narrative was neither a wilful disruption of time nor a suggestion that temporally-driven narrative cannot also be complex.

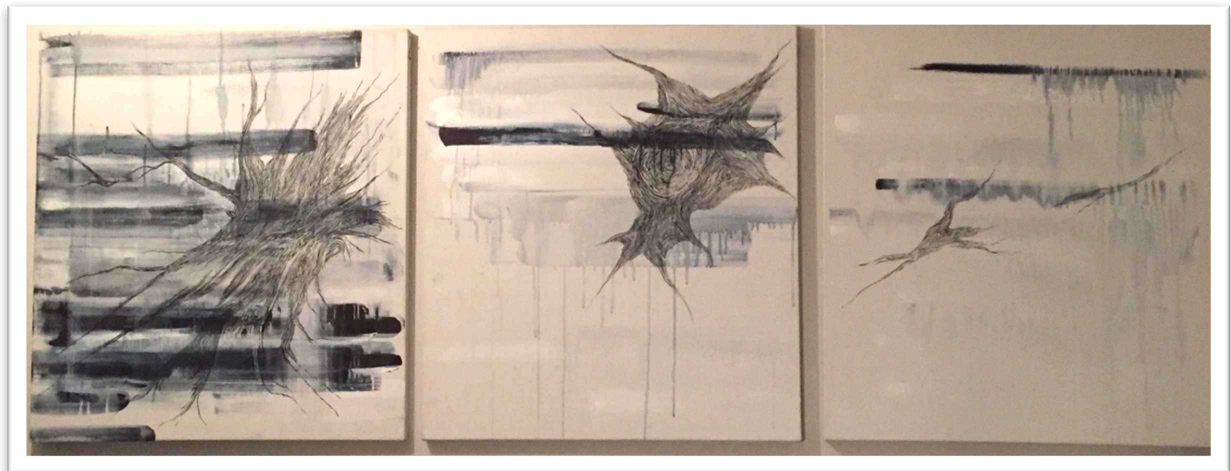
In embarking upon *Eulogy*, I set out to write an emotionally-driven narrative. The first section I wrote was 'Eulogy', which appears as the first fragment in the novella. In a conversation with a friend about how the dynamics of relationships can turn on their head in a moment – from being unified to fractured, and vice versa – he told me he and his partner never sleep estranged by an argument, they never go to bed with 'cold shoulders'. I wondered what if… what if my narrator in the height of an argument never got that chance to realign, a chance to make up. What if she lost her partner after 'wishing him dead'? What complexity of emotions would she experience as she prepares to deliver the eulogy at his funeral? Not only is there sudden loss, the grief of losing a loved one, but the added complication that the circumstances of the accident were fuelled by an unresolved argument and that her final words to him were tragically prophetic. The exploration of these 'what ifs' provided internal momentum for the novella and determined that the progression between fragments would be emotionally driven triggers rather than chronology.

As a relatively new writer, my approach was informed by more established creative processes from other fields. Character and narrative are important aspects of my job as an experienced costume designer in the film industry. I start the design process with a narrow view, identifying and defining character, then expand wide, responding to the script with a

view to defining a 'basin' from which to extract ideas. In creating and defining the basin, it follows there will be a consistency in everything coming out of it, and within these confines there is freedom to focus closely, to really develop and individualise characters. Generating cohesive vision within the work I produce, as well as between my work and the rest of the film, is crucial to successful design. My contribution does not stand alone – it is a collaboration, enhancing and enhanced by the work of a creative team in other areas of design, cinematography, direction and performance.

As the antithesis to design, stimulated by a desire to keep ideas fresh and my mind open to seeing things differently, I paint. Where design is exacting and considered, my paintings are abstract, gestural and raw. However, similarities can be drawn between my design process and how I go about constructing a painting. They both involve a process of expansion and contraction, and both have an element of collaboration. I almost always produce large works made up of a series of smaller works. Figure 3. *Imprint: Storyboard 1-3.*

Starting with a single drawing I select smaller frames from within the drawing which



are then cut out and re-assembled. This forms the basis for individual canvases that collectively make up a single work, a new cohesive whole. I call my artworks 'story boards'

The assembly of the smaller works – the order, balance and collaboration between them – is as important as the paint on the canvas.

Figure 4. *Squall: Storyboard 1-12.*

There is something hard to articulate that determines the choice of the original fragments and the order of the reconfigured works. Aesthetic is a factor, but it is a response between the fragments that dictates selection, application and order. What I hadn't consciously realised until I saw that someone else had hung one of my works with the panels butted up against each other, is how important the space between the fragments is to allow dialogue between pieces. In design, too, the relationship within and between elements adds layers and depth to the collaborative process of storytelling in film and television, an alchemy that resembles the power contained in the 'space in between' that I am exploring in my MCW.

When considering creative process, I believe the patterns and links I explore in the disciplines of painting and design explain why I am drawn to fragmented narrative, why mapping is a useful tool for me and why I chose to write a character-driven novella. In *Eulogy,* I took the approach to writing as being a process of discovery. Rather than following a life, starting at the beginning and unfolding consecutively, the narrative is emotionally driven and told in the first person as an exploration of the complexities of loss. The impetus is a single traumatic event. Bookending the work, the narrator delivers a eulogy for her partner, killed in an accident after an argument. In this moment she experiences complex emotions; grief, anger, love, joy. To springboard the arc of the narrative, I asked why the narrator might experience such an array of emotions, and how she might be equipped to possibly survive such loss. In order to answer these questions, I chose to explore the tapestry that makes her who she is, and this, in turn, lent itself to a fragmented narrative, a narrative with a sense of collecting and assembling memories to explore the intensity of emotions surrounding loss and to make sense of the present.

Each section in *Eulogy* is a memory fragment. The narrator slides between telling events of her childhood through the eyes of a child, and from a more knowing adult perspective,

as an adult looking back. In this way, the complexities of how her life has been shaped are explored. The fragments alone are a kind of snapshot. Collectively they jostle together to build a deeper picture of the narrator's struggles with loss, through exploration of love, identity and the complexity of relationships. The reader gains insight into who she is and why she feels the things she feels as she delivers Dean's eulogy, and understands the source of the strength that will carry her into the future.

The more sections I wrote, the more apparent the importance of order became, and with it a consideration for the spaces in between. Certainly if the sections were to work together to create a larger whole, the space between could not be empty. How the sections related spatially determined the invisible bridges spanning the gaps, as well as the balance of one section against another. At this point mapping (See figure 5) became valuable.

Even though I had all the fragments in my head, being able to see the puzzle helped determine the order. The individual fragments ceased to be their own entities as the patterns and links between drew them together to make up a larger overarching narrative. At the same time, other characters gained dimension and life, and, much in the way memory is layered, I found I needed the narrator to create layers in the supporting characters, of Dean, Dad, Mum, Esther and Felicity.

At the same time as mapping the relationships between characters, I created a timeline. Even though the order of the fragments in *Eulogy* does not adhere to the timeline, in order for the puzzle to fit, I needed to be clear about the order of events so that concerns about chronological inaccuracy did not detract from the reader's experience. Solidifying when a fragment took place was also useful in checking the tone of the piece, for example in considering whether the focalisation of the narrator was appropriate for the age she was at the time.

Figure 5. Map of *Eulogy*.

While I never envisaged they would be read singularly, I initially approached *Eulogy* as a series of linked, stand-alone stories. As my creative and critical research evolved, my approach to *Eulogy* became more specific and complex. Rather than stand alone stories, it became clear my impetus was a psychologically driven single work. I changed my thinking from writing a series of stories and began viewing and developing them as fragments of a single larger work pivoting around the theme of loss. Consideration of the space between fragments, how they interacted spatially, meant that far from being stand alone, they were the opposite – they were dependent upon each other As these individual fragments accumulated and I built a more comprehensive picture of the narrator, it also emerged that in the process of exploring loss, I was equally exploring love, and that in revealing the complexities of the narrator, I was also creating a eulogy.

THE SUM OF THE PIECES

My process in writing *Eulogy* was to make decisions that best served my narrative, rather than to diligently execute a work illustrating a particular form. While I believe I have produced a cohesive whole made up of fragments, the order of which has been primarily driven by emotional connection, and that a successful work of this kind likely expounds some aspects of spatial form, it is hard as the creator to determine the effects of the spaces in between. A reader makes connections between fragments. As the creator I already have in my mind more information than the sum of the pieces on the page.

With a single narrator, the shape of my overall narrative is less complicated than the novels I examined. With multiple narrators, *Baby No-Eyes* has a dynamic structure coupled with the added pathos of the cultural relevance in the link between its structure and the Maori oral tradition, as well as a wider political and social context. *February* has strong temporal concerns that are explored spatially with a psychologically driven ordering of fragments. There

was certainly never any intention in *Eulogy* to emulate either *Baby No-Eyes* or *February*. However, the study and the mapping of both has been revealing and beneficial to the creative process of bringing all the fragments of *Eulogy* together, as well as understanding the mechanics and power of a spatial approach.

Baby No-Eyes and *February* both have an aspect of retrospection in their consideration of loss, with the pivotal tragic event happening some time before the present day of both novels. In *Eulogy*, I was interested in a sense of immediacy, of delving into the emotional complexity in the 'here and now' of a moment of loss. The jumps in time are concerned with exploring the sum of the narrator's past as an examination of the way she feels in the present moment of the novella, but also to give a sense of how she is equipped to approach the future. In a sense, this idea seems to conceptually encompass the notion of spatial form where the connection between past and present creates another level of interpretation. Similarly, with memory as the impetus for narrative, and a pared back style of writing focused on the psychology of the narrator, *Eulogy's*, narrative drive is a nod to the concerns of modernist writers.

I found the 'space in between' intriguing, and here are some literal references in *Eulogy*. It was a natural progression to extrapolate fragmentation and spatial form in the artworks the narrator creates. Her artworks are almost all cumulative pieces involving re-ordering fragments and encompass an aspect of time. Not surprisingly, since spatial form is a function of psychologically driven narrative, I also drew parallels between form and narrative when articulating the narrator's relationships. This is specifically expressed by the narrator when she delivers her eulogy: 'If only we had chosen the stillness of the space between us.'

The significance of time has been interesting, how it plays through the concept of whakapapa in *Baby No-Eyes* and how it provides markers for the fragments in *February* to vacillate and balance between timeframes. As narrative unfolds, chronological ordering is an automatic reader response. With multiple narrators, the proximity of another viewpoint of the

same event provides an additional opportunity for complex spatial interaction. Of the three works, *Eulogy* has the most obvious and contained chronological progression since with the single narrator, what happens before directly affects what happens next. I attempted to explore events spatially as well as chronologically by revisiting them at a different point in the narrative as more details and relevancy unfolded.

If I found myself again in a situation where I was trying to describe fragmented narrative and what happens in the 'space in between', I would still be inclined to suggest a visual connection. I would modify my statement to clarify that I'm not suggesting fiction is *exclusively* a visual medium, but I would argue that the aspect of spatial form in fiction lends itself to being described in visual terms and that describing it visually is helpful to illustrate and understand the mechanics of spatial form. In my enquiry, the language surrounding this discussion has strong visual connotations; bridge, spiral, link, space, gap, linear, spatial, circular, fragment, whole, pattern, seeing and so on. How else can space and unsaid words be articulated other than in some form of visualisation and how can the gaps be represented on paper other than diagrammatically? What I propose as a writer of fiction, is the usefulness of mapping to identify and articulate the invisible bridges and links that are formed in spatially-driven narrative and to demonstrate the balance between time and space in a narrative. Like Mitchell, I recognise the importance of both spatial and temporal elements to narrative. Nonlinear narrative provides fewer direct connections than linear narrative, encouraging the reader to actively create links, weighting fragmented narrative towards spatial consideration. Neither superior not inferior to temporally-driven narrative, the challenge and pleasure of fragmented narrative is to make the intangible 'space in between' tangible, and through the collaboration of fragments to express something more than the sum of the parts, to convey something new.

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