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Windows and Mirrors: Representing the Self and Another in the Personal Essay

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

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## Abstract

This Master of Creative Writing research project consists of two parts: a critical essay exploring how authors of the personal essay weave together their voice with the voices of others, and my own collection of personal essays exploring how to do the same.

The critical essay examines personal essays by Alexander Chee, Valeria Luiselli and Leslie Jamison. In each of these essays, the author draws attention to an issue of wider significance by weaving together their own stories with the stories of one or numerous others. I have chosen these three authors and essays because they demonstrate the varied narrative positions an author of personal essays can use in writing other's stories and stories about broader public issues. For example, Chee is alongside the AIDS epidemic but not a victim in the traditional sense of living with and dying from AIDS. Luiselli is both within and alongside the migration crisis as she is a Mexican woman going through the immigration process even if she did not ride La Bestia to get to America, like most of her interviewees did. While Jamison is a patient herself using her story to represent the story of others. The shift in perspective of the three essays, ranging from Chee's alongside the issue to Jamieson's inside, shows possibilities for how an author might highlight an issue of wider significance regardless of their position in relation to the issue, witness, insider or somewhere in between.

I argue that weaving together personal stories with the stories of others allows broader issues to emerge as the story transcends the individuals involved. Each author uses different techniques to achieve this, showing the scope of possibilities that I could adapt to my own collection.

The creative component of my thesis is a collection of personal essays. My essays have their roots in the everyday experiences of life. By writing these essays, I have tried to make sense of what it means to be human. For example, what does it mean to be a daughter? What

does death look like when it shows up unexpectedly? And when it is long waited for? How can I describe the symbiosis between my body, heart and mind? How can I describe dreams or luck or loss? How can I make visible the hidden choices that make up all of our lives, the compromises we make juttled up against the small victories. My essays describe the human experience as seen through my eyes. In some essays, my eyes gaze upon the experience of others and witness their moments of struggle and growth within the minutia of everyday life. I have sought to capture their voice in these moments while also sharing how their experiences have impacted and changed me. Some of the experiences are universal and can be recognised by others as they read, and some experiences will be novel and specific to me or those I write about.

As the authors explored in the critical essay presented many different techniques for weaving their story together with that of another, I have experimented with those possibilities. The resulting collection includes a range of subjects in various formats, including one instance of autobiographical fiction.

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## Preface

2020 and 2021 were difficult years to be writing and not just for the obvious reasons. The COVID-19 pandemic is not a character in my stories, but its presence is undeniable. Repeated lock-downs where I live in Tamaki Makaurau, Auckland, teaching from home and extended time apart from loved ones have created an altered reality that we may or may not come back from. I can only wonder if the outcome for my mother would have been different if she had become unwell with RSV outside of the COVID-19 pandemic. I am at her bedside now only because it is likely that she is dying. There have been times in this thesis that I have been afraid to write. Afraid to acknowledge the truth of my situation and equally afraid not to. There are days of utter paralysis and days where I pay for each word in tears and sweat. That is not unique to me, and I take comfort in the struggle of writers around the globe. This is what it means to show up with something to say. No one ever said it would be easy. Reading over this time has been an escape from my reality into the stories of Alexander Chee, Valeria Luiselli and Leslie Jamison. Experiencing their journey through their words reminded me that I am not experiencing this life alone and maybe, in turn, my words may provide solidarity for someone else.

Looking back across the landscape of my writing, I can see many crucible moments, moments of struggle that result in growth or transformation. The stories are like baby birds fighting their way out of the egg or moths and butterflies from their chrysalis. Yet, through the struggle, they gain life. Significant issues that emerge include death and loss, trauma and growth, and what it means to be a mother, a daughter, a teacher, a runner, or, more broadly speaking, a human being.

I have titled this work as a whole *Windows and Mirrors* because each essay in this creative collection is an opportunity to look out at the world from a particular viewpoint and also a chance to see ourselves reflected. By which I mean, each essay is a way to see the world



and see ourselves in the world. More windows and mirrors are provided by looking at the world through the work of others, an experience explored in the critical component of the thesis that precedes the creative work. Together, they build a view of the world.

Critical Component:

One Voice, Multiple Stories:

The Integration of 'another' in the Personal Essay

The world can be an overwhelming place. The constant bombardment of news content from multiple sources has created the phenomenon of news fatigue, leaving people feeling numb and powerless. One person can't solve climate change or end wars, but they still feel the burden of those issues. The gap between concern about an issue and the ability to positively impact that issue is one of the causes of news fatigue. When problems are so big, we can do nothing as individuals to solve them; we often try to manage the issue by breaking it down into something measurable or tangible. We create distance between ourselves and the problem by creating statistics and pain scales and identifying body parts, symptoms and diagnoses. We either move away from the big picture to look only at the details, the subpersonal, or we zoom out to the macro level to see everything from a distance, the super-personal.

In the creative non-fiction genre, personal essays use literary techniques to tell true stories. Personal essays have the ability to refocus the lens so that the individual person is visible. They can give a face to the AIDS epidemic, help us see the child in the wave of refugees, or humanise patients. This essay, the critical component of this thesis, examines how three contemporary North American creative non-fiction writers, Alexander Chee, Valeria Luiselli and Leslie Jamison, integrate their own stories with the stories of others in order to create personal texts with wider significance. It closes with a brief discussion of how I have used these essays as a model for my own collection of personal essays. These writers push back against people's detachment against the horror that specific issues present. In particular, I ask what techniques they use to tell the lives of others? I focus primarily on three essays, 'After Peter' by Alexander Chee from his book, *How to Write an Autobiographical Novel*, 'Border' by Valeria Luiselli from her book, *Tell Me How It Ends*, and 'The Empathy Exams' by Leslie Jamison from her book, *The Empathy Exams*. I examine the ways in which all three essays use a robust

personal perspective and integrate the voices and stories of others while bringing to the forefront wider issues.

## 9,000 DEAD IN THE CITY

The creative non-fiction essay, 'After Peter', by Alexander Chee is a eulogy for Peter David Kelloran, a friend and one-time boyfriend to Chee. It comes from Chee's collection, *How to Write an Autobiographical Novel*, but was first published in 2001 in *Loss Within Loss*. *How to Write an Autobiographical Novel* includes essays about a multitude of Chee's experiences, from being a drag queen to writing his first novel. Through 'After Peter' Chee shares his own loss at the hands of HIV AIDS, giving a human face to the epidemic. Chee does this by employing different voices, interweaving them throughout the essay. Chee uses the voice of others through hearsay to tell the story of Peter from beyond his direct experience. Chee also draws upon his memories of Peter and the AIDS epidemic to show his personal loss. Finally Chee takes on the voice of an observer to keep Peter at the centre of the story and himself on the periphery. The interweaving of these three voices allows the reader to see Peter as representative of the enormous loss caused by the AIDS epidemic.

Chee uses the voice of others through hearsay to tell the story of Peter from beyond his own direct experience. Chee opens the essay with Peter's death story, an event he was not present for and did not hear about until three months had passed. Chee uses the words of those present to tell the story. "He died in his bed at the age of thirty-three on the afternoon of May 10, 1994, at the Maitri Hospice in San Francisco" (74), he tells us. The essay uses quotations from the people who were present to describe Peter's death and, by extension, the deaths of thousands from HIV AIDS. For instance, he writes, "'And then he started to go,' his friend Laura Lister says" (74). The second-hand accounts of Peter's death have enough detail to allow Chee and the reader to imagine the scene, what it would have been like to witness the event for themselves, the shock, relief and grief they would have experienced. At the time,

deaths from AIDS would have been commonplace in some circles but still new enough to be shocking. By using the words of others to allow the reader to imagine Peter's death, Chee shows us one specific human face of the AIDS tragedy, one that he loved.

Later on in the essay, Chee is able to use the voice of others to fill in the gaps in Peter's life. "Here is everything I never knew about Peter" (87). He uses quotes from friends and loved ones to tell the story Peter never shared with Chee, and Chee was only ever able to hear secondhand. As Chee states, "Peter's story continued without me, to its end" (87). Chee writes this section as a traditional biography, including travel, education, and employment details. This enables him to show us the pieces of Peter he was not able to see for himself. He shows us the son, the friend, and lover Peter was to other people. Chee shows us Peter as a complete human, one of the thousands who contracted AIDS in the 1980s and died.

Chee also draws upon his own memories of Peter and the AIDS epidemic to show his personal loss. Peter was twenty-eight when Chee first noticed him. Peter had come into the bookstore where Chee worked. The narrator in the essay describes him as "tall and broad-shouldered and thin. He had a wide Irish frame and usually wore leather: a motorcycle jacket, boots. A dyed blue tuft of his hair glowed across his forehead... I'd seen him at demonstrations" (75). We learn that Peter was active in bringing awareness to the HIV/AIDS epidemic with ACT UP and Queer Nation and participated in many demonstrations. Chee moved in the same circles, but they had never met. He writes, "I supposed, the first day I saw Peter, he'd either seroconverted recently or had recently decided to do something about it. I saw many people in this way, on their first few days, and I was forever inventing some story about them" (75). Chee's essay 'After Peter', in a sense, comes from this same impulse, the desire to tell stories about people and their lives. It was another year before Peter and Chee spoke. Chee writes, "I didn't know his name or anything about him, except that he was

handsome in a way that made me lose my breath, and he was hurrying away. And that he was possibly, probably, positive” (76).

In ‘After Peter,’ Chee develops the story of Peter by describing his memories of San Francisco, where his and Peter’s stories take place. San Francisco was the epicentre of the AIDS epidemic in the 80s and 90s, and Chee was confronted by its aftermath everywhere. Chee uses the setting to allow the reader to see beyond Peter’s story to the community he represents. Chee provides faces and moments that transform the statistics of the HIV/AIDs epidemic into people; real people with loved ones, hopes for the future, and fear. “The store was the first in the country to have a selection devoted entirely to AIDS/HIV issues...,” he writes, “I saw many people in this way, on their first few days... I was often the first person they had to deal with after being diagnosed, a bookstore clerk who would show them the short shelf of books” (75). The reader can imagine, through Chee’s evocation of scene, a parade of newly diagnosed HIV sufferers passing through the bookstore in a fog of disbelief and fear. He prompts the reader to ask, how would it have been to interact with these people, so vulnerable and confused after diagnoses, as they sought answers in a bookstore? What must it be like to play this role in an unfolding epidemic no one is talking about? As McCormack wrote in the *New York City Times*, Chee “reminds us that whomever a writer pictures as his audience, he is also writing into absence, standing in testimony for the sake of the dead”.

As a gay man living in San Francisco in the 90s, Chee presents himself as hyper-aware of the HIV/AIDS epidemic surrounding him. We learn he was an activist and was surrounded by AIDS every day. In ‘After Peter,’ Chee remembers the moment he put “the empty clothes together with the empty apartments” (77). In San Francisco, he tells us, it was not unusual to buy clothes and bric-a-brac directly off the sidewalk from the owner. He writes about seeing a man who:

Was thin, thin in a way that was immediately familiar. Hollowing from the inside out. His skin reddened, and his brown eyes looked over me as if lightning might fall on me out of that clear afternoon sky. And I knew then, as I paid twenty dollars for the boots, that they'd been recently emptied. That he was watching me walk off in the shoes of the newly dead. And that all of this had been happening for some time now (77).

What Chee represents himself as understanding at that moment is that the boots he just purchased, along with all the other clothes and bric-a-brac, represent a life lost and the person selling them is a person grieving that loss while simultaneously preparing to undergo the same fate. He shows us how he became able to read the signs to put together the story of pain and loss from what is left behind. Through this memory, Chee asks the reader to imagine what it must be like to stand on the sidewalk, selling the belongings of your newly dead friend. He asks us to imagine what it must be like to watch those belongings move into the hands of strangers who would never know the life they had before. What it must be like to imagine one of your friends standing in your place in the not too distant future, selling your belongings. In this way, Chee provokes the reader to use their imagination. He invites them to understand what it must be like to confront their own mortality.

Chee takes on the voice of an observer, keeping Peter at the centre of the story and himself on the periphery. The narrator describes Peter's life the way one might describe a crush or celebrity. Peter rarely addresses Chee directly, such as when asking for his phone number. All other descriptions are as if Chee is the viewer casting his gaze upon Peter, admiring him. "I don't know how Peter saw me. I'll never know. How I saw him: Peter at Cafe Flore, sitting in a



sunlit window, surrounded by friends; Peter walking a dark sidewalk, wheatpaste in a bucket in his hands, putting up flyers; Peter at meetings, standing in the back of the room, scowling slightly; Peter shining, naked, in the reflection of the mirror in his apartment as he approached his bed” (83). As a reader, we get a vague sense of Peter, the man, and instead, we come to understand how Chee feels about Peter. It is his specific version we see, built more upon partial fragments and glimpses and the imaginings that coalesce around them than from extended interactions. This view allows the reader to feel the complete loss of Peter the way Chee would have felt it.

The narrator is himself HIV Negative. It was not him that would get sick and die in the early days of the AIDS epidemic. Chee knows that he is one of the lucky ones and describes how fighting to bring awareness to HIV/AIDS saved his life. “Pictures of me at the time,” he writes, “show a thin, dark-haired young man who seems inordinately happy for someone who spent a good deal of his time wanting to be dead” (78). As Chee writes of his desire to die, he moves into the third person, creating space between himself as narrator and the young man who wanted to die. “He hollowed his desire to die with the knowledge that other people were dying who wanted to live,” he writes, “and this was the single strongest motive for his participation in direct-action AIDS activism. Being an activist meant, among other things, never being alone, and being alone was when he got into trouble. And so he made sure he was never alone” (78). Chee shows us how he was affected by his direct contact with the HIV/AIDS epidemic. He saw the lack of accurate coverage in the news media, and through his activism Chee strove to make people see the human cost of HIV/AIDS. To make people notice the tragedy happening all around them: “These kinds of actions were about resetting long-standing frameworks, ways of seeing the world that didn’t include us or our deaths” (80). Chee uses this essay as another tool to bring awareness. He makes the reader visualise the faces of those who

have been lost to HIV/AIDS and to care about them and, through that caring, maybe do something. It is also fitting that he should do this through the portrait of another, and finally as a portrait of a whole community, both the lost and those who remain.

In telling this story, Chee places himself on the edges of the story, calling himself a 'minor character'. This positioning allows Peter to remain at the centre of the story, representative of the people living with, and dying from AIDS. However, Martha Ann Toll (2018) notes that even if Chee is a minor character in Peter's story, "the reverse is not [true]," and Peter continues to star in this story even after his death.

Why am I telling this story? I am, as I've said, a minor character, out of place in this narrative, but the major characters of all these stories from the first ten years of the epidemic have left. The men I wanted to follow into the future are dead. Finding them had made me want to live, and I did. I do. I feel I owe them my survival. The world is not fixed, and the healing is still just past my imagining, though perhaps it is closer than it was. For now, the minor characters are left to introduce themselves, and take the story forward (79).

In this passage Chee shows the reader his obligation to the victims of the AIDS epidemic, Peter included. Seeing their impossible struggle to survive gave Chee a reason to live, and now he honours their memory by moving forward and telling their story, in part through this essay.

'After Peter' weaves together three voices, Chee's, Peter's and the 9,000 victims of AIDS in San Francisco during the 80s and 90s. Chee uses Peter's story as a proxy for the thousands of others whose stories we cannot know, the ones who died, while Chee's story stands in for all those who have been left behind to carry on. Chee gives the reader moments

where they are invited to imagine what it must have been like to live in San Francisco in the 1980s and 90s, see the clothes on the street and know what that means. Chee allows the reader to connect with the story, see the characters, and develop feelings for them. He evokes Peter's presence in his life and also the void he and others like him have left behind in the world.

## A Story with No Beginning, No Middle and No End

Another approach to the personal essay with wider significance is the extended creative non-fiction essay *Tell Me How It Ends: An Essay in Forty Questions* by Valeria Luiselli. In Chee's essay 'After Peter', Chee brings attention to the AIDS epidemic from his position alongside but not within the HIV/AIDS experience. He can see the devastation but will not undergo the same fate. Luiselli, on the other hand, brings attention to the refugee crisis from her position as a Mexican and recent immigrant to the United States. As one reviewer puts it, "Luiselli effectively humanizes the plights of those who have been demonized or who have been reduced to faceless numbers, the ones caught in the web of gang violence fueled by drug wars and the American arms trade" (Reynolds). The questions on the intake questionnaire for unaccompanied child migrants create the structure of the essay. It begins and ends with the first question, "Why did you come to the United States?". In the first section entitled 'Border', which also works as a standalone essay, Luiselli tells three stories. Her story of applying for a Green Card, the individual stories of child refugees travelling to America, and the broader story of how America and American's responded to the refugee crisis. Luiselli does this by framing her essay with the same questions she asked refugee children in the immigration centre, drawing upon her experience as a Mexican immigrant to America and acting as an intermediary for the children she interviewed.

In the first section of 'Border', Luiselli moves between two distinct times, 2014 and 2015. The essay opens with Luiselli in 2015 working as a volunteer interpreter for the federal immigration court in New York City, working with unaccompanied minors. It is Luiselli's job to document the children's stories, through the use of an intake questionnaire, as part of the process of determining their eligibility for 'immigration relief'. It is the first step in determining if

the child will successfully immigrate to the U.S. or be deported. Luiselli uses the questions of the intake questionnaire as a framework for her extended essay, opening the first chapter with the first question, “Why did you come to the United States?” (7). The children cannot speak their stories fluently on their own, so Luiselli’s approach is in part an effort to find other ways to tell them. She writes, “The children’s stories are always shuffled, stuttered, always shattered beyond the repair of a narrative order” (7), “they are delivered with hesitance, sometimes distrust, always with fear” (7). In *Tell Me How It Ends*, Luiselli seeks other ways to piece together the words the children give her into a story that might provide those children with a chance because the process itself does not offer much hope. “The process by which a child is asked questions during the intake interview,” she writes: “is called screening, a term that is as cynical as it is appropriate: the child a reel of footage, the translator-interpreter an obsolete apparatus used to channel that footage, the legal system a screen, itself too worn out, too filthy and tattered to allow any clarity, and attention to detail. Stories often become generalized, distorted, appear out of focus” (11). The children survived the journey against all odds, and the odds are slim that they will be allowed to stay. Luiselli uses her translation skills to help the children in the interview room but then seeks out other forms of storytelling beyond this, advocating for the children through her essay.

Luiselli weaves together her own story with refugees’ stories to bring attention to the refugee crisis by drawing upon her own experience as a Mexican immigrant to America. In ‘Border’, Luiselli describes her experience of applying for a green card, her road trip across America and the stories of unaccompanied child migrants who cross the Mexican US border. In addition, we see glimpses of her future role as a volunteer interpreter and how she came to take on this role. In this essay, Luiselli uses her insecure status as an alien as a narrative bridge to allow the reader to imagine the horrific circumstances refugee children endure to cross the

border and continue to endure once they have arrived in the United States. This essay is beneficial for understanding how an individual story can be integrated with that of others, in this case, child refugees, because Luiselli is both within and alongside the story. She is a Mexican immigrant discussing the immigration stories of South American child migrants.

In 'Border', we see Luiselli begin the process of obtaining a green card for herself and her family. Over a year has passed, and she looks back on the beginning of her story with knowledge and experience from her later work as a volunteer interpreter. Luiselli allows the reader to compare and contrast the legal process of obtaining a green card with illegal migration by describing her experiences of immigration in 2014 and her experience translating the children's stories in 2015. By representing both pathways into America, Luiselli puts her personal story in a broader context. At times this comparison is made directly:

The green card application is nothing like the intake questionnaire for undocumented minors. When you apply for a green card you have to answer things like: "Do you intend to practice polygamy?"...And although nothing can or should be taken lightly when you are in the fragile situation of asking for permission to live in a country that is not your own, there is something almost innocent in the green card's application's preoccupations with and visions of the future and its possible threats: polyamorous debauchery, communism, weak morals!... The intake questionnaire for undocumented children, on the other hand, reveals a colder, more cynical and brutal reality (10).

These two forms showcase two facets of America's many attitudes towards migrants. By showing us these two sides, Luiselli allows readers to imagine what it might be like to fill in the

paperwork asking permission to live in the country, not your birth. She enables us to empathise with her situation even as she empathises with the unaccompanied minors, showing us the issue of immigration in America.

As both essay and road trip progress, Luiselli and her family become aware of the arrival of many unaccompanied minors crossing the border from Mexico. "It's a sad story that hits so close to home," she writes, "and yet seems completely unimaginable, almost unreal: tens of thousands of children from Mexico and Central America have been detained at the border" (12). As Mexican's themselves, waiting for green cards, she and her family become obsessed with the story. "We start hunting down any available information about the situation at the border" (13). Luiselli shows how she and her family feel a kinship with the children. The children's journey across the border mirrors Luiselli's journey to achieve documented status.

Luiselli narrates how the family followed the children's story in the hopes that it would have a happy ending, but as they continue their road trip, they begin to hear news reports about protests from residents against the arrival of the children. In a photograph they find on the web, "an elderly couple holds signs saying 'Illegal Is a Crime' and 'Return to Senders'...I zoom in on their faces and wonder. What passed through the minds of Thelma and Don Christie when they prepared their protest signs? Did they pencil in 'protest against illegal immigrants on their calendars, right next to 'mass' and just before 'bingo'?" (14). Luiselli wonders if the reactions would be different were these children "of a lighter color: of better, purer breeds and nationalities. Would they be treated more like people? More like children?" (15). By sharing these memories from her road trip, Luiselli shows one example of how America and American's reacted to the mass arrival of child refugees.

Luiselli's descriptions show the reader three distinct perspectives, white Americans, nonresident and resident aliens, and illegal aliens. Luiselli is closer to an illegal alien than a

white American with her status as a nonresident alien. This kinship is shown by how Luiselli and her family feel the need to present themselves to white America as always happy, smiling and no threat, while hiding their ethnicity. On their road trip, when Border Patrol stopped them, the family needed to “display big smiles” (23) along with their passports in an effort to appear non-threatening. Luiselli represents the hostility and suspicion directed towards her family and how they have learned the best way to manage this is by appearing a certain way. Her narrative shows us how it feels to be unsafe in the country where you live simply because of where you were born and how you look. Luiselli uses her story to show the reader systemic racism and how the label ‘alien’ can override ‘human’ as a person's status in the eyes of others. Luiselli and her family immigrated to America legally, yet they are still treated with prejudice. If they are treated in this way, the essay asks readers to consider what hope the migrant children have when they seek alternative ways of entering America?

Luiselli does not simply tell her own story, but within the essay places her own children in the position of unaccompanied minors:

Sometimes, when our children fall asleep again, I look back at them, or hear them breathe, and wonder if they would survive in the hands of coyotes and what would happen to them if they were deposited at the U.S. border, left either on their own or in the custody of Border Patrol officers. Were they to find themselves alone, crossing borders and countries, would my own children survive? (18).

Luiselli read about the reality that awaited unaccompanied minors at the border throughout the road trip and struggled to understand it. “We fall silent and look out at the unbroken line of the



highway, perhaps trying to put together the many pieces of the story - the unimaginable story - unfolding just outside the small and protected world of our rented car” (17-18). She has previously described the children’s journey, and now Luiselli wonders if her own children could survive riding La Bestia. She imagines them found by Border Patrol or by vigilantes. By following the news stories of the migrant children, it is only logical that Luiselli would imagine what it would be like to endure that journey, would her own children make it or if they would become another statistic. Through the narrative of her imaginings, Luiselli puts a human face on the horrific statistics. She presents her children’s faces as the faces of unaccompanied minors. She also shows us how America has responded to the refugee crisis as shown through everyday Americans.

Luiselli acts as an intermediary for the children she interviewed to draw attention to their stories and the broader refugee crisis. In the essay, *Tell Me How It Ends*, Luiselli also uses statistics so that individual stories she has translated and documented can be situated within their wider context. She uses statistics to paint the grim reality the children she interviewed have experienced. “Eighty per cent of the women and girls who cross Mexico to get to the U.S. border are raped on the way” (26). 11,333 migrants were abducted or kidnapped in the six months between April and September 2010. Since 2006, “some sources estimate... around 120,000 migrants have disappeared in their transit through Mexico” (26). Luiselli shares these statistics so we might realise that four out of every five females she interviewed would have been rape victims, whether or not they could talk about it in their interview. She also invites us to imagine the hundreds of children she could not interview because they died on the way.

Luiselli challenges the reader to see the faces of the unaccompanied children:

Children certainly take the risk. Children do what their stomachs tell them to do. They don't think twice when they have to chase a moving train. They run along with it, reach for any metal bar at hand, and fling themselves toward whichever half-stable surface they may land on. Children chase after life, even if that chase might end up killing them. Children run and flee. They have an instinct for survival, perhaps, that allows them to endure almost anything just to make it to the other side of horror, whatever may be waiting there for them (19-20).

In this passage, she describes children, not Mexican children, not migrant children. By doing this she allows the reader to imagine their own children in this role, jumping on moving trains and chasing after life. She shows the reader the realness of the children and their humanity. She makes us wonder how anyone could want to hurt these children, how anyone could turn a blind eye to their situation. Luiselli remembers the uncovering of a mass grave in Mexico, filled with migrants who refused to be enslaved and couldn't pay a ransom. "I remember the dark days when this news broke out in Mexico - thousands of perhaps millions of people in front of newspapers, radios, and TV screens, all of them asking: How? Why? What did we do? Where did we go wrong, as a society, to make something like this possible?" (27). By sharing this story, Luiselli warns us of what happens when people turn a blind eye to the situation of others. She writes to bring awareness to the plight of unaccompanied minors before and after crossing the border. Her road trip and her alien status brought her close to the story, while her work as a volunteer interpreter overwhelmed her with individual horror stories with no end in sight. Luiselli writes as a way of doing something with the horror stories. As a way of coming to terms with them and doing something for the children who have suffered and continue to suffer. Luiselli describes what drives her to tell the children's stories:

Because - how do you explain that it is never inspiration that drives you to tell a story, but rather a combination of anger and clarity? How do you say: No, we do not find inspiration here, but we find a country that is as beautiful as it is broken, and we are somehow now part of it, so we are also broken with it, and feel ashamed, confused, and sometimes hopeless, and are trying to figure out how to do something about all that (24).

One critic describes Luiselli's subject matter as one "toward which many people have hardened their hearts — and with which many others have hit a point of empathy fatigue" (Rooney). Luiselli seeks to combat this fatigue by telling the stories she has collected, hers and others, and giving the refugees back their humanity.

## The Medicalised Self

In Luiselli's essay 'Border', Luiselli brings attention to the refugee crisis from her position as a Mexican immigrant to America. She has a position on both sides of the story. Leslie Jamison, on the other hand, in her essay 'The Empathy Exams,' is firmly situated at the heart of her story, but uses herself and her experiences to draw attention to the general vulnerability and isolation that comes with being a patient.

'The Empathy Exams' is the title essay of the collection published by Jamison in 2014. The collection explores what it means to feel the pain of others and have one's own pain acknowledged (Garner). For example, one essay is called 'Grand Unified Theory of Female Pain'. Throughout this collection, Jamison shares her stories and the stories of others around her in an effort to understand and express the human condition. Jamison uses the essay, 'The Empathy Exams' to explore the identity of the patient and allow the reader to connect with that identity. Jamison uses variations of form and structure as a vehicle to achieve this. Even within the single essay 'The Empathy Exams,' Jamison uses a range of forms to channel the voices of others. She uses first-person narrative, second-person narrative, third-person narrative, research, medical scripts, and clinic notes. Each form creates a different tone, allowing diverse voices to emerge. Jamison weaves together these various forms to fully explore the concept of empathy in the context of medicine, allowing the reader to see beyond the procedure or diagnoses to the person. It is a beneficial essay for showing how an author can tell the story of a group of people, in this instance, patients, from within that group.

Within this essay, Jamison uses first-person narrative to tell her own stories of working as a medical actor, having an abortion and having heart surgery. The first-person narrative allows Jamison to explore her thoughts, feelings and wonderings alongside the description of

the events. As a medical actor, she literally needed to imagine and then embody what it might be like to be another person. We meet her first as Stephanie Philips, “A twenty-three-year-old female patient experiencing seizures with no identifiable neurological origin” (1). Jamison shows us how someone might imagine another’s pain through her imagination of Stephanie. She makes Stephanie real to us by fleshing out her backstory and speaking of her as if she is real. The story of Stephanie is the first glimpse the reader gets of the two sides of medical interventions, the patient with their story and pain and the doctor with an endless parade of symptoms to diagnose and procedures to perform. The job of the medical actor is to assess the competence of the student doctors:

The first part is a checklist: Which crucial pieces of information did he/she manage to elicit? Which ones did he/she leave uncovered? The second part of the evaluation covers affect. Checklist item 31 is generally acknowledged as the most important category: “Voiced empathy for my situation/problem” (2-3).

Juxtaposed with the story of Stephanie Philips is Jamison’s own story of abortion and heart surgery. In this story, the stakes are raised as the interactions between Jamison and her doctors are real, and any callousness or patronisation is keenly felt. Within the essay itself, Jamison allows us to see the complete picture of her situation that a doctor would have neither the time nor the inclination to access. She shows us the effort and energy it takes to submit to a procedure, to be vulnerable and trust a stranger as they invaded her body and forever changed it. Jamison shows us her vulnerability and need for something she didn’t know how to ask for. She writes, “I sent Dave a text... I didn’t hear anything back for hours. This bothered me. I felt guilt that I didn’t feel more about the abortion; I felt pissed off at Dave for being elsewhere, for

choosing not to do the tiniest thing when I was going to do the rest of it” (8). By sharing her thoughts and conflicting emotions, Jamison evokes the emotional weight of the situation.

Jamison tells the story of the people around her story in the third-person. She describes how Dave experiences his time waiting for her during her heart surgery: “While they were sitting in the cafeteria a doctor came to find them and told them that the surgeons were going to tear through part of my arterial wall – these were the words they used, Dave said, *tear through*” (19). Through her description, we see the interconnected stories of Jamison undergoing surgery and Dave and Jamison’s family waiting outside. These moments exemplify the three voices of any medical situation, the doctor, the patient and the patient’s loved ones. Gleeson (2020) simplifies this further into two sides, “This may not be war, but there are two sides. The well and unwell; doctors and patients; staff and visitors. Susan Sontag wrote of the dual kingdoms of the well and the sick; one passport stamped, the other with the corners cut off” (114). As a healthy person, Dave is experiencing distress at what Jamison is undergoing, but he is free to go at any time. Jamison makes sure we see this.

Within the essay, she also uses scripts from training manuals and surgical clinic notes to tell her story from the perspective of another by trying on their voice. In Jamison’s role as a medical actor, training manual scripts are used to brief the actor on how to portray every element of the character they are acting. The scripts detail what to say and when and how to say it. In addition, the scripts guide the actors in how to respond to the student doctor’s examination, what details to give up under what conditions. The script for playing Stephanie Phillips appears on the very first page of the essay and is revisited and developed as the essay progresses:

## **STEPHANIE PHILIPS**

Psychiatry

SP Training Materials

**CASE SUMMARY:** You are a twenty-three-year-old female patient experiencing seizures with no identifiable neurological origin (1).

Jamison mimics the training manual scripts when describing her own medical adventure. Her version of the training manual scripts have a satirical tone that allows a surprising candour to emerge without tipping into sentimentality;

**ENCOUNTER DYNAMICS:** Answer every question like you're clarifying a coffee order. Be courteous and nod vigorously. Make sure your heart stays on the other side of the white wall behind you (24).

One effect of these impersonal scripts within the essay is to create distance between the event and her description of the event. Jamison imagines how her experience could be played by a standardised patient and, by doing so, confesses her ambivalence to her pregnancy and abortion not as herself but as an actor playing a role. By describing her pain and confusion as notes for an actor to play, Jamison is able to confess her vulnerability without shame. She allows the reader to imagine playing the part of Leslie Jamison complete with costume. By doing so the reader is able to have empathy for her as a human being going through two challenging medical interventions. Jamison presents herself as a 'standardised patient' representing countless others in similar circumstances.

In addition, Jamison uses the surgical clinic notes to clarify the difference between appearances and reality, between how people would like to present themselves to the world and their internal reality. She represents this literally on the page by offering one reality and then using strikethrough to obscure it before the next one is presented. Although the strikethrough suggests that the words partially concealed are not meant for the public record and are too raw to be presentable, the audience can still read the text. "*Patient ~~wonders if people can bring her booze in the hospital~~ likes eating graham crackers from the nurses' station*" (18). Jamison describes what she has done, "Now I can imagine another kind of tape – a more naked, stuttering tape; a tape that keeps correcting itself, that messes up its dance steps" (18). The stuttering she imagines represents a search for the right answer and an acknowledgement that the story is complex and unexpected. The words double back on themselves, and the reader must go back to the beginning of the sentence to find the meaning in the words not struck through. The reader is left considering two possible narratives – the story could be this, but it could also be this. The stuttering of the tape brings into sharp relief Jamison's ambivalence to her situation. Both the struckthrough and not struckthrough words could be true simultaneously. Jamison offers up her own experience, the pretty and the painful, as a way of imagining the experience of others. She offers her own experience as an example for others to follow. This is shown in the final post-publication essay of the collection, where Jamison discusses the responses she has received from readers, "It's about the people who looked me in the eye... and said: this gave me permission to talk about what hurt" (232).

By using different forms Jamison is able to collect a range of voices and perspectives on her own story. By trying on other voices, Jamison is able to describe events with the safety of distance. The story is no longer personal because it is no longer Jamison telling the story. By being open and vulnerable in the telling of her story, Jamison has laid bare for the reader the



cold realities of being a patient. She allows the reader to see the person amongst the procedures and have empathy for them. "A patient is not a person. A patient is a medicalised version of the self. A patient is a hospitalised double of the body. To become a patient is an act of transmutation, from well to sick, liberated citizen to confined inpatient" (Gleeson, 114). In the essay 'The Empathy Exams', Jamison aims to alleviate some of the unnecessary pain of being a patient by demonstrating empathy, both for herself and others.

## Conclusion

What do the AIDS epidemic, the migrant crisis and patientdom all have in common? They are situations where people can be seen as being reduced to less than human. What Chee, Luiselli and Jamison all attempt through their creative non-fiction essays is to restore that humanity and bring awareness to the wider issue that took it in the first place. The three authors all have a unique position within their essays. Chee is alongside the AIDS epidemic but not a victim in the traditional sense of living with and dying from AIDS. Luiselli is both within and alongside the migration crisis as she is a Mexican woman going through the immigration process even if she did not ride La Bestia to get to America, like most of her interviewees did. Jamison is a patient herself using her story to represent the story of others. The three essays serve as examples of political storytelling with heart. Each essay works with the speaker's position to make space for the voice of another and, by doing so, draws attention to an issue of wider significance.

## Windows and Mirrors: Creative Exploration

By looking closely at the details of the personal essays of Chee, Luiselli and Jamison, I gained a greater understanding of the possibilities of the personal essay. Across the three essays I studied, there were moments of intense intimacy alongside broader moments that intertwined the author's voice and story with the voices and stories of others. I was struck by how the authors positioned themselves within their essays and the effect this positioning created. In other words, I was interested in the authors' use of narrative distance to protect themselves while still evoking an emotional response.

In my collection of essays, *Windows and Mirrors*, I have tried to tell “stories that carry both a literal truthfulness and a larger Truth” (Gerard). I wanted to explore the way other people's stories and experiences, as well as my own, can be witnessed and how witnessing the stories of others changes us. This can be seen in my own shifts of understanding, and it is my wish that the reader experiences these shifts also. The personal stories I have shared are not campfire stories; they only exist in written format to be read. They are intimate stories, my own and those belonging to others. The stories are an artifact that acknowledges and bears witness in an effort to legitimise the human experience and provide solidarity to the reader.

The collection as a whole begins and ends with loss and coming to terms with loss. I have interspersed essays of varying intensity between these two bookends, including teaching essays and abstract conceptual essays. While the collection begins and ends with an extreme close-up, it also moves through mid shots and wide shots to provide context and relief from continuous emotion. Setting these essays within the same collection brings together the very different things that make up a life.

Some of the essays in my collection explore moments of change and transition, for example, through loss or trauma. This is the case with 'A View from Below', 'Runner's High', and 'Burn to Shine'. These essays include life-altering situations that must be moved through and made sense of. The essays provide a vehicle for the reconciliation of change, and while the details are unique to me, there is something recognisable within them for readers to connect to. In these essays, I want the reader to feel the shock of what is happening alongside me as I experience it. I want them to feel the gut punch and know something significant has happened. I have tried to achieve this by using my memories as scenes. I want to honour the moments of loss and change and allow the reader to witness them through the story's details.

Other stories in the collection weave together the voices of others with my voice in a way that allows the other voices to be central. These are essays that draw upon my experiences as a teacher working with students and their experiences of being in the world, as in 'Highs and Lows' and 'Politics at School'. I am more of a witness to the story than the main protagonist in these essays. I have centred the students by using their words as quotes and building scenes from my memories of their sharing. The students' experiences of challenges that I have never had to face to the same degree, for example, sexism and disaffection, told using their own words, make them a distinct voice from my own.

Also within the collection there are three abstract essays interspersed through the collection, 'Eternal Soundscape', 'On Dreams, Dream On' and 'Born Lucky'. The topics I have chosen to explore are engrained deep within my identity. I call them abstract because the concepts cannot be held in your hand; sound, dreams and luck. They are included in this collection as an expression of my most intimate attempts to share how I experience the world in domains that are not acted out in the physical realm. In this way they are my most personal sharings because they cannot be witnessed outside of their written form.

I have also included one piece of autobiographical fiction, 'You Have To Do Your Own Growing.' I learned about autobiographical fiction through an online course offered by Alexander Chee, the author of *How To Write An Autobiographical Novel*. He told the participants, "we write autobiographical fiction to describe something we couldn't describe by describing our lives". I chose to use autobiographical fiction because it allowed me to work with subject matter that would be too unsettling to handle directly. Chee encouraged the class participants to be inspired by Lee Isaac Chung as he "looked for the ways his memories organised into constellations around events that he had always known about from his childhood but never examined... He then sought to find the stories of the adults within those constellated memories" (Chee). The idea of telling the stories of the adults around my childhood that I was not privy to at the time, was what inspired me to write 'You Have To Do Your Own Growing.' By using autobiographical fiction, I was able to put distance between myself and the events in the story. I was able to look at the people as characters and not flinch away from writing the truth as I saw it. By changing some aspects, I have been able to protect the dignity of my family members while still cutting to the heart of the story.

My creative component, *Windows and Mirrors*, is a collection of essays depicting the small and large moments that make up a life. I have used my own memories, experiences and imaginings expressed as scenes intertwined with the voices of others through quotes to tell the stories in my collection. The stories are a reminder of the fragility of life juxtaposed with the resilience of the human spirit. Just as I found recognition in the stories of Alexander Chee, Valeria Luiselli and Leslie Jamison, I hope the reader of this collection finds solace in the solidarity these stories represent.

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In addition to the texts cited here, my original thinking in terms of writing about others in creative nonfiction was especially influenced by reading *The Trauma Cleaner: One Woman's Extraordinary Life in Death, Decay & Disaster* by Sarah Krasnostein (2017), *The Faraway Nearby* by Rebecca Solnit (2013) and *13<sup>th</sup> Balloon* by Mark Bibbins (2020). In *The Trauma Cleaner* Krasnostein shares her story of interviewing Sandra Pankhurst. The book moves between the third-person telling of Sandra's story and the first-person narrative of Sarah interviewing Sandra, including her response to Sandra's story. *The Faraway Nearby* by Solnit uses folk tales as well as the personal stories of others alongside Solnit's own. Bibbins's *13<sup>th</sup> Balloon* gave me a another perspective on the AIDS epidemic expressed through a book length poem. This piece informed how I understood and wrote about Alexander Chee's work. I am grateful to the inspiration of these texts in both the critical and creative portions of this thesis.

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Creative Component:

## Windows and Mirrors: Personal Essays



## A View From Below

2015. Warm mineral water. Strong bodies jumping, laughing, and submerging before breaching the surface once again. I am here with my son, Ryan. We are challenging each other to see who can sit at the bottom of the pool the longest. Mother and son. We love the water. Being in it or under it. We can both open our eyes underwater. If you jump up as high as you can in the water, your downward motion will carry your body all the way to the bottom of the pool, where you can sit and look through the murky water until your lungs tell you it is time to come up. We always come up together. Big smiles on our faces. Mother and son.

We are not at the pools alone. I have come with a work friend from Kindergarten and her two boys. We are doing what teachers call 'parallel play'; she plays with her sons while I play with mine. We will get out soon for some hot chips and gossip, but for now, my focus is on my son.

"Jess! You know CPR?!" It is my friend drawing my attention behind me.

I look around to see a middle-aged blonde woman struggling to haul a boy to the edge of the pool. Her face is twisted with panic and effort. I swim to her and together we lift the boy out of the water, over the pool edge and onto the concrete below. His body is ungainly. Arms, legs and head go only where gravity tells them. In my head, I'm thinking. *Shit. This kid's dead.* I use his arms to sit him up and pull him forward. With one hand supporting his chin, I whack him on the back a few times. A lot of water comes out of his mouth. His eyes are open but absent. I lay him back down. My ear to his face, listening for the breath that I already know is not there. As a teacher, I am required to hold a current first aid certificate, so I have been to my fair share of first aid courses over the years. I know exactly what to do. Lay the body on a flat surface. Tilt the chin back to open the airway. Pinch the nose closed. Cover his mouth with mine and

blow. My breath into his lungs. Tilt my head to watch his chest rise. Air went in, and water came out. A bubbling spring exiting through his mouth. I was not expecting that. *This kid is dead.* I roll him over to the side for some more back blows. More water and mucus escape. I know what to do, so I'm doing it. I can't think about whether the boy is alive or dead. It is not my business. My business is CPR until the ambulance gets here. I place hands midway between his nipples, palms face down, one hand on top of the other. Elbows straight, use my body for strength, make ten compressions as deep as *his* thumb. Then two more rescue breaths. "Ten to two no matter who". They are forever changing the ratio of breaths to compressions, but I already know it doesn't matter. Whatever I do gives him a better chance to survive, even as I know he is already dead. I am in a rhythm now. Someone is holding a phone to my face. The ambulance will be here soon.

A few days later, I am at home sitting in my lounge. Across from me is a British man in his early fifties. He has an easy smile and comforting eyes. He has come to ask me for my story. He has done these hundreds of times before. He used to be a police officer. A boy had died at a workplace, so WorkSafe NZ is investigating. He asks me if I would like to be contacted by victim support. The answer is out of my mouth before my conscious brain has finished decoding. No! I am not the victim here. I know who the victim is. I know his name, and it is not me. This is not *my* story.

Some people talk about defining moments. I reject that. I refuse to be defined by a moment. I want to talk about significant events. That day at the pool was significant to me. I learnt a lot that day. Mostly I learned that sometimes people die for no reason. And places

where we think we are safe are the same places where people die. Take any public pool you like, and someone would have drowned there. No exceptions.

Does this perspective mean that I have gone through post-traumatic growth?

People develop new understandings of themselves, the world they live in, how to relate to other people, the kind of future they might have and a better understanding of how to live life (Tedeschi in Collier, 2016).

Do I now have a better understanding of how to live? That feels like a bit of a stretch. I do know this moment comes back to haunt me every time I go through a first aid refresher course.

Early in 2021, I needed to renew my first-aid certificate. It was the second time I had done this since that day at the pool. The first one was rough. I got caught in the trap of not knowing if I felt upset because I felt upset or if I felt upset because I thought I should feel upset. Emotions are confusing, and either way, I felt upset. This time around, the course was on a weekend first thing in the morning. I felt the pressure of getting there on time when I hate getting places on time first thing in the morning. On the drive into school, I got lost inside my head, building up anticipation for the moment when we would cover drowning, and I would be thinking, *It's not like that at all*. Building up anticipation for the remembering that had already started from the moment I signed up to do the course. Six years have gone by, but I still remember in my body, the way his body felt as I pulled it from the water, my surprise at seeing water come out of his mouth, the wet chill of his lips on mine when I breathed air into his lungs, how my breast popped out of my swimsuit when I was doing CPR and the poor kid's mum had to pop it back in for me so I didn't have to stop. The memories are a mash-up of horror and

embarrassment and ultimately devastation. Devastation because the kid died. Devastation because I did everything right. Right place, right time, right skills, and I still lost. My first-responder story is about failure, and it wasn't even me who lost my life or my son's life. I was just a bystander in this story.

I walked into the refresher class and found a place to sit. I was fifteen minutes late, and I was on the edge. A couple of minutes later, the facilitator asked me to introduce myself, and I completely lost it. Tears and shuddering sobs, the whole nine yards, I could not keep it in, and we hadn't even started. I had to step out to calm down. One of my fellow English teachers came out to comfort me, and while I cried, she told me about the person she had lost. Her first-aid failure story. I should really stop calling them that. She didn't fail. I didn't fail. We lost. Picard puts it this way, "It is possible to commit no mistakes and still lose. That is not a weakness; that is life."

That is life. And I'm in it.

I think I'm at peace with this. Or at least heading in that direction. "You're like Teflon with this kind of stuff," my husband tells me.

There is a fine layer of death across our world. It coats everything like dust or ash from a volcano. We move about as if it isn't there, as if everywhere we go, we are not surrounded by ghosts, by echoes of loss and trauma. What I know now, that I didn't know before, is places have a memory. Places bear witness and hold testimony to life, including death, including violence, all of it. People may forget. People may only remember when reminded by first aid courses. But the marks on the landscape remain. The white crosses on the side of any road mark it as a graveyard. One we move through on the way to school or to do our grocery shopping, and only every now and then do we stop to be afraid or to remember. I suppose that's a survival mechanism. How can we live if all we think about is death?

Back in 2015, the boy's family organised a blessing of the pools to remove the tapu and allow all involved to move on. I attended with my friend. The family was sad but resolute. I was confused. The ceremony was meant as closure, but all it did for me was close the door on one life and change my view of the world. Memento mori - Remember you will die. Remember and act accordingly.

## Runner's High

From what I remember, it was early evening. I was at home. A multigenerational home, with me at the core. My parents, my husband, my son. Ryan was three or four years old, and we were doing typical mother and son business of the early evening. Dinner. Bath. Bed. But on this evening, the routine was interrupted by a phone call and a summons to the racket club where Dad was president. To the racket club where Dad played tennis and squash and socialised. The phone call didn't say much. In fact, I didn't take the phone call, so can't say what was discussed. The results, however, were immediate. The mothering duties were passed on to the father and I, along with my mother, took the short trip to the end of our street to the racket club. Remuera Rackets Club.

Our knowledge walking through the doors was that something had happened. Dad had collapsed and was in the men's changing room. We were to be given special access to be with him. My mind felt blank as we walked through the emergency exits pinned back to provide easy access for the ambos. It was a moment of transition from how things were, though not knowing, to how things would be now. During the not knowing, my eyes sought out details, information, clues. What would we find in the men's changing room? What would my new normal be from here on in? My mind whispered *He might be dead. He's probably dead.* As we reached the changing room door, concerned faces greeted us. Puffy eyes in blotchy faces. The energy of action was missing, and that was my first confirmation that Dad wouldn't be getting up from this collapse.

The changing room was divided into two parts. One part for toilets and hand basins, the other an open changing area with a door into the sauna on one wall. The sauna reminded me of a walk-in chiller that you might find in an industrial kitchen. A proper latch on the door to keep

the heat in and a small window. The other walls supported bench seats. It was humid. The space was steeped in sweat and deodorant, and there was Dad, lying on the floor. Someone had tenderly draped a towel across his body. I imagined the coolness of the tile against his skin. He was 57.

It was a heart attack, they were saying. They did everything they could. CPR. But with no defibrillator... well, there was nothing else they could do. Someone had called my brother, and he arrived with his girlfriend, Angel. He crouched over my father's body, his eyes downcast. Angel held him, her arms wrapped around his shoulders. More people arrived, and I stopped noticing. The change room was packed. Family and friends huddled in groups talking quietly not wishing to disturb my father. Watching like sentinels. Waiting for the ambulance to arrive and take custody of him. Not knowing what to do but knowing that we needed to stay with Dad until then.

The world stopped for me at that moment. No one in my eye line was 'getting on with it'. No one moved quickly. It was as if the energy had been sucked out of the place and we were all observing an extended moment of silence. It would be this way until the ambulance arrived, and we stepped once more into the world. Me, without a father, my mother without a husband.

It was a mark of respect or maybe a 'there but for the grace of God go I' moment. Whatever it was, it felt appropriate. Stiff upper lip and all that. I recognised it as a pivotal moment. I had experienced something that would leave a mark and colour all other experiences that came after. I felt the echo of this moment sometime later when I was travelling to the local Countdown. A five-minute drive away. A right, two lefts, followed by a final right, left. At the final right, I sat waiting at the lights. It was red, but a green arrow indicated that it was my turn to turn. My eyes were on where I wanted to go, looking out my side window as I turned. As I made my way through the intersection, some shift in colour and light drew my

attention to the periphery. It was a car, moving when it should be still. There was a second between noticing and impacting. Nothing to be done. I turned my head towards the car and felt the impact as if I physically had been struck. A deep ache across my whole body. Sharper than I would have imagined. My eyes trained on the inside of my passenger side door as it crumpled inwards towards me. No time for thinking, just acknowledging. This is happening.

A T-bone, and here the world stopped for me again, but this time louder, and it was only me that stopped. The radio played on, and the traffic drove past. Only the people directly involved paused, and there was no moment of respectful silence. It felt wrong. This thing had just happened. I couldn't reconcile how the radio was still playing. Didn't it know we'd been in a car crash?

It's funny how much of the actual crash went on beneath my notice. The airbag deployed. The keys ejected from the ignition and embedded head height in the back seat. My husband and the tow truck driver took great pains to let me know how lucky I was that the keys did not stab me. Maybe don't have so many keys on your keyring, they suggested.

After my father's death, there was concern that my brother and I were harbouring some secret heart condition. An insidious defect that would spontaneously result in either of us having a heart attack and prematurely dying. MRIs were scheduled at Auckland University Faculty of Medicine. The Faculty of Medicine is not an attractive building. Constructed in 1968, it is boxy in shape, all discoloured concrete and glass. I walked through the doors and followed the signs to the Magnetic Resonance Imaging Machine. It was an odd twilight zone, sitting in the waiting room, simultaneously having and not having a heart condition. I would not get the results for days. Stripped of identity in a hospital gown, I was told to lie very still in the MRI tunnel and hold my breath when instructed. The cold plastic of the bed pressed uncomfortably into my shoulder



blades and hips. My comfort was secondary to the need for clear, crisp images. It was dehumanising. The tunnel centimetres away from my face, mechanical noises indicating the functioning of the big machine. A disembodied voice regulating my breathing. Then it was over. I dressed and left.

“Everything looks fine,” my doctor told me over the phone. “In fact, your heart looks really strong. We suspected your father’s heart condition was due to childhood illness and now we know for sure. There’s nothing for you to worry about.”

My father was an entrepreneur and an athlete. He was constantly told to slow down, take it easy, just in case his heart couldn’t take it. He ignored this advice. He was in charge of his own life, and he showed this through running.

He ran marathons—Auckland, Rotorua, Tāupo, Wellington, Queenstown, multiple times each. I was small at the time, but I can remember long car rides to stand at finish lines. Sleeping in roadside motels, being bored, playing eye spy with my older brother, James. I was not interested in the race other than seeing Dad cross over the finish line and the ice cream that would follow. I remember eating celebration meals in smoky pubs and dozing in the car on the road trip home.

Back in the 80s, Dad ran with his friends. His mates that he played sports with. They would train together and socialise together, all with their spouses in tow. Marathons were a social event for the whole family. As I grew older and Dad’s knees gave out the event changed from running to cycling and instead of marathons, he did the race around lake Tāupo. The car rides, the boredom, the waiting at finish lines remained the same. It just wasn’t my thing and it became less so as time went on. Until finally Dad became a weekend warrior and we no longer had to travel to support him. He would be gone for huge whacks of the day and as a teenager, I must admit, I didn’t really miss him. Gone were the days when he would take me to the duck

ponds or the Winter Gardens to try and teach me my times tables. Teenagers are a tough crowd. Looking back, I don't blame him.

It was five years after his death that I first went for a run. I wanted to take more control over my life. I felt the urge to exercise, and running seemed like the natural choice. After all, Dad had found success as a runner. There was no reason why I couldn't too. I started with alternating running and walking between lampposts. My body felt heavy and slow. It was hot, and chafing was most definitely a thing. I felt like I couldn't catch my breath, and I would stare at the next lamppost, willing it closer as I struggled. It was hard. It was not fun. But I kept doing it. I ran around the streets of Takapuna, the scent of salt in the air. I was gone for about an hour, but it was enough to be a start. On that first run, I became a runner, even if I wouldn't call myself such for a long, long time.

Running is a habit, and it is often said that the hardest part is actually making the decision to run. Making the decision to put on your running shoes and then actually doing it. Once that's done, it is just a case of putting one foot in front of the other ad nauseum, sometimes literally. In the beginning, it didn't feel good, but it was satisfying. It was also free and as a frugal person free suited me down to the ground. It was an activity Dad and I could share, even if I was five years too late.

My first event was the 'Tough Guy and Gal Challenge' over a year later. A 12km mud-run. I made my mum and my son be my support people. Mum said it reminded her of Dad's running, and I felt a little bit less guilty for making her stand around for two hours while I ran, slid and crawled my way through the mud. Being a part of a throng of athletes was empowering. I felt the energy engulfing me and pulling me onward. There was so much goodwill between competitors. I remember catching some girl's eye as we slid side by side

down a muddy hill, laughing all the way. The bumps and scratches, the ice-cold water; my body was in the moment, tackling the course as it came, like a moving meditation.

The course was two 6km laps, and I can remember seeing Mum and Ryan as I completed my first lap. I threw them a wave and kept going. I loved it. They were still there, patiently waiting as I crossed the finish line. And then more waiting as I lined up for the outdoor showers and changing shed. I was exhausted but happy. I wanted to do it again. This was the thrill of an event. This was runner's high. It made me feel like Dad and I were part of some club.

I don't really remember how I got involved in the "I Love to Run Community" on Facebook. It was probably because of an inspirational quote. Something like "It doesn't get easier. You just get stronger" with a great image of a runner mid-stride, the sun setting in the background. It can be tough to be a runner in a non-running world. No one wants to hear about your 5km or your new personal best. I think people feel guilty hearing about runners running, thinking they should be running too.

I found a group of people online who did want to hear about how I crushed a 30 minute 5 km. People who did want to discuss the pros and cons of different Bluetooth headsets, fueling options and cures for chafing. It's a community, like what my dad had but for today's online world. I now have permission to take a running selfie whenever I want to. I can post it online and someone somewhere around the world will tell me 'good job'.

"My regular friends don't really care, but I got up and ran 25k this morning, and I feel like a rockstar" (Runner 1).

"No one in my family understands how excited I am, but I know y'all will get it... Not only do I have an in-person race tomorrow, but the swag included a free pair of Goodr sunglasses!! I am so excited!! I can't wait to wear them!" (Runner 2).

In the running group, I hear stories of dog attacks complete with visual evidence. We discuss what personal protection kit some of us need to take when we run, things like pepper spray and small folding knives. I wonder if I am passionate enough about running that I would run in a place where you needed to be armed. Just in case.

“Question: When solo, do you run with a defence mechanism on you? Pocket knife, pepper spray, etc? I run with a spray that’s small enough to fit in my pouch. I’m ordering a small EDC pocket knife for extra protection. Just wanted to know other’s thoughts on carrying while running” (Runner 3).

What a question to have to ask.

We talk about runners' bodies and the perception that if you are a runner you need to be trim and attractive. No belly rolls hanging over waistbands. But that’s not how it is. Running is about endurance. It is about inner strength. Pushing past your limits into the blue sky beyond. Having thighs that rub together and being a runner is not mutually exclusive.

“I might not look like a runner, but this big body gets the job done...” (Runner 4).

There is pushback against this type of stereotyping, and a new community has developed online. The Sports Bra Squad.

“I joined the #sportsbrasquad today! It’s hot, and I am really trying to tackle some fears here. It was the most amazing thing as I stopped worrying about what people thought. I felt a huge sense of badassery and just lived in the moment for the rest of my run home!” (Runner 5).

All you have to do to join is run in your sports bra. Sounds simple but owning the identity of ‘runner’ and wearing the uniform (compression socks, sports bra, short shorts) takes grit. Especially when the reflection in the mirror doesn’t match the expectations of what a runner should look like. Should is a bullshit word anyway. I can’t imagine Dad second-guessing

himself in his runners' shorts or his cyclists' lycra. He was a sportsman. Nothing more to it. That is a choice I make too. But I say, runner.

Dad's running was an assertion to the world. He was told he was taking his life in his hands every time he laced up his runners, but he did it anyway. It's that beautiful tension between sweet and astringent. Between running that makes you healthy and running that kills you. The phenomenon known as runner's high is described as a feeling of euphoria coupled with reduced anxiety and a lessened ability to feel pain. It happens to runners after a good long whack of aerobic exercise. I have experienced it after 10km, so there is no doubt Dad had it after 42.2km. Whatever pain he experienced as a hangover from his childhood illness or his deteriorating knees (something which caused him to have to navigate steps in a step together, step together, rhythm sideways downstairs), must have fallen away, numbed by his runner's high. Would he have lived longer if he had heeded the advice? Would he have been the man I remember if he did?

"Wow, Ryan! You're looking great! You're a runner?"

Ryan shook his head.

"You look so fit and healthy! You come from a great line of athletes."

I smile, recognising the doctor is talking about my Dad, my brother and me.

It was last Monday when I took Ryan to our family doctor to get antibiotics for an ear infection. The same doctor had recommended Dad slow down. Ryan takes after me and does not get sick often. It had been a couple of years since he last saw our doctor. On the way home, I thought about the doctor's words. Sure, Ryan is not a runner. But neither was I at his age. I grew up, and I became a runner.

“You know running is addictive,” I told Ryan once we were home. “You just haven’t caught the bug yet.”

He laughed and made a joke about drugs and alcohol also being addictive.

“Sure, but at least a runner’s high lifts you up rather than the alternative.”

He walked away without further comment. Teenagers.

Ryan is not a runner, but that doesn’t mean he won’t be. We got home early from the doctors, so of course, I did the only sensible thing I could.

I went for a run.

## Eternal Soundscape

Rain on a tin roof

At night

In bed

Or first thing in the morning

In bed

The combination of sound with soft

Physical sensation

Cocoon, pupa, chrysalis

A pause-break for transformation

Each raindrop a hammer blow

Reshaping and smoothing

Crafting with intention

When the rain stops

Sound emerges

A clutter of noise once overshadowed

Seeps through and life

Continues

Sound has a bit of everything, light and darkness, salvation and terror. There is something about the sound of rain falling upon a tin roof that soothes me. It's even better if I am in a warm, soft space in utter darkness. Wherever I am, whatever the situation, I can close my eyes and imagine that sound and find peace. It's that good. I put it down to growing up next to the

motorway. The big one, State Highway One. For the entirety of my childhood, there was sound, constant but ever-changing, like the sea, like the sky. Even now, sans motorway, my ears miss the sound. My brain seeks it out constantly. It is my baseline. My normal.

In silence, my brain creates its own sound. Tinnitus is an auditory phantom sensation, like a ghost, a “perception of a sound which results exclusively from activity within the nervous system without any corresponding mechanical, vibratory activity within the cochlea” (Jastreboff 82). Risk factors for tinnitus include hearing loss, growing older and being a woman. The impact of tinnitus upon sufferers varies drastically and can be exacerbated by the body's fight or flight mechanism. Psychologically threatening conditions can indeed be an alternative way to generate tinnitus. The brain in an effort to increase its sense of safety creates an “enhancement of auditory perception and orientation causing hypervigilance to occur. Chronic stress affects the hippocampus causing neuroplastic compensations and leading to the perception of tinnitus” (Jastreboff 82). Tinnitus isn't a diagnosis in itself but a symptom of something else.

I don't live by the motorway anymore. I moved to the country with my own little family in 2014, all fresh air, pine trees and roosters. There is noise here, but it is intermittent. There are patches of quiet that scream. Today has been a long day, and I am relaxing in a hot bath. The house is quiet. No television, no dehumidifier, no music, no conversation. Complete silence. I ease into the hot water listening to the gentle splashing. It sounds unnaturally loud, but it is not the only sound I can hear. For me, the absence of noise has its own sound. Multifrequency ringing, or maybe whistling. All I know is silence is loud. Silence surrounds me, pushing hard against my consciousness. Like a spotlight direct to the face, the noise is austere and menacing. My attention brings the sound into sharp relief like a magnifying glass. My heartbeat adds to the cacophony, along with the whoosh of my own blood moving around my body. I can hear my stomach gurgle as it digests my most recent meal. I take a deep breath and sigh it out.



I might as well have been sighing into a microphone for the way my ears receive the sound. My intention was to relax, but I have made one crucial mistake. The silence. I have opened myself up to the silence. What I needed was a bit of white noise to give my brain something to latch on to. Some real sound to distract me from the phantom ones. The ghosts, always lurking in the background, waiting for a break in the soundscape to creep through. It is silence personified.

As all the Heavens were a Bell,

And Being, but an Ear,

And I, and Silence, some strange Race,

Wrecked, solitary, here - (Dickinson, *I Felt a Funeral in my Brain*).

I too, know the intense volume of silence and its power to destroy. Except I like to think I am not having a mental breakdown. However, if I stay in the bath much longer, maybe that will change.

Noise pollution has been described as a very slow killer. It has been linked to heart disease and autism spectrum disorder as well as a range of mental health issues (Green). Laws have been put in place to protect populations from noise pollution focusing on town planning and shielding technologies. However, urban sprawl and continued industrialisation have had an impact that many might describe as the price of progress. Studies continue to investigate the impact of noise pollution for example, and this makes me laugh, a focus “on annoyance and sleep disturbance”. How might one quantify annoyance? Slightly annoyed, mildly annoyed, moderately annoyed, highly annoyed and extremely annoyed? “Many residents of the greater Atlanta area may be exposed to noise levels that put them at risk of being highly annoyed or

having high levels of sleep disturbance” (Kim). In my imagination, I see households of tetchy, bedraggled people, clutching their morning coffee with their unbrushed hair and don’t-talk-to-me eyes. Motorway noise was never like that for me. Maybe they mean more inner-city noise, sirens, yelling and gunfire. Unpredictable and unnerving noise. “Studies on levels of the stress hormone cortisol in people exposed to noise pollution show raised levels compared to the general population and a reduced ability to regulate the hormone” (Green). When I learned more about noise pollution I had to wonder if it was the root cause of my hearing difficulty. If growing up next to the motorway was why I could only hear people most of the time.

I’m at home relaxing with a good book.

“Jrhsf yslief fnshnfa on t.v. tonight?” asks my husband.

I don’t reply right away but go back into my memory to hear it again. *What’s looking good on t.v. tonight?* The pause is awkward, but I can reply. This is a daily occurrence. The invitation to conversation came as a surprise. I wasn’t ready. My husband suggests I might have hearing loss. Again.

I make an appointment at the hearing clinic. An afternoon three weeks later sees me huddled in a booth undertaking a pure tone audiogram. The results are typical for someone of my age. The technician suggests a build-up of earwax could be a contributing factor. No, you do not require hearing aids. Thanks for coming. Pay at the reception on your way out.

I feel dejected. The quick fix I had been hoping for is not an option for me. My ears work fine. Follow up appointments are not suggested, and I never mention the true extent of my frustrations. I will need to recover from this moment, regroup and when I feel ready, research what’s going on for me, myself.

A couple of weeks go by, and I confer with Dr Google. A series of search inputs leads me to one possible diagnosis: Auditory Processing Disorder. What I discover is that Auditory Processing Disorder (APD) is less to do with the ears' ability to hear sound than it is with the brain's ability to transform sound into speech. This is especially problematic in complex listening environments where understanding speech-in-noise is required. Environments such as wedding receptions, conferences and busy classrooms for example. Sufferers have "decreased perception and orientation, requiring compensation by attention and memory through the activation of the amygdala, hippocampal and frontal-temporal network" (Jastreboff 83). So what that means to me is that I need to use different parts of my brain to interpret speech. Thinking on my experiences I can say this feels true. It's funny to me, that I can miss the meaning in the moment and then find it in my memory.

In my life, I have multiple strategies to work around my hearing but there are certain situations where I just can't fake it. Conferences are by far the worst. I am already out of my comfort zone and completely surrounded by strangers. At every conference, there is guaranteed to be a moment where I can't take part. Where I am excluded. Consider this scenario:

You at a conference. A round table affair, ten or twelve participants per table. It starts in the usual way, karakia, opening address, slide show presentation. The speaker is engaging, and the topic is interesting. You are relaxed and enjoying yourself. The current thinking in the field of conferences is to provide topics of conversation for the participants to engage with to make the experience more interactive and enjoyable.

"At your table, discuss the most significant challenge facing society today," the speaker prompts.

The participants at your table engage with gusto, as does the rest of the room. You draw an involuntary deep breath, preparing yourself for what comes next.

“The way I see it, our most hdlaisdiu aiuehks dlaksjdlaks jdsuefhsijkfjhse roailak,” one participant comments.

“jsdlkajs lkdj education is the jdkeif apektu dhjalskfu enfaiwnd aksddr hslwpsan famslfie nforhamwr akdfhrt family skfjeir alskernws,” replies another.

You have a choice to make, lean in towards the nearest person, eyes on their lips to focus you, make your mind hear their words. Or lean back, take a sip of your tea and completely opt-out from all discussion. If you’re attending with a friend, you might try. If you’ve come alone, probably not. It doesn’t really matter one way or the other. In a few minutes, it will be back to sitting in silence listening to the presenter.

“Jdiehtnal heuanue haeofmyt ayb aurgtvfpl qhudnet sjdha?”

You can tell the question is directed at you by the person’s eye contact, and you know it is a question because of the rise of tone at the end.

“I’m sorry, I can’t hear you,” you say. “I’m a wee bit deaf!” You yell a bit to make your point. You shrug at the other person and wait for the awkwardness to pass. You’re not deaf; you just can’t hear.

Living with APD is that experience over and over again with no variation and no solution. It’s enough to make a person wish to never have in-person conferences ever again and just do all conferences over Zoom or Google Meet, or maybe Facebook Live.

My relationship with sound isn’t always so ambiguous. I learned through my work with toddlers that sound can be cathartic and empowering. Sound can dominate a space and lay claim to

territory. In private moments, when overwhelmed, it can soothe. In joyful moments, when overflowing, it can enhance. Sound is a tool as much as a sense. I know because I use it. In 2011 our little family was living on the North Shore of Auckland, in Takapuna. No motorway but within sight and sound of the ocean. I was driving the streets of Takapuna on Halloween. Driving slow to better look out for my son, Ryan, a trick or treater. He was eight. He was with a neighbour and their son. He was supposed to be home an hour ago, and now no one is picking up their phone. Ryan was too young for a phone, but the neighbour had no excuse. After half an hour of searching, I pulled into my driveway, slammed my hands into the steering wheel hard enough to cause pain, and screamed. My face was distorted by rage and fear and shame. Shame because, of course everything was fine, and I was overreacting. I couldn't control the emotions pouring out of me. I screamed and cried and screamed again. The moment passed. I took one more turn around the streets before setting up a vigil in my living room. Restlessly tidying and rearranging the odds and ends on my kitchen counter. An hour later, it was dark outside. My neighbour arrived home with my son and theirs. I greeted them at the door.

“Did you have fun?” I asked Ryan.

“Yes!” He replied, happy and content; his hands clutched a bag full of candy.

I asked my neighbour what kept them, and she brushed me off.

I mentioned trying to get hold of them on the phone. She had left it at home.

Not a big deal, right?

No. Not a big deal at all. Everyone was safe and sound. A real non-event. Everything was fine. And it was. I just learned to build in extra strategies to prevent a repeat in the future.

Musicking is the act of creating music. Of creating sound. Toddlers are musicking when they climb up on furniture to yell out, wordlessly expressing their power and emerging independence. I was musicking in the car when I was overwhelmed by the fruitless search for

my son. I was able to exercise my frustration, fear and powerlessness through a wordless scream. Musicking is a tool for emotional regulation, a way to soothe ourselves, steel ourselves, and work ourselves up. From tuneless humming to screaming, the act of musicking is the act of acting upon ourselves. Allowing ourselves to take control. Changing how we feel to change how we act. I used musicking to bleed off excess emotion in order to continue the search for my son. To be calm in order to present myself as I wished to my neighbour, that is, not crazy or hysterical. Musicking is often accompanied by the much-maligned power pose, think Wonder Woman. But I love a good power pose. There is something about taking up space in both the physical and auditory realms that convinces the brain that you can do anything, tackle anything from a job interview to a high stakes hostage negotiation.

Sound has the power to soothe or agitate, alienate or unite. It's there for me when I need a moment of transformation, to break out of one way of being into another. Sound is the trick I play upon myself to get where I want to go. To be who I need to be and move forward.

## I Didn't Lick It Off A Stone

You've got to do your own growing, no matter how tall your father was.

*Irish Proverb*

It's Wednesday morning at Kaipara College, and my teacher colleagues and I have gathered together to learn more about the Māori concept of health and wellbeing, Hauora. Today's class is a bit different. The lens we are looking through is more in focus. Our teacher is a living example of Hauora. She is sharing her beliefs with us, and it resonates with the whole staff. We talk about connection and spirituality and the power of our ancestry to guide our lives through tohu (signs).

I wonder about my ancestors, who they were and what they went through to enable my existence? Are they leaving me signs that I am blithely ignoring through ignorance, through disconnection? I want to know, what is my whakapapa?

After our session, I ask the teacher, "Is whakapapa an okay word for me to use?" I am of New Zealand European ethnicity.

"Of course," she said, "But why wouldn't you just say genealogy?"

She's right. I'm not of Māori descent, so why wouldn't I just say genealogy?

I'm not alone in this quest. It's a familiar tale, retold again and again, with different actors in different locations and situations but always the same question, the same mission. Who am I? Am I my story, the sum of my experience? Or does it go deeper than that? Down towards fate, destiny or legacy? Everyone wants to know where they came from. Where they fit in the world, and I am no different. I should already know, but I don't. Why? I want to learn about my whakapapa or my own culture's version of this concept, but I don't even know where to start

looking. I need a culture to take part in this conversation, and my culture has its roots in colonialism, a legacy I'm only just beginning to understand.

The truth is rarely pure and never simple.

(Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, 6)

Beginning to explore my heritage has been a matter of emails, Facebook messages and a lot of time spent trawling the internet. Since my father passed away many years ago, my first stop for information was my Uncle David. So I emailed him, and he responded.

We were brought up in an ordinary State House at 21 Takitimu St in Orakei and both went to Orakei Primary School.

My father was a 'writer' and while we were growing up was a sub-editor for a couple of business magazines, the main one being 'Better Business'

Prior to that, he owned a publishing business in Tokomaru Bay on the East Coast that produced a weekly newspaper.

He was previously married and had two sons, Tony and Julian. Tony is now about 92 and lives on the Gold Coast in Australia where he recently retired as a Chartered Accountant. Julian was murdered in Nairobi while there helping his son Christopher Nathan to set up an avocado oil plant.

You can contact Tony on [email address]

Chris can be called on [phone number]

One of Tony's daughters I think has done a lot of research on the Nathan family history.



Your grandmother Liliias Mabel Nathan (nee Gray) came out from County Durham England with her family as a result of the great depression, and they settled in Gisborne, where she met my father Frank Louis Joseph Nathan.

That enough?

David

I replied that it was a good place to start.

Do not resent growing old, many are denied the privilege.

*Irish Proverb*

Hearing that Grandpa Frank was a writer, I was excited to see what I could find out online. I searched his name and the name of the magazine and found a record in the National Library archives. The record included Frank's name but no details as to what the document was or how to access it. It was frustrating to get a glimpse and no more. I didn't know how to move forward, so I did the most sensible thing I could think of and asked the university librarian for help.

Hi Jessica

Thanks for this request. Not an easy task you've given yourself!

Your grandfather sounds like an interesting and worthy New Zealander so I hope you can turn up something interesting.

James, the librarian, shared his searches and included the links so I could follow along and dig a bit deeper. For example, there was a link to a book he co-authored *Where we have come from: a dip into the history of the Kohimarama/Orakei area from about A.D. 1694, and into the life of John Coleridge Patteson, martyred Bishop of Polynesia* (1969). Another link led to a portrait. I had to email a screen capture to Uncle David to check if it was Grandpa Frank. His response was brief.

Yes...handsome man!

Grandpa Frank has the same face as my father and the same face as my brother, so it was not that much of a surprise. I just liked the affirmation the confirmation gave me.

He didn't lick it off a stone.

*Irish Proverb*

I feel a connection to Grandpa Frank through writing. When we talked at school about Taha Wairua there was an image in my mind of myself as the point of an arrow, with my ancestors standing behind me, supporting me, urging me forward. Grandpa Frank living and working as a writer gives me permission to try my luck. I am allowed to be a writer; it's in the family tradition. He has already walked the path for me, and now I attempt to follow in his footsteps. Having a connection with Grandpa Frank gives me a sense of belonging in my own family. The 'I'm like you' moment that I love to hear from my son.

"I'm good at solving problems, like you, Mum."

My son and I have the same eyes in the same face and the same 'can't be told' stubborn

streak that used to get me in so much trouble growing up. We get all that from my mum.

Every man is sociable until a cow invades his garden.

*Irish Proverb*

Mum, christened Anne Mary Elizabeth Hutchinson, was born in 1941 in the city of Newry in Northern Ireland divided by the Clanrye river in counties Armagh and Down, 55km from Belfast and 108km from Dublin. She is the eldest child of Winnie and Tom. She has two younger brothers, who were both sole surviving twins, Jimmy and Tommy.

She was raised Catholic, but that was left behind when she made the move, first to Australia and then New Zealand along with the name Anne. She would from then on be called Annabelle. She also lost her accent, meaning the only clue to her heritage was her deep auburn hair. The only glimpses we got were Guinness for breakfast on St Patrick's day and cheering for the Irish Rugby team whenever they faced the All Blacks.

At the beginning of my search into my whakapapa, I didn't know my grandfather's name. I thought that was a bit 'not cool' of me. I couldn't bring myself to come straight out and ask my mother, so I did the next best thing and Facebook messaged my cousin, Joanne in Ireland. But I didn't ask her directly either. Instead, I asked for 'any information' for my 'university project'. She was very accommodating and sent loads of old family photos. They had descriptions on the back.

I hope these photos help, we found some lovely ones of your mum too. You look just like her!

I was no closer to figuring out my grandfather's name, and it wasn't until I was driving my

mum to an appointment that I got the courage to ask. She had come across a photo of herself from her school days and was describing it to me. She was in her school uniform in a sports photo holding what she thinks is a basketball and I think is a netball. She told me about her school days.

“Saint Claire’s, where the nuns hit you as hard as they could.”

“I thought Nuns were supposed to be kind.”

“There might have been three nice ones in the whole convent. Nuns are vicious.”

“Sounds awful.”

“You just got used to it.”

I wonder now if this is the reason religion didn’t play a part in my upbringing. After a moment of silence, I asked.

“What was your dad’s name?” I kept my eyes fixed on the road and held my breath.

“Tom.”

I couldn’t bring myself to look at her in case she scolded me for not knowing, but she didn’t react. Her mind was probably on our upcoming hospital appointment and maybe that was distracting her from the failings of her daughter. I suppose Mum had her own reasons for not talking about her family. Out of sight, out of mind and all that.

Complain that you have no shoes until you meet a man who has no feet.

*Irish Proverb*

I have been to Ireland a few times and one of the things I remember most strikingly is the quality of the light there. While the greens here in New Zealand are sharp and vibrant, the greens in Ireland are muted and soft. I was around seven years old on my first trip to Ireland. We

travelled with mum's brother Tommy and stayed in little Bed and Breakfasts while we toured around. We visited the Giants Causeway and Blarney Castle to kiss the Blarney Stone. Legend has it that the stone is a fragment of the famed Stone of Scone aka the stone of destiny aka the coronation stone upon which the first King of Scots was crowned in 847. Kissing the Blarney Stone is meant to give you the 'gift of gab,' according to Irish legend. Of course, you have to lean upside-down and backwards over the highest parapet of a 15th-century castle in order to do it. It is an exercise in bravery and will-power. The gift of the gab even has its own word - blarney. Initially, I thought this word meant meaningless chatter, but it can have a much more favourable definition: eloquent, charming and witty; attributes that helped Cormac McCarthy prevent Queen Elizabeth I from seizing Blarney Castle in 1586. I have kissed the stone twice now.

No matter how many rooms you have in your house, you're only able to sleep in one bed.

*Irish Proverb*

Here in Aotearoa New Zealand, or at least in my family, culture wasn't something we talked about. I still have a special book of fairy tales passed down from my dad, but the stories contained within were just stories, and I never thought of them as my stories. A lot of these stories have been recreated and rebranded in movies and television shows so that it is difficult to see their origins and intended meanings. I know a lot more about Māui than I do about Dullahan aka the headless horseman. Who even knew the headless horseman was an Irish fairy? From what I remember, the headless horseman was a movie starring Johnny Depp back in 1999. The legacy of a culture can be seen in its language and stories but neither of these things has been passed down to me.

It's a lonely washing that has no man's shirt in it.

*Irish Proverb*

So, what does it mean to be Irish?

The [Irish] people are thus inclined: religious, frank, amorous, ireful, sufferable of infinite pains, vain-glorious, with many sorcerers, excellent horsemen, delighted with warring, great almes-givers and surpassing in hospitality. The lewder sort (both clerics and lay people alike) are sensual and loose in living. They are sharp-witted, lovers of learning, adventurous, kind-hearted and secret in displeasure (Richard Stanihurst, 1547 - 1618).

This last sentence speaks to me, and I am proud that I can see these qualities in myself. It is what I would like to call my Irish side coming through. I do wonder what 'secret in displeasure' might mean, but I choose to interpret it as not complaining. I have enjoyed exploring my Irish side online, skipping from blog to online magazine to news article. But what I am missing is the spiritual side. Is there an Irish equivalent to the Māori concept of mana?

A bit more searching and this is what I found... Bernadette Flanagan and Michael O'Sullivan co-authored "Spirituality in Contemporary Ireland: Manifesting Indigeneity". They identify Pilgrim Paths, Holly Wells, Pattern Days as three elements of Irish spirituality enjoying a resurgence. They say, "being a pilgrim, by land, sea or both, is one of the most universally recognized characteristics of ancient Irish spirituality".

However long the day, the evening will come.

*Irish Proverb*

This reminds me of the journeys my ancestors have undertaken from the Northern Hemisphere to the Southern Hemisphere. I am learning that my Celtic and Gaelic roots are not exclusive to Ireland but could and probably do extend to my English heritage as well. My mother's journey to New Zealand was one of stepping into the unknown. All I know is that she took a job escorting a patient from the UK to Australia. I can imagine her, confident and strong, stepping onto the plane surrounded by strangers; one of them with their life in her hands. If she had second thoughts, she never showed it. She reinvented herself as she saw fit, asking no one for permission. It is as if she was partaking in a pilgrimage of her own, and while I doubt she would regard it as such, the links seem obvious to me. My mum could easily have been one of the heroic figures described in the Celtic Myth of the "Immram" or Sacred Journey. "In such mythological stories, heroic figures leave the safe and the familiar behind them in order to undertake great adventures into the utterly unknown. Fraught with challenges and gifts, perils and pleasures, these journeys offer the opportunity for transformation" (Flanagan & O'Sullivan).

The Irish have a set of principles around the pilgrimage.

Be Grateful;

Be Inclusive to the stranger;

Be Guided by Faith;

Be Silent before the mysteries encountered; and

Be Joyful.

I find them beautiful. Something I can aspire to. Principles that could be applied to moving through a life as well as on the pathway of a pilgrimage.

You never miss the water until the well has run dry.

*Irish Proverb*

Irish heritage is only one part of the story. Half of my heritage is English. English culture has had a huge impact on the popular culture of the entire world, rivalled only by the influence of its other English-speaking cousin, American culture. So much so that it can be difficult to acknowledge that it is a culture at all. New Zealand educationalist Ann Milne calls this phenomenon “white spaces”, and it is the hangover of colonialism. Eurocentric culture is so pervasive that those of us identifying as New Zealand European or Pākehā, might not even perceive it as a culture at all, just the natural, normal, way things are. The more I learn, the more I see this as both a problem and a loss. My stories *are* King Arthur drawing Excalibur from the stone, Robin Hood stealing from the rich and giving to the poor and St George slaying his dragon and saving the princess. Not to mention William Shakespeare, Jane Austen and Charles Dickens. Why shouldn't I own that?

Many a ship is lost within sight of the harbour.

*Irish Proverb*

Coming to understand my place in the world was like bringing a lens into focus. The images have always been there, but I didn't recognise them for what they were. I needed subtitles, or captions or maybe a tour guide to point out the important landmarks.



The good parts of my personality, my optimism, my quick wit, my passion for learning, could all be associated with my Irish heritage and knowing that they are not just good things about me but good things about my culture has bolstered me. I feel a bit more entitled to claim the symbols of my culture than I did before because I have taken the time to learn what they are, where they came from and what they mean. I feel like I could now wear the Claddagh Ring, which symbolises love, friendship and loyalty without feeling like a fraud. I can say the iconic Irish blessing because it is mine, a gift from my ancestors.

*May the road rise up to meet you.*

*May the wind be always at your back.*

*May the sun shine warm upon your face;*

*the rains fall soft upon your fields and until we meet again,*

*may God hold you in the palm of His hand.*

And yet, I know that I would still feel like a tourist in Ireland, even standing in my mother's childhood home.

Life is like a cup of tea; it's all in how you make it.

*Irish Proverb*

“Tūrangawaewae are places where we feel especially empowered and connected. They are our foundation, our place in the world, our home” (Te Ara). But I have to wonder, is it okay for me to say this Māori concept communicates exactly what I want to say? That this Māori concept is the right word for this moment? My tūrangawaewae is here in Aotearoa New Zealand. It is Ōhinerau, Mt Hobson where I grew up. It is South Head where I bought my first

home. It is the place where I love, and I am loved. There is no place in Ireland or England where I can say that. That is here in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Beware of the anger of a patient man.

*Irish Proverb*

So where does that leave me? I have reached out to family members I haven't spoken to in years and seen the common threads that bind us together. I have woken a curiosity in myself and a desire to share what I have found with my son. I am going to be ripping out Irish proverbs left, right and centre.

But I still feel uncomfortable. Why do I feel like I am appropriating the Māori culture by using words like awahi, manaaki, whakapapa or tūrangawaewae? Shouldn't I be staying in my lane?

An empty sack does not stand.

*Irish Proverb*

I started this journey looking to find the roots of who I am. But it doesn't end here. Each day I must remake the decision to show up as myself in the world.

It's not a delay to stop and sharpen the scythe.

*Irish Proverb*

Below a moody sky, I stand with my back to the wind and my feet planted in the soft grass.

There is a heat in the air that says summer and I hear the low thrum of black beetles' wings as

they stagger through open windows and doors, colliding with walls and furniture. Click beetles pop against my bare feet. In this place, I am never alone. I wonder what my ancestors would think of Aotearoa with its sharp greens and flightless birds? Are they peering down at their distant daughter through the cloud cover, watching over me? The sun has gone and there is no moon tonight. I wonder at my comfort and lack of fear. On this land, within these boundaries, I am home. This place, which I return to, which shelters me and my family, sustains me. This is what it means to have a place to stand, a tūrangawaewae. From here my story, and those of my descendants, move forward.

## Highs and Lows

The lesson had about 15 mins to go before the end of the school day.

“With our last fifteen minutes, I would like you to nail down your quotes for tomorrow's exam!” I was talking loudly to be heard over the students who had also started talking.

“This is your opportunity to really feel ready for tomorrow!” I had completely lost their attention, and they started to pack up.

“The effort you put in now will have a direct impact on your results tomorrow!” Some students stood up and moved towards the door. Some students made a conga line out of chairs and sat giving each other massages. This was the scene that one of the senior English Teachers walked into with the prearranged intention of lending a hand.

It's embarrassing enough to have this moment in your classroom as the only adult in the room; no one can see your shame; it is a whole new level of embarrassment when it is in front of your senior teacher. This is my first year teaching English to high school kids, a big shift from Early Childhood and Primary teaching where I have spent the last ten years.

*Oh shit! Why this moment? Everything was fine ten minutes ago. Damn it!*

I walked over to my conga line students and, in a low voice, asked if this could be a thing we don't do right now. They laughed.

“We're looking after our wellbeing, Miss!” a student replied in what could be described as an outside voice. I breathed deeply and turned to face the other teacher in the room. She looked incredulous. I put on my disaster denying smile and made my way over to her.

“At this time of the day, I sometimes let them wait outside for the bell.” I left that hanging, hopeful the other teacher would think that's a great idea. She didn't.

“Alright, everyone! Can you pack up your stuff, tuck in your chairs and pop away the cushions!”

Maybe I could salvage the moment by redirecting the students towards tidying up the classroom? *Hahahahahahahahaha yeah right.* Some students put things away, and some students had a play fight. Teenagers take up so much space. I thought I would be able to stop saying ‘Keep your hands to your own body’ when I stopped being an early childhood teacher. It turns out I am still an early childhood teacher; I just teach teenagers. Another few agonising minutes passed by, and then the bell rang.

*Thank God! I really need to work on my end of lessons. \*sigh\**

The students made a rush for the door, some pausing as they passed to say, “Thanks, Miss!” There was an inevitable conversation coming up next about how I had no control over my class and needed to be firmer to get the students’ respect.

*Yay! This is going to be awesome!* I thought *I am super looking forward to this conversation.* I rubbed my hand back and forth across my forehead in an effort to erase the scowl that was developing.

She began, “Firstly, the main problem with this class is the balance. There are too many boys, not enough girls.”

“Okay.” This was not what I expected.

“You get a group of boys like this together and they have what my son calls a ‘dick-waving competition’. Each of them trying to outdo the others. That’s what you’ve got on your hands.”

“Oh... okay.” *This was a nice surprise... So it’s not all my fault.*

“This is where your seating plan comes in. If it were my class, I would have them like this.” She pointed to the rows of desks as she spoke. “Troublesome boy here, well-behaved

girl there. Troublesome boy here, well-behaved girl there. Troublesome boy here, well-behaved girl there, and this is where you run out of girls.” She wasn’t even a third of the way around the classroom.

“Mhmm”

“You’ve got their exam first thing tomorrow morning?”

I nodded.

“Okay. I’m going to show you how to have your desks. We’ll move them now and get everything ready. You won’t have time in the morning.”

“Okay. Thanks for helping me with this.”

“It wouldn’t have been a problem if you had been properly mentored. How are you supposed to know!?”

We spent the next ten minutes moving the desks into exam formation. All individual desks facing the front to prevent talking and/or cheating.

“Now, in the morning you stand here, halfway down the classroom and make the students fill in the desks from the front. That way they can’t sit in their boy-heavy group at the back.”

*Useful.*

“Now think about your most annoying student. The one who is guaranteed to create trouble tomorrow. Have you got someone in mind?”

I nodded

“Alright, now they are going to sit here, right at the front of the room, right underneath the board. Make sure there is nothing on the shelves here; it might go flying.”

I laughed. I could feel myself coming down. Now I had a simple, practical plan in place for tomorrow, and it was going to be okay. I thought about her comments on creating a seating

plan, or allocated seating. I could feel myself waiver, maybe the boy-girl-boy thing could work moving forward? My own son, Ryan, had advised me strongly against allocated seating at the beginning of the year. He said the students would just talk louder and yell across the room. I figured as a student he would be the expert on this, so I have trusted this wisdom all year long. That doesn't mean I can't ask a student to move if I feel that is in the best interests of their learning.

“Also, stop saying please to you your students. Please implies a choice and there isn't one. What you say goes, got that?”

I nodded again but only out of politeness. I already knew I wouldn't be taking this advice onboard. I find that I want my students to want to do the things I have asked them. Not feel obligated through a sense of duty or fear. I want to say please to my students because I want them to say please to me. I also want them to know that a relationship where we don't have basic courtesy isn't that great. These young people will be heading off in the world in a few years, and the only way they will learn respect is to experience it first hand.

Obviously, I didn't mention this to my senior teacher. She was trying to give me the tools that work for her in her classroom. She didn't like seeing me upset and gave me the help that she could. Other than being embarrassed, I was grateful.

I felt particularly low heading home. The feeling had been building for a couple of weeks. It started when a few of my Year 12 students failed their mock exams because I never told them they had to mention the phrase, 'author's purpose' in their response to text essay. It was easy to wallow in self-pity. *They failed because of me. These students shouldn't be disadvantaged just because I am their teacher. I wonder what job I can do when they fire me.* Next, one of the learning assistants walked out of my Year 10 class because a student was rude

to her. I didn't even notice it happening. The Dean was brought in on that one. No one blamed me, but that didn't make it any less my fault.

"You need firmer boundaries," another English teacher told me after the Dean incident. "Your job is to teach, not to be their friend."

*I'm not trying to be their friend, I thought, but I just nodded. A knot formed in my stomach, and I tried to rub away the lines forming between my eyebrows. I tried to appear calm and competent even though I really didn't feel like I was. So the takeaway message, I thought to myself, is to be firmer and stricter if I want my students to be successful. I felt sick. I don't know that I can be that person.*

The next morning, my Year 10s had their exam. I followed the plan and seated the students accordingly. So far so good. We went through the exam rules:

No talking.

No getting up from your seat.

Nothing on your desk except a blue or black pen.

Put your hand up if you need more paper or to go to the bathroom.

Most of the time, the rules were followed, but I started noticing whispering between students. I would go over to one desk to shush them, only to hear another group kick-off. A couple of times, I saw a student returning to their seat. It was like putting out scrub fires. I felt myself losing control, and I began to get scared about the students' results.

*What's going to happen if I can't provide exam conditions?*

I decided to email the dean on duty to ask for a second pair of eyes. Ten minutes later, a dean arrived.

"I'm just having a hard time keeping a lid on them," I told him.

"I can't stay, I have a meeting to go to, but I'll read them the riot act. That should help."



*Shit. How's that going to help?* I smiled and gritted my teeth. The dean stopped the exam to talk to the students.

"This is an exam students all over the country are taking. It needs to be taken under strict exam conditions, or else the results might not be accepted. Now, if you are breaking those conditions by talking or acting silly, Miss will send you up to the dean's office, and you will face the consequences. Do you all understand?"

The students nodded.

My face went hot, and my eyes watered. I took a couple of deep breaths and thanked the dean for coming in. He left.

*I could have done that myself! Great! Threatening them always works so well! All my problems are officially solved!*

My nose was running when I went over to give a student more paper.

"Are you alright, Miss?" He whispered.

"Yeah. It's just that wasn't what I wanted to happen."

He nodded, and I turned away. It took a good twenty minutes for me to calm myself down, but the students followed the rules during that time, so that was something. With fifteen minutes left in the exam, my senior teacher arrived.

"I got an email from the dean saying you wanted another pair of eyes?"

"That was thirty minutes ago, and I think we've settled down now."

She smiled and shrugged. "Alright, if you don't need me, I'll see you later."

I gave the ten-minute warning and took a turn around the room. I whispered encouragement and reminders to proofread. Some students sat with blank papers in front of them. For them, this time had just been an hour and a half of silent sitting. Even after all this

time, they still wouldn't show me what they could do. I collected their papers anyway. The bell went, and the students left.

I sat at my desk, a burning in my stomach. I could feel myself on the edge. *I'm not coping. I shouldn't be this upset.* I scanned through my diary, found a day my students wouldn't really need me, and booked it off as a sick day. The day I chose was Friday; today was Wednesday. I just had to hold it together for another day and a bit. I have always felt my feelings in my body. Instead of having emotions, I would have UTIs or cold sores. I currently keep track of my emotional state by way of a mouth ulcer that has been present for nigh on five years. It gets better, but it never goes away, and when it gets bad, I know things are bad. I know I need to change something. Take a day off, regroup and recharge. I know myself well enough to know what 'not good' feels like.

\*

There are certain gestures I do when I am under stress. The first one is rubbing my forehead. I didn't realise my students were noticing my mannerisms until my last class of the year for my Year 12s. I was over at Emma's desk when she said,

"I shouldn't show you this, but since it's the last day..."

She went over to the filing cabinet where she was, in theory, storing some work and pulled out an A3 piece of paper with a list written in felt tip. She brought it back to the desks so I could read it with her and her friend, also in on the joke. The list read:

#### Quotes from Miss Brown

"I've had 4 cups of coffee but I really need 6 before I stop taking phones off people."

\*Peekaboo bitch\*

“I feel like a wild animal.”

\*Pigeon sounds\*

“Now, Sam, you actually need an unfamiliar text otherwise you are just being unusual.”

“Use the stickers like they cost money.”

“I am disheartened.”

“I’m going to get my stapler... and... staple stuff... together.”

As I read the list, I couldn’t help laughing out loud. It was hysterical! What on earth was peekaboo bitch? Or pigeon sounds? Apparently, I declared myself to be a wild animal while searching through the stationary cupboard. I was talking to myself, but my students were listening. They told me I say lots of entertaining things, so they decided to create a list. They gave me the list as a token to remember them by.

It took me a couple of days, but I managed to decode what \*peekaboo bitch\* and \*pigeon sounds\* were. These are a couple more of my stress indicators. \*Peekaboo bitch\* is when I put my face in my hands and then open my hands in a peek-a-boo like gesture. It’s sort of like an ‘I can’t believe this is happening’ gesture or maybe closer to ‘everything is awful and I should just quit now.’ I had to actually make the pigeon sounds before I recognised what it was. It happened in the middle of my Year 10 class. I took a deep breath in and exhaled through my lips, creating a sound that I think sounds nothing like pigeons. It’s a way of releasing tension from my body. Never a good sign. Looking back, that Year 12 class must have been reasonably stressful.

\*

It was Friday morning briefing in the staffroom. Each week we take time to read the notices, draw the staff raffles and hand out a couple of awards in the name of staff bonding. There was the 'oar-some' award in the form of an oar and the 'I need a drink' award in the form of a wine glass. Zac was awarded the oar-some award last week, so it was his turn to pass it on to a new recipient. He stood up to make his speech.

“This week, I decided to ask my students who they thought was most deserving of this award, and there was one name that came up again and again. This person flies under the radar and keeps a low profile, the exact opposite of me. The students told me she’s always kind and helpful and brings in food for them. That person is Jess.” He turned and looked at me.

\*

Is it horrible to say that I enjoy wearing a mask because it means that I can stop smiling? All the time, every day, smiling, looking people in the eye and being cheerful, it's exhausting. With the mask on, I have permission to not smile. No one can see, no damage done. I can stop acting out polite and friendly and allow my mask to slip behind my mask. When I see my students, I smile. When I see my colleagues, I smile. When I see strangers on the street, I smile. Friendly, cheerful, happy to see you is my teaching persona. It's my way of making connections with students—a way to build the trust that learning is built on. I am asking for vulnerability; the least I can do is smile. But I get tired. So very tired. And there is a lot of work to be done.

\*

It is Term 4 Week 7, three weeks until the end of the year. I have four classes of writing exams to mark and four classes worth of report comments to write. Personalised comments to show how well I know my learners. The only problem is that I don't feel like I know anyone nearly well enough. It's this kind of to-do list that freezes me in place. I haven't started any of it. Students are asking for their results, and I am fobbing them off. *Sure I read your essay. I just can't remember it exactly. There are so many of them!* But in reality, I haven't even looked at it.

I managed to break the stalemate last night and mark one whole class set of writing exams. My Year 10 class whose exam was interrupted by a visit from the dean and my overflowing emotions. One student was able to show me his perspective of the event through this writing exam. It started off typically:

*Revenge and hate. The Fat man always carried this anger in him...*

But after a short paragraph, a new story emerged.

*My second story about miss.*

*From the very start, I knew miss brown was gonna be my favourite teacher and she is. I miss going outside to the trees, I mean she even brought lollies for us. I am so grateful I have her as my teacher but she started crying and I feel really bad like I've let her down. But I couldn't ask for a better teacher. Thanks miss.*

I read the story out loud to my husband.

"When were you crying in class?" he asked, mildly confused.

"Um... last Wednesday from the looks of this essay. It's been a tough couple of weeks, but how sweet is this?" I laughed out loud.

It's a piece of physical evidence that I have made a difference to someone as sappy as that might seem. It's the kind of good feeling that lingers on, and I smile remembering the story. All in all, I was happy with my classes' results. A couple of students will have another go with

the learning support teachers because they handed in blank pieces of paper, but everyone else achieved solid results on or nearby their age level. As the year draws to a close, I can feel proud of the work we have done together, even if it is just a shift away from hating English quite so much.

## On Dreams, Dream On

To go to bed with a story is to not sleep very well. The arrangement of the day, out of sorts, leaving the mind active and alert throughout the night. A desire to get up and write warring with the expectation of bedtime hours. My eyes open in the near darkness, their gaze turned inward.

I imagine moving blocks of writing like cards in a deck. My writing is like a new and different form of the game solitaire—a game I used to play as a child. I formulate a plan. I will search out my teacher registration folder in the morning. There is a piece I wrote nine years ago that could be perfect to include in the larger piece on politics. I run through my planned actions over and over, trying to commit them to memory. I must not forget! *I wonder if I can gently ease out of bed without disturbing anyone.* There is the warm presence of a dog on either side of me, effectively stapling me to the bed. I cannot move. *It's okay,* I tell myself. *I will remember.* Even as I say this, I know that some of the brightness of my thoughts will have worn off by the time I actually make it to the keyboard. The ease with which my mind spits out monologues will be lost in the remembering.

My body still under the covers is in contrast to my mind ranging over imagined terrain. I imagine myself as *chevaux-de-frise*. My body in trikonasana pose multiplied into eternity. My many selves linked together with chains and barbed wire. I have been placed in the ocean, in the way of the tide, to gather up stories, like wreckage. I feel the pull of the tide in my bones as it lodges debris within me. Weighing me down. Saturated with stories, I am pulled out to stand heavy on the shore. Now what? How to carefully untangle what's left from the sharp metal spikes, designed to lacerate as they ensnare.

My mind lingers with this image for a long time, unable to see what has been caught in the trap, but instead seeing only a legion of myself holding a line. It is not joyful. It reminds me

of the sailors in Davy Jones locker, all bloated skin, hair floating with the will of the tide, eyes milky white, or eaten out by fish. I am asleep.

I feel the itch of fear start on the inside of my elbows. The tension triggers a chemical response in my body. Adrenaline. Cortisol. As the world moves in my mind's eye, my imagination stimulates my senses, and I am floating. The ebb and flow of the water pulling on my still form. This is a dream.

\*

Dreams have been viewed as messages from the Gods, premonitions of the future or, as Wilhelm Maximilian Wundt believed in the late nineteenth century, as “a kind of temporary insanity...a glimpse of what a mental disturbance would be like” (Coolidge, 33). Maybe my dream was a sort of hallucination. There certainly was no precedent for me to imagine myself as one of the passive while effective weapons of war. Maybe it is as Wundt says, and vivid dreams are most often caused by indigestion (Coolidge, 33). Maybe a food journal is as useful as a dream diary in understanding where dreams come from and what they might mean.

I have always thought dreams were the mind's way of organising the events of the day. Sorting, categorising, making connections in ways my conscious brain is not able to. Is my subconscious brain seeing something I have missed? Can I use my dreams as a way of accessing the lesson?

Hartmann saw dreams as providing a context for emotions, and, in his own words, he said, ‘dreaming contextualizes emotion.’ Part of this contextualization,



he believed, was the ability of dreaming to note subtle similarities and to create metaphors for our emotional states. Thus, dreams create a story based on our emotions and psychological issues, (Coolidge, 4).

So, dreams are our minds' way of creating metaphors out of emotion. Metaphors from the debris of the day left floating in our minds, waiting to be sorted away into the correct storage unit. I know my dreams about writing are caused by the pressure of deadlines mixed with the fear of imposter syndrome. Maybe the metaphor of *chevaux-de-frise* represents my passivity, waiting for stories to come to me, get caught in me, rather than me going out to search for stories—food for thought. Obviously, I have some feelings about this. Maybe I feel powerless; maybe I feel out of control.

At Rainbow's End, there is a ride where you, along with other park goers, enter a room with large video screens aligned along the walls. They surround you. The screens play images of roller coasters corkscrewing, kayakers going over waterfalls. Paragliders jumping off cliff faces. I would always stand, eyes fixed on the screen and sway until I almost fell over. Swaying in sympathy with the movement on the screen. Lost from the world inside a representation of a different world. Like a waking dream.

Lucid dreams are defined as dreams in which the dreamer knows that she/he is dreaming. This fascinating state of mind is relatively rare but there is a variety of validated induction methods to increase lucid dream frequency. For the dreamer, lucid dreams are fun (e.g., flying) and helpful (coping with nightmares or training motor skills) (Thonemann).

I am asleep but awake, on the roller coaster with my feet planted securely on the dingy carpet. Sleep has not been coming easy to me.

Scrolling through Facebook and Instagram I am targeted with ads for sleep masks. How does Facebook know I am having a tough time sleeping? That I crave a darkness that doesn't exist anymore. So much ambient lightning, tiny blue standby lights on electrical devices. The dehumidifier with its display panel. Even the full moon conspires to make the world less than dark. Blackness, like a blanket I can curl up in, and become invisible, is what I can not find, and that is what tempts me to buy a mask.

I click on the ad to discover a range of different designs. One boasts lavender pouches to promote a night of deep sleep; one is filled with tiny glass beads for additional weight apparently positive pressure is a thing now. They come in different colours and are very attractive. I want one. But I do not want to pay the \$100 plus price tag. I am so cheap! I mention my conundrum to my husband, and we agree to look for a sleep mask at 'Chemist Warehouse' next time we are nearby. On further research, we discover, Chemist Warehouse does not sell sleep marks.

Lloyd, my husband, buys one for me online. I am happy. I didn't want to make choices about colour and all that. I just wanted a sleep mask. There is such a thing as decision fatigue, and I didn't want to use up any of my decisions on choosing an iteration of sleep mask. Sometimes it's nice when someone else takes the decision out of your hands and just does it.

The sleep mask arrives, and it is magnificent. Pitch blackness even with the lights on. The mask is a lot like the one in the ad, but no branding or logo. It is just black. Soft padding like the rims of glasses velcroed onto the inside of a blindfold. My sleep has 100% improved. My body finds stillness sooner and stays still for longer. It makes me wonder if my nighttime

maneuvers are my body's attempt to move away from the light while still in bed. It is dark now. Properly dark and I sleep.

I am asleep. The mask is working. It is black. Like a weighted blanket for the mind, that is what darkness is for me. Tonight the blackness contains colours; reds and browns in smudges across the insides of my eyelids. It's my imagination, but I go with it because I am asleep. I know I am asleep.

I hear a rhythmic scratching. It's the sound my cat makes running his paws down the glass door, over and over again. It's his way of opening the door, and it works; someone always complies. In my dream, I visualise him inside, asking to be let out—Scratch scratch scratch scratch. But wait...

He could be on the outside asking to be let in. There is something important in this thought. Something about perspectives in storytelling: the idea feels insightful. I will write about it in the morning.

In the morning, I remember I had a thought while sleeping. I remember the thought was important and exciting. I remember what led to the thought, the colours in my mind, the cat scratching. But the thought itself is gone, like mist evaporating in the early morning sun. I can not make it come back. Only write around the hole the idea has left behind. Feel out its shape with my words. Am I the cat on the inside looking out? Or the outside looking in? Am I trapped or exiled?

In his famous book *The Interpretation of Dreams* (Die Traumdeutung), Freud (1900/1955) laid down his ideas on the interpretation of dreams (cf. Jones, 1910), which in his view had a clear and comprehensible place in mental life. Although dreams sometimes seem to have no connection to everyday life, Freud held that

this was untrue. Mental processes form dreams that are in direct continuity with “waking life” and express unconscious feelings and desires in a disguised form. Freud proposed the psychoanalytic technique of free association to access the unconscious meaning of dreams, that is, to find the underlying meaning (latent content) of the superficial (manifest) dream. The latent content of dreams would reveal the preconscious thoughts of the dreamer and repressed memories, desires, and wishes. Explicit dreaming about this repressed material would make sleep impossible, hence the manifest dream is the guardian of sleep (Thonemann).

So, my subconscious protects my ability to sleep by dressing up my dreams so I don't recognise them. Interesting, but I'm not sure I'm buying.

It is Sunday, early morning. I am asleep. I am at the supermarket, but I was only just at the supermarket yesterday. I have already done the weekly shop. I am buying Nutri-Grain. I can hear my thoughts struggling to make sense of this out of character purchase.

Why am I buying Nutri-Grain? No one eats Nutri-Grain. Nutri-Grain is expensive, and it doesn't have enough health stars.

I look down at the trolley, and it is full. Leeks, spinach, coffee, milk.

I have just done the shopping! Why am I doing it again? I am going to blow the budget!

In my sleep, I am getting upset. I am confused. I know enough to know that I have already done the shopping but not enough to know that this is a dream. Such a mundane dream filled with unwarranted tension and fear.

To **dream** of a grocery store represents decisions being made that help to sustain you for the short term. Keeping a good situation going by addressing your short term needs. Confidence about knowing what you can delay, confronting problems or delaying an unpleasant situation from occurring. Feeling that it's easy to deal with your problems "just for now." (Dream Dictionary).

Sounds like a whole heap of nonsense to me. It makes me wonder if, in my dream, the metaphor was nothing to do with supermarkets. Maybe there is no metaphor in my dream at all and I fell asleep hungry, thinking of food.

Does Your Dream Need Interpreting? In Artemidorus' view, not all dreams require interpretation, since not all dreams predict the future. Some dreams are simply the result of an irrational desire, an inordinate fear, or a full or empty stomach (1.1.2, cf. 4. Pref.6): For example, it is inevitable that in their dreams a lover will imagine himself with his beloved, that someone frightened will have a vision of what frightens him, then again that a hungry man will dream of eating and a thirsty man of drinking, and for that matter, someone who has overstuffed himself will dream of vomiting or choking, because of the blockage caused by indigestion. We can see, then, that these dreams, where the feelings are pre-existent, do not foretell the future but recollect the present (Thonemann).

Dreams can be a way of processing what is happening in life now, or if you believe it, they can be projections of possible futures. I believe that what we think influences how

we act which in turn creates our pathway into the future. One of my favourite Star Wars quotes is “The future is always in motion”. In the Star Wars universe the ‘Force’ grants visions of the future, but the recipient never knows if these visions are leading them towards that possible future or warning them to do everything in their power to avoid it. How can we know if our frenzied attempts to steer away from danger aren’t just a form of target fixation whereby we steer into the very danger we are trying to avoid? I do not believe my dreams prophesize the future. But they can give me insight into where I am now.

The poet’s task is this, my friend,  
To read his dreams and comprehend.  
The truest human fancy seems  
To be revealed to us in dreams:  
All poems and versification  
Are but true dreams interpretation (Nietzsche, 32).

I’m asleep and dreaming. I’m in an apartment building, quite high up. It looks like a party or family gathering. The apartment has a balcony but not like one you would expect. This one is made from cinder blocks. Someone, maybe me, has removed some of the cinder blocks to make a comfortable seat for three teenagers, one of them my son, Ryan. I see cracks in the mortar between the blocks closer to the building’s wall. I notice and think nothing, just notice. I am on the balcony as the front half of it starts to tip, slowly at first, but not slow enough for the teenagers to get up. There is a moment where both them and I realise what is going to happen, but no time to reach for them. They don’t even look my way before falling. No pleading eyes,

no fear. As they fall, I run inside and call out for someone to call an ambulance. I am nearing the apartment door when the building itself begins to lurch. I have no feelings just a focus to get to my son. But then I know. It isn't just the balcony that will fall tonight. I look across the apartment at the other adults and call them to come to me, but there is no time. The building beaks and their half falls away. I turn my back and crouch down as a fireball passes over my head. I know I need to leave, but I can't resist opening one of the internal doors of the apartment. It used to lead to a bedroom, now it opens on air. I look through at the gaping hole and know there is no chance for my son in a situation like this. His fall was the first among many. He would be at the bottom now. He would most certainly be dead. My son is dead. I turn back to the exit and open the door. There is no emotion in my dreams. No feelings at all. Just utter acceptance. No questioning. No thinking out other ways of doing things. Just doing things and moving forward until I awake confused and concerned.

Thonemann believes one of the functions of dreams is mood regulation. I go to bed stressed and play out the emotion through my dream, bleeding it dry allowing me to awaken in a different emotional space from when I fell asleep. Then why did I fall asleep calm and wake up afraid?

Sometimes I dream in riddles:

Don't look for the meaning inside the poem

Look for it inside a house fire at 3 am.

I dream in snippets of stories. In flash fiction. I dream about confusion and loss and transition and being alone. I dream about my greatest fears but there is no fear in the dream. In the dreams, there are no feelings at all.

Thus the aesthetically sensitive man stands in the same relation to the reality of dreams as the philosopher does to the reality of existence; he is a close and willing observer, for these images afford him an interpretation of life (Nietzsche, 34).

The feelings come when I am awake.

Now I'm awake. I still remember what it was to dream and I feel safe in the surety that there will be more dreams. Dreams of danger, dreams of loss, dreams of supermarket shopping, dreams of home.

And perhaps many will, like myself, recall home amid the dangers and terrors of dreams they have occasionally said to themselves in self-encouragement, and not without success: "It is a dream! I will dream on! (Coolidge, 33).



## You Have To Do Your Own Growing

Faux leather armchair.

Bedside table.

Cables, monitors, alarms.

An odour of sweat mixed with stale recycled air.

A shower curtain pulled back.

Single-serve pudding, a fruit cup and sandwiches, like what you might get from a bakery, displayed on a canteen tray placed on an overbed table.

A cup of tea, murky and sweet, cooling alongside.

Their little patch of territory, private in a public sort of way, with defined boundaries respected by fellow patients and visitors, and disregarded by staff. After all the whole shebang is their territory. Just like the whole of the library belongs to Raphaëlle.

Raphaëlle's skin sticks to the chair and makes a damp ripping sound every time she adjusts her body. Outside it's jumper and jacket weather, but inside the hospital, it's too hot for more than a t-shirt. She has a pile of clothes beside the chair. It's quiet but not silent. It is never silent at the hospital. Ben is asleep so Raphaëlle lets her mind wander and imagine the next crime scenario she will write. She looks across the aisle at a man scrolling on his phone.

*Ding. An email. It's from Mr Mercury. He has Grace and wants me to take \$50,000 and meet him at the base of the sky tower. How will I get past the nurses? I'm supposed to have an operation tomorrow morning. They won't be keen to let me leave. I'll have to make a distraction and sneak out down the stairs. There are always TAXIS outside. I could be there in 20 minutes. Where are my clothes? I'll just have to go like this. I'll ask to go to the bathroom and*

*be down the stairs before they know what's happened. I can't let anything happen to Grace. I'll die if it means she's safe...*

"Raphy?"

A voice says her name and takes her attention. It's her partner Ben, he's awake.

"Yes, babe. I'm right here. You were sleeping. Your lunch arrived but I told them just to leave it. I said you needed your sleep. I can get you another cup of tea if you like... if that one's cold?"

Ben reaches out and grasps Raphaëlle's hand as if reassuring himself that she is real and really there. His hand feels clammy in hers. He has an aura of sickness around him. Hot and sticky. He smells like sickness, slightly sweet and slightly bitter. A culmination of lying in a hospital bed for days, and fever sweats. Raphaëlle breathes through her mouth. Ben's eyes are glazed and struggle to focus. The man is sick and definitely in the right place. Raphaëlle takes a deep breath and meets his chaotic gaze. She stands over him and brushes the hair back from his face as she did with their daughter, Aisling when she would have a cold. But this isn't a cold.

\*

Siobhan is busy preparing dinner when Raphaëlle enters the kitchen.

"Mum! I'm quitting school and moving to Sydney," Raphaëlle says.

"What!" Siobhan is caught off guard.

"Stop overreacting! Ciara is in Sydney, what's the big deal?"

"Where on earth is this coming from? I thought your plan was to finish school and study music at university?"

“I was, but I can’t wait. The job opportunities in Sydney are great for writers. I can work as a waitress during the day and write by night. People do it. There’s no money in music now.”

“Wow, could you just take a breath for a moment...”

“Mum! No! I’m not boring like you. I want to do something with my life, actually make something of myself. I don’t even know why I’m trying to explain myself to you. You have no idea what it is like to have dreams. What have you ever done?”

“Please don’t rush into anything. Once you leave school it is so hard to go back. I just don’t want you to regret anything when you get to my age. Please just take a couple of days to think about it?”

“Whatever.”

Siobhan stares at her daughter’s receding back and tries to refocus on dinner. The teenage years had been the hardest to date. Toilet training was nothing compared to the hot and cold temper of her youngest.

“These are her mistakes to make,” she says out loud. “It wasn’t like I was any better.” A sadness settles about her.

\*

Richard sits on the floor of his bedroom. A book propped open in his lap and an alphabet card on the floor next to him. *Winnie the Pooh lived with his friends in the Hundred-Acre Wood...* Richard’s lips move while he reads, ever so slightly, and his eyes glance at the alphabet card to check he has his sounds right. He is focusing with effort on the words in the book and the story hiding in the words. It is hard going, but his teacher says he must read every day for homework. Richard loves school. He loves the warm classroom and the soft carpet on the floors, the

tissues for blowing his nose. At school there is reading time and playtime, writing time and game time. Richard is learning to add and take away and how to measure with a ruler. He feels okay at school. Sometimes he doesn't feel okay at home. The door to Richard's bedroom opens, it's his mother Siobhan with the baby.

"Ricky babe, I'mma put the baby down here next to you. Will you read to him for a bit? There's a good lad". She takes off her cardigan and lays it on the bare floorboards, before depositing the baby on top. She smiles a wane smile at Richard and leaves, shutting the door behind her. Richard can hear muffled voices from the living room. He looks across to his baby brother and reaches out to tuck the cardigan closer around his wee body. In a small voice, he begins the story again.

"Winnie the Pooh lived with his friends in the Hundred-Acre Wood".

There is a sound of shattering glass. It makes Richard freeze and look towards the door. A moment passes in silence before the low voices begin again. Richard looks at his brother, quiet and still, wrapped in the cardigan and back to his book. He says the next line and the next. Working his way doggedly to the end of the page.

\*

Leaving the library after work, Raphaëlle feels late. She has a constant feeling of lateness nowadays, of being double booked and running out of time. She should be at home looking after Ben. That's what you do with your loved ones. You look after them and nurse them back to health. But how much comfort is the right amount of comfort to give the man you love when you want to do something else, be somewhere else? How much is enough when the illness doesn't seem to go away? Might not ever go away. Raphaëlle could spend a lifetime

comforting and never see the back of it. Never see the end of it. Sat beside a sickbed from here to eternity. She had first met Ben in Sydney. She was waitressing at the local comedy club and he was a regular. They had gotten together quickly and even moved in together after the first month of dating. They only moved back to Auckland once Ben got sick, so they could both be closer to their families. Marriage and Aisling followed soon after.

Ben's illness pulls at Raphaëlle like elastic. She moves away and the tension begins. The reverse pressure to return to him. No spontaneous drinks after work. No girls nights out. The tension stops her from planning. Stops her from asking, "Will you be okay if I...?" Because how can someone say no to that. Even when the answer needs to be no. So Raphaëlle says no to herself. It's only right, she rationalises. But on the small stretches of alone time between work and home she wonders what if. What if Ben died? What if his next virus is his last? What if he has a car accident on the way home? It happens, Raphaëlle knows. People die unexpectedly every day. What would she do if today was Ben's day to die? What would she do? What *could* she do? She would never get remarried, she knows that for sure.

\*

Siobhan is 'touched out.' There are little hands touching her body at all times. Her body does not belong to her. Motherhood has done that. It's supposed to be this way, she knows, but in this moment, the slightest sensation against her skin makes her teeth clench and her brain tense up. She tolerates their touch, the need she senses in their gaze, their utter dependency. There is love there too, but it is overlayed by fatigue and stress and fear. Siobhan jiggles the baby in her arms hoping to soothe him to sleep before the bus arrives. Richard is sitting next to her on the bench at the bus stop, his little legs pressed up against hers. His fingers wrapped

around her forearm. His blue eyes taking in the world on the busy Sydney street. The little family doesn't speak. The baby doesn't cry. On the bus, Siobhan guides Richard to a window seat and takes the seat next to him for herself. The baby has dozed off. Siobhan can see Richard looking to her, expecting something, asking something with his blue eyes. But she doesn't have anything to give right now. This knowledge cuts. Richard would be better off with a different mummy. They both would. What would happen to the children, if she just fell asleep and didn't wake up? Their new mummy wouldn't make mistakes, wouldn't burn the dinner or shrink the washing. Their new mummy would read to them every night, have a shower every day and brush her hair and look pretty. Siobhan spends the bus ride indulging in this fantasy of her children with a new mummy, safe and happy and well. Living the life they deserve. Not this half-life. It's not meant to be this way she knows but she can't seem to shake herself out of this feeling of slowly falling asleep.

\*

Raphaëlle has walked down the steps around the back of the library every day, twice a day if she forgot something in the car. The textured concrete steps were just steps. Just moments spent between here and there. Here; the car. There; the library. Raphaëlle had fallen into the librarian role by chance. She was at the library and overheard a mother pleading with her son to just "Find a book! Read a book! Enjoy a book! It's not that hard for God's sake!"

Raphaëlle had held back a chuckle and suggested a comedy filled with toilet humour for the teenager. A Terry Pratchett Discworld Novel, *Guards! Guards!* As Raphaëlle checked out her own choices, the librarian mentioned that they were looking for a new youth librarian if she was interested in applying? Raphaëlle was working at the supermarket at the time, stocking

shelves and running the checkout while Aisling was at school. Why not apply? That was five years ago and the library had become a second home. Raphaëlle's challenge then was always to get teenagers to put down phones and pick up books. The free wifi helps to get them through the doors but little more.

In hindsight, Raphaëlle could see the danger. The steps were wet from the rain overnight and leaves had accumulated in the corners, but it wasn't these hazards that caused Raphaëlle to slip. It was a fine layer of small stones, not quite grit, that kept her foot in motion towards the edge and over. Her back arched as if her belly button could lead the way to safety. Arms windmilled, fingers splayed, grasping nothing. The first strike of a fall is the most deadly and where the head meets the spine is the most vulnerable, especially when striking the unyielding edge of the first step. But not this time.

This time it was Raphaëlle's back that landed first. At three points, representing three steps. Her head continued its journey towards the concrete, gave it the whisper of a kiss and then snapped back up. Raphaëlle slid down another four steps before the momentum left her sore and stunned, lying prone on the steps. She could feel the aches develop as the adrenaline receded. Raphaëlle could feel the chill of the concrete through her jacket. Her jeans were wet and leaves clung to her. She stayed still for a moment and ran her mind along her body, investigating it for injuries, marvelling at her continued status as alive.

The pain was a good sign. Alive people feel pain, she thought. With this, Raphaëlle rolled towards the handrail and very slowly pulled herself upright. She looked between the car and the library. Sure, she was a bit hurt but hurt enough to go home? Raphaëlle does not even imagine actually needing medical attention although she would have insisted upon it for anyone else. She continued towards the library and her day of work. No point making a fuss. Raphaëlle didn't see anyone, so no one saw her fall.

\*

The anaesthetising glow of the television set lulls Raphaëlle into a fitful sleep with dissatisfied dreams. Dreams she doesn't remember or chooses not to. In the morning, her body feels heavy and slow, to the point of unwieldy. The fabric of her clothing chafes and sits uncomfortably against her skin. There is a wrongness to it, a loss of ease.

"I need a swim," she says out loud.

"Any chance for some lunch?" asks Ben.

"Sure," Raphaëlle smiles brightly.

Raphaëlle puts the thought of swimming to the bottom of a never-ending to-do list, mostly centred around domestic tasks and library paperwork. The library is the heart of any community and Raphaëlle is committed to ensuring it maintains that status through outreach initiatives. But the price of innovation is paperwork. Raphaëlle assembles toasted sandwiches and places them butter-side down in the frying pan. While they brown off, she reminds Aisling to do her homework and gets Ben his medicine and a glass of water. His illness is receding for now. Some kind of virus, the hospital has said, a result of his compromised immune system. It would be but one of many, Raphaëlle knew. The future looked more murky than rosy. The constant threat of illness and disrupted lives on the horizon. Lives put eternally on hold for an illness-free future that may or may not come. What kind of childhood is Aisling having that constantly revolves around her father's health? She's old enough to be mostly independent now, the same age as Raphaëlle when she left school. Raphaëlle flips the sandwiches and prepares the plates. She listens to the sizzle from the pan and wonders about the man from the hospital. After saving the love of his life, how might he sneak back into the hospital and be



ready for his operation? Raphaelle dishes up the toasted sandwiches and takes them to the lounge.

\*

Goals for 2019:

- Swim the harbour bridge ocean race. *That means training.*
- Draft my “Who done it” novel. Title: An Unexamined Life. Or maybe, A Life Unexamined. *Maybe I could solve a real-life crime like Miss Marple?*
- Join an orchestra or at least a string quartet.
- Hold a regular open mic night at the library. *Maybe quarterly? Maybe monthly?*
- Take Aisling on a girls trip to Sydney.

\*

The water is cool but not cold. It wraps around Raphaelle’s body like an embrace. Defining the boundaries between her and not her. Raphaelle feels the heat within her skin push out against the water leaving behind an odd contradiction of hot and cold, clammy and refreshed. The lap pool in Albany is twenty meters long and chest-deep at best. Nothing at all like the ocean. Not real preparation for a race but better than nothing she thinks. Arms stroke, legs kick, mouths gasp. They get better at it. It makes no nevermind to them the composition of the water. How much salt, how much chlorine, how much urine. They get better, they grow stronger. Focus on your breathing, she thinks. Stroke, stroke, breathe. Stroke, stroke, breathe. In the ocean there are bodies. Grasping hands and kicking legs. No questions you’ll get hit, she thinks. A foot in the face and a sharp intake of saltwater into lungs. She wonders, do people die in these races?

A whole bunch of those runners died in China. Twenty-one of them. Hypothermia or exposure or whatever. Running through the wilderness in their shorts and singlets in the hail. The organiser is sincerely sorry. Remorseful. What a burden to carry. An ocean swim must be more difficult than that. More dangerous. Am I seriously comparing an ultra marathon with a harbour crossing? I'm psyching myself out. Just keep swimming. That's how bodies get stronger. Be afraid on the day if you must. For now, just swim...

In the spa afterwards, Raphaelle allows her body to ease into the heat as a form of meditation. She has thirty minutes before she must leave and return home. She pushes those thoughts from her mind and etches the physical sensation of heat on skin, the release and comfort, into her memory. A balm to soothe her later when it becomes hard to sleep.

\*

Raphaelle sits on her mother's lap tucked under one of her arms. It is soft and warm. Her mummy is a bit older than the other mummies, but that's okay. Ciara is snuggled in on the other side. With her arms around both girls, Siobhan begins reading. Raphaelle has heard the story a hundred times. All about Christopher Robin and Pooh Bear and Piglet and Tigger and Eeyore.

"Read the bit where Christopher Robin bonks Pooh Bear's head on the way down the stairs!" she says.

"Alright. Just let me find the right page. You think of your favourite bit too, Ciara and we can read that next."

Raphaelle can see her mother smiling at her, her eyes bright. It makes her feel warm. She looks across at her sister wondering what bit she would choose. It wouldn't be as good as

her bit but that would be okay. The longer they had reading time, the longer they could stay up before bed. A shadow crosses the door and Raphaelle looks up. It's her father, fresh from the pool. His dark hair dripping on his t-shirt. Raphaelle can see him listening and waiting for the right moment to interrupt.

"Not the stairs bit again!" he says and Siobhan laughs. Her father approaches to give them all a kiss, mum first, then Caira, then her.

"I'll have a glass of wine waiting for you when you are finished here," he says to Siobhan.

"Just five more minutes. I don't get to see them so much now they are both at school".

"I understand. I just miss you too. Good night girls! Don't keep your mother reading too long." He turns and leaves them to it. Raphaelle starts dozing when Ciara's bit is being read and doesn't notice at first when her mother gently lowers her into her bed and pulls the duvet over her. The last thing she feels is her mother's kiss on her forehead as she drifts into a peaceful sleep.

\*

Raphaelle was watching Breakfast TV by chance. It was background noise more than anything else, but then Ciara's voice came on and Raphaelle just stood fixated and something bit inside of her.

**Emma Smith:** Welcome to the show, Ciara! We are so excited to have you.

**Ciara Hutchinson:** And I am so excited to be here.

**Emma Smith:** Now, Ciara, you have been a staple figure in the theatre world here in Sydney for a while and now you have a new show out. What can you tell us about that?

**Ciara Hutchinson:** Well, the show is your typical, girl meets boy, girl falls in love with boy, boy turns out to be a zombie kinda show, and the spin we're putting on it is that the whole thing is set in the past, in Medieval times.

**Emma Smith:** That sounds so awesome!

**Ciara Hutchinson:** It really is. We have some really talented stage actors playing the roles, I mean to be working with the likes of Margot Robbie and Hugh Jackman, I might well have died and gone to heaven!

**Emma Smith:** I love what you are doing, you are a real role model for young girls coming through. Actually..., just thinking of that. What advice would you give to the young aspiring women out there watching you right now... Just speak to them for a moment if you can.

**Ciara Hutchinson:** Oh, okay. Sure. I think I can do that. The young women of today huh? Mmmm. What would I say?

**Emma Smith:** Yeah. Like what advice do you wish you had received when you were starting out?

**Ciara Hutchinson:** Now that's easy.

**Emma Smith:** Yeah?

**Ciara Hutchinson:** Don't get married young. Too many of our brightest girls with so much potential miss out on being the CEO of their own lives in order to be a PA in someone else's. Get established, know who you are, lay your foundations and then if you want to, merge your life with someone else... That is only if you want to. I never did (Shrugs). This is the new world, there is more out there than just marriage and babies. The theatre for example!

**Emma Smith:** Haha! Yeah... the theatre!

**Ciara Hutchinson:** I would also tell them not to compromise. I would say that there are people out there that are afraid of you. People who can not deal with what you represent,

because it reminds them of all the things that they are not. All the opportunities that they allowed to pass them by. They will want you to feel ashamed of the light you have within you. My advice is to not let them. Don't let anyone make you feel less than. Just don't.

**Emma Smith:** Alright, words to live by. Thank you so much for taking the time to join us. That was Ciara Hutchinson, promoting her new show, 'I Love Your Brains' now showing at the Capitol Theatre in Sydney and then touring around Australia this summer. Next on the show, we have some budgeting advice from Australia's best-loved accountant Anthony Bell, accountant to the stars!

\*

The chair at the salon sticks to Raphaëlle's bare legs, much like the chair at the hospital, she thinks. But the salon and the hospital could not be more dissimilar in Raphaëlle's opinion. The air is an example. Here at the salon, the air is warm and dry with a slight breeze from an open window. There are no open windows at the hospital, maybe they think someone might jump out? Or throw their rubbish? The air in the hospital is still unless you're sitting underneath a vent. It has a weight to it, like the air itself is weighed down with particles and too tired to move around much. The hospital has its own smell. Bleach, sweat and deodorant combined into a signature scent. Sweet and acrid, cheap and stale. As Raphaëlle thinks about the hospital her face twists. They had gone three months without a visit. Three months maintaining a semblance of wellness. Enough that Raphaëlle felt okay about going to the salon in the first place. The salon that smells like coconut and warm oriental spice, luxury and exorbitance. Raphaëlle sips her champagne and submits to the endless touching that getting one's hair done requires. She avoids the chitchat through the use of a canary yellow notebook. On the page,

she has written a title; How to plan the perfect murder - salon edition. Raphaëlle writes with a calligraphy pen because she likes the warm black of the ink and the way it makes her writing look more sophisticated than it really is, more valid. The salon is a contradiction of sanctuary and submission. One must be still, confined to a chair while a stranger paws through their hair, but the trade-off for this stillness is the absence of obligation. No obligation to talk to anyone, beyond the pleasantries, of course. No obligation to comfort or console, no obligation to serve and to smile, to always smile. Here at the salon, Raphaëlle is still. She regards the razor-sharp scissors, and the array of chemicals seemingly everywhere inside the salon and considers how one might use such readily available tools to plan the perfect murder. She makes notes in her notebook ready to be built into a new piece of writing, about a nearly 40-year-old woman who fantasises about killing her business partner on the shop floor of their premier salon in New York City, or maybe L.A.

Raphaëlle is nearly 40-years-old and is spending more and more time considering what that means in terms of being old or being young... of being too old. She thinks about what she set out to do on her first trip to Sydney, following in Ciara's footsteps. She was going to have a novel published in that first year. What the hell happened? Life happened, she supposed. But didn't that same life happen to Ciara? How did their paths end up so divergent? Raphaëlle could feel the tension burrowing between her eyebrows. What the hell was she doing!? All these ideas, all the scenarios dreamed up in hospital waiting rooms, or while vacuuming and what had she done! Nothing! Raphaëlle had fallen in and out of love with words arranged in notebooks. The one constant - murder. But something was different today. Today there was a bit of grit in Raphaëlle's stomach. An anchor point for a pearl to develop around. She would finish something. She would write an awful story and finish it and move on.

\*

Siobhan opens her wallet and looks at the twenty, hundred dollar notes inside. The money makes her feel nervous and is the combined efforts of pawned jewellery and cash in hand work typing invoices for the local auto shop. It is the most money she has held in her hands at any one time. Would it be enough? Siobhan runs through the plan in her mind. Tonight would be a special night. It's Siobhan's twenty-fifth birthday. The children are safe with their aunt and Siobhan is getting her hair done before her special birthday dinner. The hairdresser is all the way in the city so Siobhan will be gone most of the day. She has arranged to get a taxi straight to the restaurant. No one is expecting her until 7 pm that night. Siobhan waits at the bus stop. The bus to the city comes and goes. The next bus pulls up, it goes to the airport. Siobhan gets on. In her pocket, she has her passport, a ticket to Auckland, and a polaroid of her with the boys. As the bus pulls away she feels a sense of anticipation. Of something starting and something ending. She thinks of her boys with their new mum. Happy of course. She nods to herself, she has made the right decision and now her real life can begin. The boys will be okay. Better than okay. She doesn't allow herself to think of any other possibilities.

\*

The restaurant has been booked for the event, a private function. Ciara is arranging champagne saucers on the bar when Raphaelle walks in.

"Happy Birthday, gorgeous!" Ciara says, looking at her little sister.

"Thanks."

“The big four-oh aye? How does it feel to be entering the best years of your life?! Aisling is nearly all grown up, Ben seems on the road to recovery, it’s all about you now.”

“I don’t know about that.”

Raphaelle doesn’t want to get into it right now with her sister. She thinks about Ben. His cheeks look flushed and there is a wildness to his eyes that Raphaelle recognises as the beginning of fever. Everything seems so transient, she thinks.

“I’ve asked mum to get Ben to help her with organising the seating arrangements,” Ciara says. “Everyone should be here within the next half an hour. Just enough time for us to have a drink. Gin and Tonic?”

“Yes, please.”

Raphaelle and Ciara sit together at the bar. Ciara talks about her new show and despite herself, Raphaelle can’t help but laugh. Zombies in Medieval times? If she needed any more evidence that even bad writing gets published this was it. Or was it a case of ‘so bad it’s good’ she wonders? Raphaelle feels the determination solidify within her and wishes she could just skip dinner and write. Not tonight, she thinks. There will be time enough when we get home. Raphaelle watches her mother over dinner. In her eighties now, Siobhan looks fragile, like one misplaced step would see her with a broken hip. Her mind isn’t as clear as it was either. She is smiling and laughing along with everyone else, but Raphaelle doesn’t see comprehension in her eyes, only confusion with a hint of fear. Ciara had picked Siobhan up from the rest home as a special treat for the family. They didn’t get to see each other very often. Not with Ciara living in Sydney, for the past twenty-plus years.

A waiter approaches Ciara at the head of the table and Raphaelle can see the confusion writ large on her sister’s face. Curious she gets up and walks over.

“...an older gentleman has asked if he can speak with a Siobhan?”



“Can you point him out to me?”

“Just over by the bar... in the brown suit jacket.”

“Okay, thanks. I’ll go over and speak with him.”

The waiter nods and leaves to collect empty glasses and take more drinks orders.

“What do you think that’s about?” Raphaëlle asks.

“I don’t have the foggiest,” Ciara says, and then she turns and walks over to the bar.

Raphaëlle is left standing there for a moment then she makes the choice to follow her sister.

“Hello, I’m told you want to speak with my mother? Siobhan?”

Ciara is talking to a smartly dressed man in his mid-sixties. Dark blue jeans, shirt and suit jacket.

“Yes. It’s rather important. I had arranged to visit her at the rest home and when I arrived they told me where she was.”

“May I ask why you had plans to visit with my mother?”

“Our mother.” Raphaëlle interrupts.

The sisters look at the intruder, one with annoyance and the other with curiosity.

“I’m sorry, I should have introduced myself. My name is Richard, and I have known your mother for a very long time, though not so much in recent years. You see, she is my mother too.”

“Huh,” murmurs Raphaëlle. She looks across towards Siobhan deep in conversation with Ben, completely unaware. Raphaëlle takes this moment to look at her mother. Really look. What had happened? What significant event lead to this moment? She notices the smile lines and the furrows between the brows. As Raphaëlle looks, she sees not her mother, but a woman, like her. In that moment of revelation, Raphaëlle feels an intense kinship with her

mother. A warped pride acknowledging that she has lived beyond her role as Raphaëlle and Ciara's mother. She is a whole human being, messy and real.

“Alright...,” Raphaëlle says, “why don't you join us for a drink?”

## Politics at School

“I am only sixteen years old and I got a call from my best friend crying about how the boy she trusted and thought she was *in love* with, leaked her nudes. A photo she trusted him to keep to himself was seen by nearly every year twelve and thirteen from her school. She took it to her *male* teacher and he said, “that’s just what teenage boys do.” I think it is disgusting that a teacher she trusted didn’t do anything about it until her *female* principal was involved.

Something like this could seriously affect my friend's future when an employer is looking on the internet for background information about her. How is being a teenage boy any excuse to do horrible, sleazy acts like this?! The sad thing is that this isn’t even the first story I’ve heard of boys leaking girls nudes” (Student 1).

This was one of the responses from my Year 12 English students a few months back when I asked them to write 500 words on a social justice issue, sexism, racism, classism etc. I kept it broad, sexism could include gender roles but it could also include homophobia. The girls in my class almost unanimously choose to write about sexism and their personal experiences. It was tough reading. Young women are being body-shamed by their peers for not being slim enough while also being told to ‘cover up’ by their teachers so they don’t distract the boys. There seemed to be no winning. Not attractive enough and too attractive at the same time. Some of their words made me stumble.

“Sexism in the classroom. ‘It’s 2020, that doesn’t happen anymore!’ Well, tell that to the boys that call women ‘dishwashers’, joke about date rape and say that girls belong in cages. Teachers turn a blind eye and girls don’t put up a fight because we know there’s no point and, after all, we want the boys to like us” (Student 2).

I never had to deal with anything like this when I was at school.

“The Western society that I have experienced evidently favours *beautiful* people. To me, a stereotypically beautiful woman is young, with nice hair, clear skin with an attractive figure. She is not too short, nor too tall, athletic but not so much that it is masculine, she holds herself with grace and confidence, however not too confident that it is intimidating” (Student 3).

I am proud that my students are self-aware enough to articulate their realities, but God damn do I wish we had moved on by now. I want better for them.

\*

My Year 9s need to do a speech this year. Since I have full autonomy to decide how I teach this skill and what the parameters of the task will be, I decided to set this speech topic:

If I could change one thing about the world it would be...

I billed it as an opportunity for all comers. Students could go literal or fantastical, possible or impossible, meaningful or trivial. They just had to own it.

I floated the idea of unicorns as the new personal transportation of choice and having the internet download to our brains daily.

My students had other ideas.

We are still in the planning stage but I would say around half of my students have chosen very serious topics like racism and global warming. Interesting, since I never gave them any serious examples, preferring instead to exemplify the trivial.

Students at Year 9 are around thirteen years old and I need to remember that when they show up with their idealism. One student was sharing her idea with me.

“If I could change one thing in the world it would be that I could give all homeless people a place to live and enough food to eat.”

“Do you mean, like a charity?”

“Yes.”

“A noble idea, but I wonder... How do people feel when they need to receive charity?”

She thought about it for a moment before replying,

“Not good.”

“Probably not. Your idea is like the ambulance at the bottom of the cliff, helping people after everything has gone wrong. I wonder, what idea would be like the fence at the top of the cliff?”

I smiled and left her to her thoughts. I wondered if I had been a bit too blunt with my comment. After all charity in itself is not a bad thing... but if I could change one thing in the world it would be that charity is no longer necessary.

\*

“I don’t know who needs to hear this, but it’s dangerous to post your running route online every day.”

That was the post that arrested my scrolling of Instagram one Sunday morning. It was accompanied by an image of two of the offending posts. Typical running maps with speed, time, calories burnt. A logo proclaiming “Yes She Can!” in the corner. It was posted by a group under the handle @womansrights\_news. I normally like their stuff. But this post put a dent in my calm. This time I did not ‘like’ but made a comment.

“This post is one step away from victim-blaming”.

Enough said.

Long story short, a bunch of enthusiastic people replied to my comment and I had new Instagram notifications blowing up my phone for the next 24hrs and beyond. I read all the replies but made the choice not to engage further, after all, enough said. Some of the replies were supportive.

“@jessicabrownnz 🙌 Beyond right. “Don’t post your stuff so you don’t get raped” is essentially the same as “don’t get drunk and don’t wear a short skirt or you’ll get raped”. How about we teach men to stop raping instead of teaching women that they have to constantly be careful!”

Some of the replies were hostile to the point of threatening.

“@jessicabrownnz then put your address in your bio ✨”.

But the vast majority knew it wasn’t great but they wouldn’t be taking chances with their safety.

“Agreed, but that won’t happen overnight and in the meantime, I will be protecting myself and teaching my daughters to do the same”.

One person was able to express my opinion a lot more eloquently than I was as they replied to another comment in the thread.

“@xxxxxx I understand but can I float this? We (society as a whole) have been learning a lot (hopefully) about microaggressions, unconscious bias, and about what and how we teach keeping white supremacy alive. Is this not the same except with women? When you teach women that their actions need to be altered on a personal level, you are subconsciously making it their responsibility not to get attacked. That subconscious idea can pervade one’s mind and society into thinking women are weaker, women need to be taken care of. It infantilizes them. I have 2 daughters, obviously, I want them safe. But I also don’t want them growing up thinking their actions are responsible for the decisions of others.”

I found the whole series of interactions unsettling. I began to question myself. Am I the one taking unnecessary risks in the name of principle? I started thinking about this issue when I wrote my own 500 words on sexism, but I was realising that there was so much more thinking left to do, especially for me as the mother of a teenage son. If I stopped posting my runs online because I was afraid, would I be sending him the message that men are not responsible for their own actions?

Seeing the flair up my comment had caused online, I wondered what kind of conversation it would prompt in the classroom. So I set the original Instagram post as a writing provocation. A group of Year 9s were the first to share their opinions. I read over their shoulders as I walked around the classroom with growing dismay. The line, *Women should not post their runs online* came up over and over again. My students were agreeing with the post 100%.

“Please stand up if you agree with the post and women should not post their runs online.”

All but one student stood up.

“Okay. Now I want you to think about the predators we are protecting ourselves from when we censor our behaviour, for example by not posting our runs online... What percentage of the population do you think we need to be concerned about? What percentage of the general population? Remember we are talking about premeditated, on purpose, tracking someone down based on their running post for the sole purpose of doing them harm.”

I paused so they could think about it for a moment.

“Any guesses?”

“One per cent?”

That was from the kid who was still seated. No one else had a response.

“Okay. Stay standing if you think it is 10% or more.”

No one sat down.

“20% or more.”

Still, no one sat down.

“30% or more.”

Nothing.

“40% or more.”

At this point, everyone sat down. I asked one girl, Guinevere, what her idea was and she said 35%.

“So we’re thinking that a bit more than three out of every ten people is a threat to our personal safety? There are 22 students in class today, which seven do you think represent this risk?”

I wanted them to think about the general population as an extension of our classroom population. If we truly believe three out of every ten people means to do us harm then what does that say about how my students view the world? I am sort of hoping that they either don’t understand percentages properly or maybe they just don’t see their classmates as representative of the world at large. Maybe it is all the people we have not met who are the evil ones? At least three out of every ten of them? My students are a mix of rural farm kids and small towners. Why are we so afraid?

The next day, I had three new classes to test my provocation on. Inevitably there was always that one student who believed that responsibility should be shared between victim and perpetrator if the victim were so stupid as to post their run online. It made for some great conversations. One of my Year 9s decided to clap back at one of the more harsh commenters



and it was the sweetest gesture. Still, as a rule, we try not to get down and dirty in the comments section of an Instagram post.

One of the unexpected consequences of my Instagram comment was a couple of DMs of the “Hey there beautiful” variety. Extremely creepy since my last post was about my wedding anniversary. I decided to ignore them until that afternoon when a notification interrupted my class, letting me know a persistent Instagrammer had sent me another message. The look on my face gave me away.

“What’s up Miss?”

“Some guy is messaging me on Instagram and it is creepy.”

“Yeah, that happens to me all the time.”

“How do I get rid of it?!”

Half the class was listening and they thought it was hilarious. Students gathered around to look at the notification on my screen.

“Haha! He’s called himself Big Daddy!”

I couldn’t help but laugh myself. My student took my phone and showed me how to block the stranger. No more notifications.

“It looks like he sent you a pic Miss! Hahaha! Don’t worry, I won’t open it.”

We all had a good laugh about the weird guy. Once I got my phone back and my students were back in their seats I was standing next to a group as they tried to reassure me about the normalcy of my experience.

“This happens all the time. I’ve got heaps of dick pics from strangers off the internet. They are mostly middle-aged men.”

“And we’re fourteen-year-old girls.”

“It’s so creepy!”

“How come I don’t get sent dick pics?” Asked the one boy in the group.

“I suppose middle-aged men don’t want to have sex with you.”

I listened horrified but impressed by the apparent resilience of my students. This was their reality and they had strategies in place to deal with it. No one was playing the victim even though I am sure sending unsolicited dick pics to minors must be a crime. The class was feisty and in good spirits. They were the last class I taught on that day and by 9.30 pm it became clear there would be no more teaching for the rest of the week, maybe longer. Auckland was moving back into level three lockdown in response to a community outbreak of COVID-19. Four members of one family tested positive with the likelihood of more.

Two and a half weeks later Auckland moved into Alert Level 2.5 and we went back to school. Seeking connection I spent my downtime in the English office with my Head of Faculty, a well put together woman in her twenties, every detail about her appearance precise and polished. We talked about the Year 12 cohort and their work or lack thereof, during the latest lockdown. The subject moved to the upcoming New Zealand election.

“Sometimes when the students are talking you can hear their parents' words coming out of their mouths,” she said.

“Like how some people vote National because their parents always voted National?”

“Yeah, they have adults they respect and so they take on their point of view. We need to remember that we have that same sort of influence over our students in the classroom.”

“Some of the students haven’t ever looked at the issues for themselves to have their own opinion.”

“Some of them don’t know how to.”

“I think it’s about having the opportunity. Some of them haven’t ever been asked.”

“Have you thought about your vote?”

“Yes, but I don’t really know about the policies”

“Oh! There’s a website for that. [Votecompass.com](http://Votecompass.com)”

I typed in the web address and got started answering the questions. There were 30 questions which ranged from ‘How much of a role should the Treaty of Waitangi have in New Zealand law?’ to ‘How much should New Zealand do to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions?’ I answered as I felt appropriate trying not to overthink it. The outcome? I am halfway between a green voter and a labour supporter. Quite progressive and more than a little bit left. I shared my results with my HoF and we looked at the scatter graph of where I sit in the political landscape.

“Haha! Look at where the New Conservatives are!” I pointed to the corner of the graph where ‘conservative’ met with ‘right’.

“I wonder what kind of answers you would have to give to put yourself down there...” She paused before suggesting we go through the questions again to see if we could hit the ‘New Conservative’ target. A challenge for sure. I figured I would just give the opposite answers to what I really thought.

We each focused on our laptops channelling our inner ‘New Conservative’ sometimes reasoning answers out loud.

“We want less corporate tax because we want rich people to get richer so that the trickle-down effect thing happens, right?”

“Oh, we hate the Treaty of Waitangi so that needs to go.”

“Foreigners are scary, so no overseas investment or international students.”

“Dental care for all? Hell no! User pays!”

When the results came back my dot slightly overlapped the New Conservatives and my HoF had overshot to a rightwing conservative spot on the graph where no party dared to exist.

“How did you do that?” she asked me, laughing.

“I have no idea. You know these questions would make great discussion prompts for the students.”

\*

“Hey Miss, I’m going to deface the New Conservatives sign tonight. I’m not joking!”

“I don’t think you are,” I replied.

I love that my students are so emboldened by their beliefs. I love that they have beliefs they are willing to get in trouble for. I probably could have told her that the destruction of property is a bad idea and that there are other ways of making a political point, but I didn’t. I didn’t want to diminish her, and besides, it is one thing to talk about doing something, and it is another to actually do it.

\*

It turned out that the ‘vote compass’ website was a fantastic discussion prompt for my Year 10s. They got right into it, answering the questions and debating the possible outcomes. One question caused quite a stir: New Zealand should deport foreigners who are convicted of a criminal offence.

“This question is very topical at the moment. Have you all heard about how Australia is willing to take the Christchurch Mosque shooter for the duration of his life sentence? What do you guys think? Do we want him to serve his time here or back in Australia?”

“In Australia, Miss!” It was one of my more rowdy boys who spoke.

“How come? Shouldn't he pay for his crime here?”

“No way. We don't need the reminder of what he did.”

“You mean like, out of sight, out of mind?”

“Yeah. It's too much. We don't need that here.”

I addressed the class again, “Maybe you're right. But what about the man who immigrated to New Zealand as a child, went to school here, got married here, has been working here for thirty years. What should happen to him if he were convicted of, say... drunk driving? Where would he get sent back to?”

“He should stay here, especially if he is a permanent resident. This is where his family is.” It was a girl who spoke, long brown hair straightened around her face. She seemed quite sure.

“I don't know what the right answer is, all I know is that we need to think about both extremes when we try and answer this question. Keep thinking. Keep talking.”

I wandered around the class talking with students about the questions they were answering. The website presented the questions in a random order so no two students were thinking about the same questions at the same time. What I noticed is a lot of students don't know what the laws are now to be able to say they want things to be easier or harder, for example, should it be easier or harder to get a gun licence?

“Do you have a gun in your household?” I asked one of the lads.

“No.”

“I do,” I said, “and I remember my husband had to go through an interview and organise character references who also had to be interviewed. There were a lot of forms to fill in.”

“That must be because of the recent shootings.”

“Not at all. This was five or six years ago.”

“Oh. It’s a lot harder to get a gun than I thought it was.”

“So do you think it should be harder than that? Or easier? Or stay the same?”

I left him to think about his answer.

Things got exciting when the results started to come in. The few students who weren’t that interested wanted to have their own dot on the scatter graph. They started answering questions.

What I noticed was the reality of New Zealand politics. Two main political parties are situated in the centre of the scatter graph, one a bit lower and to the right, one a bit higher and to the left. The students who didn’t really know much about how the country was run ended up smack bang in the middle of these two seemingly polar opposite parties. They had results like 56% New Zealand Labour Party and 52% New Zealand National Party. It’s not what one would expect from the rhetoric spewed on the nightly news.

\*

On the way home I made a point of looking at the New Conservative sign. “Someone” had written ‘EQUALITY FOR ALL’ in big blue letters across the sign. A positive message. A couple of days later the sign had been replaced with a brand new New Conservative sign asking to repeal bad gun laws.

My student was very disappointed when I mentioned the new sign. Her friend, Dallas piped up.

“Every time we drive past a political sign I do this (obscene gesture). Politics is the best subject! You can get right into it and make yourself so angry!”

What I'm noticing about teenagers is this revelling in their emotions. They are not scared to be outraged or to be angry. Their own emotions don't intimidate them or embarrass them. They enjoy them.

\*

In this election, New Zealand voters had the opportunity to take part in two referendums. One was the Cannabis Legalisation and Control Referendum and the other the End of Life Choice Referendum. I read the pamphlets included in my voting pack and based my vote on the information therein.

Scarlet asked me how I voted in the End of Life Choice Referendum and I told her I voted yes.

"Oh, Miss! No!"

"What do you mean?"

"Don't get me wrong, we agree with having the choice but the way the bill is written is all wrong! There is no mental health oversight! Children, I mean young adults, can ask to end their own lives and if they met the criteria they could be dead in 48 hours and the first their family would hear of it would be when they get a phone call to pick the body up at the morgue."

"Whoa!"

"The doctor who signs off on it only needs to know you for 48 hours before they can make the decision and you know people will go doctor shopping, just keep asking doctors until one of them says yes."

"Gosh!"

“Yeah. It’s shit and people who should be helped are going to end up dead because of it.”

When I read the pamphlet it never crossed my mind that the family of a terminally ill patient wouldn’t be aware of their illness. Wouldn’t be tangled up in the day to day struggles alongside their loved one. How much would have had to have gone wrong in order for the scenario Scarlet described to come to pass? In this election, we have been encouraged to vote as if we are in the position of the most vulnerable citizens. Maybe that is exactly what Scarlet is doing. Thinking of the ones for whom everything has gone wrong and protecting them.

\*

Cut to November 11th 2020 and the New Zealand election is over. Now we are watching the US go to the polls. Joe Biden vs Donald Trump. The theatre of it, the money, and the power command my students’ attention. In quiet moments in class, they ask me who I think will win, normally during silent reading time.

“I don’t know,” I whisper back.

\*

It’s election day in the states and lunchtime in my classroom. My more political Year 10s, Dallas, Scarlet, Chante and Jaime, have claimed my classroom as their space.

“They have started to count the ballots, Miss! Trumps ahead but I think it’s in a Republican state, maybe North Carolina”, declares Dallas.

“North Carolina?” I probe.



He shrugs “North Carolina sounds like it should support Trump... And if he does lose, all his Proud Boys will beat up all the Black people and Minorities” He turns to Scarlet, “What are you going to wear to the civil war later on?”

“I’m going to wear my fishnets!” (hahaha)

“I’m going to dye my hair blue... or purple!” (hahaha)

Chante has been listening to their banter, “The fact that I am so anxious now and I’m here, I can’t imagine what it would be like over there.”

We all agree we are lucky to be in New Zealand. I comment on how engaged the group are in global politics.

“We hate it so hard!” says Scarlett. “We’ve had to educate ourselves about it because it’s our future. Old people aren’t going to do it for us.”

\*

Teaching is a political act. Not political in the sense of deciding who our next government will be, but political in that teaching has the power to shut down critical thinking or to foster it. I can provide a forum for students to air their frustrations and concerns about the sexism they witness and experience every day or I can tell them to stop being so silly. I can normalise these conversations so when Donald Trump says he can “grab ‘em by the pussy” and still be elected President of the United States we can resist the normalisation of sexual assault. We can choose to be better because we know better. We know better because we took the time to think about it and talk about it in class. We’re learning what participatory democracy means for each of us as individuals and while voting is still a few years off for many of my students I know

that the government they vote for will be moving them away from bigotry and injustice, not towards it. I know this because that is how they were taught.

## Born Lucky

### **Amulets and Talismans**

In an envelope, inside a suitcase, locked in a sideboard, was a tiny golden crucifix. It was given to my father's mother, Liliias, by Rev Keith Elliott V.C in 1959. The envelope was labelled for Nigel and Annabelle. My parents. The envelope had been opened, but the contents remained undisturbed for the whole of my childhood, for the death of my father, for the three previous house pack-ups and moves that my mother endured. On this fourth move, objects needed to be sorted through, appraised, and decisions made; keep, sell, donate or throw away. The suitcase was locked and it rattled when shook, like a Christmas present. The suitcase was on the sell list but first, it needed to be opened and its contents explored.

My father-in-law opened the suitcase with a bit of coaxing and my mother-in-law sorted through the contents. Costume jewellery and beads mostly with lots of handwritten notes from Liliias. 'This is real gold', read one note. I suspect some beads and bangles to be ivory. When they showed me the crucifix I thought about wearing it straight away. I had spent the day looking at Mum's things, a lot of unburned candles and undrunk wine. I made a resolve to myself: Burn the candles. Drink the wine. Wear the necklace. I waited until I was home by myself and then I slipped the necklace around my neck. The intention was to put it on and wear it for the foreseeable future. I rubbed my thumb and forefinger across the raised figure of Jesus on the cross and felt bumps and roughness, like braille. It is a gesture I repeat and whenever I do this, I wonder about Liliias. Did she actually wear this crucifix? It came from an Anglican priest and I was raised ever-so-slightly Anglican, so maybe she was Anglican. She may have worn it to show her faith or maybe it was just one of many items she owned that needed to be sorted, categorised, and assigned to a family member after her death? I can wonder and in that

wondering feel connected to Liliias. I will never know her life, but I have seen her face. There is one picture I can find, a portrait in the style of the 40s or 50s. She has brown hair, short and curled. Delicate eyebrows and ruby red lips or as far as I can tell from a black and white photograph. I see my face mirrored in hers as she rests it gracefully against her left wrist. I can not know her but can imagine. I can borrow her strength and grace and channel it through the crucifix like an amulet.

The crucifix is accompanied by another gold chain around my neck. One I have worn for many years. It was the chain my mother wore before my father died. Now she wears his chain and I wear hers. At one point I wore all three. I dripped gold like a gypsy. It was a distinct 'look' but what's the point in owning beautiful, significant objects if they are going to sit in a draw? Burn the candles. Drink the wine. Wear the necklace.

### **Goodluck Charms and Guardians**

Tattoos are a good luck charm you never take off and therefore can never lose or pass on to your descendants for that matter. Tattoos go with you to the grave, or the afterlife, or the little wooden display box that contains your ashes. My tiger tattoo is a portrait of black lines. It resides on the inside of my upper left arm, discrete and mostly hidden. Something for me. The tiger symbolises strength, courage and protection against the following: evil spirits, wind, disease and bad luck. The tiger is a guardian I wear on my skin.

I have another tattoo, a koi carp in a band around my right forearm. Public and prominent, unless I wear long sleeves. It is all black lines and orange watercolour. The koi represents strength of character, perseverance, accomplishment, courage, good fortune, success, prosperity, ambition, and longevity. The koi is a permanent good luck charm.

Sometimes I imagine the tiger and the koi as living tattoos that roam around the territory of my skin, having adventures and spats, like brothers. One is tasked with my protection the other with seeking out opportunities for my success. When conflict arises I get the deciding vote. They maneuver close to my ear to whisper their advice, voices that only I can hear. *You should enter that competition*, Koi will tell me and Tiger will agree. Koi tells me, *you should apply for that leadership position at school*. Tiger disagrees. I side with Tiger. I don't want to apply for jobs I don't want to do just for the moment of success, just so I can 'win' something. Koi tells me to *try anyway, just try, you can always turn it down if you don't want it*. *How do you know you don't want it? You don't really know what it is*. *Investigate further*, Koi encourages. *Just look*.

When Koi and Tiger are at odds, I am at odds with myself and I lose my serenity.

### **Prayer and Meditation**

God grant me the serenity  
to accept the things I can not change.  
The courage to change the things I can,  
and the wisdom to know the difference.

#### *The Serenity Prayer*

Knowing what's in my sphere of influence and what's not is the pathway to serenity. I can fuss about the job if I like. I can spin my wheels and grind my gears, but the job hasn't even been posted yet. It is well out of my sphere of influence. What I can do is seek advice from people I trust and then when the time is right, choose to act or not act. It's not a right-now choice at all. The decision is like a snow globe I can't seem to stop shaking. I put it down on a windowsill for

a while, watch some T.V, pick it up again, give it another shake. Walk it over to the bench and put it down again. Cook dinner. Maybe a day will go by and I will pick up the snow globe again, hold it up to the light and watch the fake snow falling through liquid. Then I become aware of what I am doing and put the snowglobe down again. This time I put it on my bedside table, out of my eye line at least during the day.

There is a slogan for moments like this: let go and let God. I can choose to ruminate on something over which I have no control, or I can give it to God and let God deal with it. You kinda need to believe in God for this one to work, but belief is a wise wager, so why not? Wherever I pick up the snowglobe it's like taking the problem off God and whenever I put it down I am giving it back to God. It takes awareness and belief and discipline. Sometimes I have it and sometimes I don't.

### **Omens and Harbingers**

We have lived in this house for over seven years, not quite eight. Seven is a special number; my favourite. Maybe it's an omen of significant events to come in this house, maybe it's not. A Fantail flying into your house is meant to be a positive omen. Personally, birds in the house are not my thing, too much flying into windows, but somehow Fantails seems to know their way, in and out. I have a family of Welcome Swallows who has made a nest on the outer wall of my home under the shelter of the eaves, like borders but they don't pay rent. Every year they return to the same nest to regenerate their family. They are prolific and there is considerable joy in watching their fledglings take flight year after year. I just saw one outside my window, small and sharp looking. Feathers of blue and orange, charcoal and cream. Welcome Swallows are stunt pilots with their sharp turns, deep dives with last-minute pull-ups. My boarders like to

torment our cat, General Meow. They fly so close into his grasp and every time they escape, except for one time, one swallow did not.

General Meow started off life as a wild cat. He couldn't keep up with his mum and siblings so he got left behind. That's how nature works, it's survival of the fittest with no remorse, no sentimentality. Live strong or die. General Meow, aka Meow-meow, couldn't keep up but he didn't die right away, he moved in with a flock of chickens and ate their food. He struggled and he lived. Just long enough to be saved. And now he lives with me as a fully-fledged member of the family. Meow-meow likes to sit on the deck watching the swallows. They like to dive-bomb him. His body follows their movements like a flower follows the sun, except perhaps with more malicious intent.

The day Meow-meow caught the Welcome Swallow I swear it was blind luck. Maybe the Welcome Swallow was a fledgling and not as experienced at taunting predators. Maybe Meow-meow was more skilled than I give him credit. Whatever happened, the swallow ended up in General Meow's mouth. His tiny incisors holding the bird in place while the canine teeth dealt the death blow. It was not instant death, he didn't die right away. After all, General Meow was not interested in eating his prey, and of course, I intervened.

General Meow relinquished his prize in the garden and I ended up holding a tiny Welcome Swallow in the palm of my hand. He was panting and gasping, a stress response partly to being caught by a cat, partly to being held by me. Unfortunately cuddling wild animals doesn't make them feel better, so instead, I turned my mind to providing the best death possible. Where would a Welcome Swallow prefer to die? I lay him down on a wooden ledge just below the nest. Close enough to take comfort from his family, but away from further danger or discomfort. Besides the discomfort of dying of course. Such a human thing to do. I imagine the

whole experience wasn't that satisfying for General Meow either as, even though he still watches the swallows like a hawk, he has not repeated the performance.

The little family of Welcome Swallows, light by one, continued on, as nature is wont to do. No remorse, no sentimentality. Their presence is a good omen, like a double rainbow.

Belief is a wise wager. Granted that faith cannot be proved, what harm will come to you if you gamble on its truth and it proves false? If you gain, you gain all; if you lose, you lose nothing. Wager, then, without hesitation, that He exists.

(Pascal 67).

believe in wonder. I believe in magic. I believe because it is a safe bet, a wise wager. But do you know what else I believe in? Science and the brain. Belief gives comfort. Belief gives confidence. Belief makes us feel positive and acting in a positive way often makes it more possible for positive outcomes. It's psychosomatic and I don't care. Pragmatic you might say. So excuse me while I place the portrait of my grandma Liliias above my writing desk so she can watch over me. I will take the prayers, the omens, the good luck charms and the guardians and draw strength from them. If I gain, I gain all; if I lose, I lose nothing.



## Burn to Shine

We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars

(Wilde, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, 48)

Stories are all around us. They are in the air that we breathe. All different kinds, all different types. There are birth stories, adoption stories, stories about leaving home for the first time, stories about falling in love. Some stories are dinner party stories, and some stories can only be shared with people who have lived through them. People who have had first-hand experience. This year, 2021, I found a new genre of story. An Alzheimer's story, a rest home story, a daughters' story. Because as I move through my own story it is only daughters who reach for me. Only daughters who know, who say, yes, I remember being where you are. I remember being you.

\*

It's 9.30 am Sunday. I am on time. I climb the stairs to Mum's flat above a block of shops. I knock on the door and turn the handle, expecting to find her ready to go. I am taking her shoe shopping today, but first, we need to drop my son, Ryan where he needs to go. I open the door and it catches on the chain. I call through.

"Hi, Mum! Are you ready?"

"What? You're early!" She comes to the door not quite dressed and releases the chain.

"I've just got to put my face on."

Ryan is waiting downstairs in the car but I figure we can wait the five minutes the task should take. I take up position in an armchair facing the bathroom door and make small talk.

Five minutes pass.

“You know your grandson is waiting for us in the car right now?”

“What? No.”

“Well, he is. Are you nearly ready?”

“You know you have never been on time a day in your life. How was I supposed to know that you would be on time today?”

“Yep. Hurry up.”

She finishes in the bathroom and starts packing her handbag. She had an hour’s notice before I arrived to get ready. It has nearly been another 30 mins and I can feel the pressure building, I don’t know how I will complete all the tasks I have lined up and be back home by 12.30.

“Come on Mum, I need you to move faster.”

“I’m moving.”

“I’m being patient. You’re being annoying.” I snap.

She scoffs at me and keeps making preparations. She goes to the cupboard under the sink to empty the rubbish bin.

“Why are you doing that now! We’re waiting for you!” I am almost yelling.

Ryan comes to the door.

“How much longer before we can leave?” he asks with exaggerated patience.

“I’m ready now. We’re coming now,” she says, but she is still tying up the rubbish bag.

Ryan wants to buy marshmallows so I ask him to bring me up the car keys so he can go to the shop. Two minutes later he tosses the keys through the door. He notices his grandma struggling to replace the bin liner in the rubbish bin.

“Good job with the leaving now, Grandma,” he says and leaves.

I snatch the bags and complete the task.

“Maybe you should just spend the day with your son.” Her voice catches.

“I’m not spending the day with him! I’m dropping him off!” Now I am yelling.

I have upset her. I take the rubbish out and pull the car around to the bottom of the stairs. She gets in without a word. We are in for a silent, awkward drive to Blockhouse Bay. Plenty of time to think about how I could have handled that better, consider apologising and contemplate the savage nature of teenage boys. I can hear my mother sigh at intervals. That’s what I do when I’m upset. I sigh.

I feel bad(ish) about snapping at her. Maybe I set us up for failure with my record of lateness. Maybe I didn’t make my expectations clear. Regardless, I don’t talk to anyone else the way I talk to my mother. My mother gets me at my worst. I feel bad about it... but not that bad. It’s a manageable level of badness. A ‘shrug shoulders’, ‘oh well’, sort of level of badness. I am certainly not torn up about it.

Once Ryan is out of the car, I take Mum to Starbucks.

“I’m sorry I was grumpy with you this morning.”

“I can be grumpy too sometimes.”

“Yeah. I think I get that from you.”

“Charming.”

\*

The phone rings.

“Jess? I have this horrible pain in my side.”

“Alright. Is it hospital-level pain? If it is then you need to hang up the phone and call an ambulance.”

“I don’t want them looking at me.”

“If we’re going to the hospital anyway we might as well cut ahead of the queue in an ambulance. Just call an ambulance, I’m on my way now.”

She hangs the phone up and I look at my dinner preparations. Half done. Potatoes just boiled for a potato salad, not yet drained. Chicken in the air fryer with another 10mins of cooking time left to go. A glass of wine just poured minus one sip. I look at my husband. He looks back at me.

“I’m just popping down to see Mum.”

“I heard. Do you want someone to go with you?”

“No. It should be fine. I’m just going to figure out dinner and put some shoes on then I’ll go.”

I walk into Ryan’s room.

“I need you to take over dinner for me. Grandma called. She’s having chest pain and I need to go now.”

He gets up off his bed and follows me to the kitchen.

“It’s not far off. These are cooked. Just drain them, add the aioli, bacon and red onion.”

“Dice it?”

“Yeah, perfect. The chicken’s in the air fryer. When it’s done, cut open the pita and put it in. Serve it with the potato salad. That should be enough for tonight.”

Ryan listens intently and nods his understanding. He starts dicing an onion.

“Do you want me to keep a plate hot for you? In the oven? Like you do for Dad?”

“Yeah, that would be great! Just put the oven on low. Thanks, Ryan.”

I slip on my shoes and jump into the car. Looking ahead to the end of the street I see an unexpected fire engine. There are two firefighters in full kit standing in the street blocking my way. As I pull alongside I see an ambulance and two 4-wheel-drive vehicles. One with a smashed windscreen and wrapped in emergency tape. I wind down my windows and turn off the radio.

“Hey.” I greet the fireman.

“Hey. You’re a teacher right?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s me, Joe. I helped with basketball last year.”

“That’s right. Look. My mum’s having chest pains. I told her to ring an ambulance and I am on my way to her now.”

“Where is she?”

“She’s in Parakai.”

“Oh, we wouldn’t be called out to that one... So you’re in a bit of a hurry then?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ll see if I can squeeze you through.”

“Thanks, Joe.”

I hear him taking on his radio to another firefighter at the other end of the blockade. I hear a woman’s voice reply. Then Joe comes back to my vehicle.

“You’re good to go. Just keep to the right as you go by, then you can gun it.”

I nod, wave my thanks and carefully drive past the 4-wheel-drive. I make the turn onto the main road and I am on my way. It is a precarious balance between fast and safe. The

4-wheel-drive behind me is a testament to the undeniable possibility of having an accident and if that happened I would be of no use to Mum. As I drive I mull over the possibilities. I can't help but draw links to my father. He had a heart attack and died. Another part of my brain recognises how easy it was to drop everything and go. I feel so proud of Ryan in particular as he took over without a word of complaint. I can focus on Mum knowing dinner is in safe hands.

The drive takes 15 minutes. I pull into the car park half expecting to see an ambulance waiting there, but there is not. I park my car quickly and attack the steps two at a time. Mum's door is not quite shut so I can push it open. She is seated in an armchair in front of the TV. The cricket is on.

"The ambulance?" I ask.

"I didn't call one."

"Why not?"

"It's just like last time. We waited for hours at the hospital and they did nothing."

I thought back to the last time I had received a frantic phone call about chest pain. A stabbing pain that was almost more than Mum could bear. We had quite a tiki tour that day. First to the local doctors who we were not registered with, then when they would not see her, to Waitakari hospital. Mum's lasting memory of that trip was of a young nurse who caused her a lot of pain when she struggled to find a vein to take blood from. Mum got loud and obnoxious, but her pain was real enough. I tried to soothe her without offending the hospital staff. After four hours of observation, I took mum home. The pain was gone, but not because of anything the hospital did.

With all that in mind, I decided not to push the ambulance angle. After all, it was not as if Mum was collapsed on the floor or screaming in pain. She was listening to the cricket commentary.

“Okay. So our problem is pain management. We think this is an episode like last time and the pain will go away?”

“Yes.”

“What painkillers have you taken so far?”

“Nothing. I try not to take anything if I don’t need it.”

“I would say you need it now. What have you got in the house?”

“I’m not sure, take a look over there.” She points to where she keeps her blister pack, filled with medicines she takes every day for things like blood pressure.

“There is nothing here. It is still early, I’ll pop down to the four square and get you some pain killers.”

“It’ll be closed.”

“It’s only 6.30. It closes at 9 pm.”

“It closed at 5 pm.”

“No. Try 9 pm.”

“Well, they don’t make coffee until that time.”

I shrug, allowing the debate to slide off me. “I’ll be back in a jiffy.”

I grab my bag and head out of the apartment. The four square is only one block over so it is faster to walk than drive. As I go I call Lloyd, my husband.

“Get her some yoghurt too. I was just thinking about her pain and it sounds a lot like when I get acid reflux. Like being stabbed with a spear. If I was old I might think it was a heart attack. Maybe get some Gaviscon if they have that too.”

The Foursquare was in the process of shutting up but still enough time for me to get paracetamol, ibuprofen and yoghurt. I picked up some Quick-eze too just in case then I headed back up to see Mum.

Mum was waiting where I had left her. I showed her the tablets and the yoghurt and explained Lloyd's theory.

"Lloyd tells me it's quite painful. Like being stabbed with a spear through the gut. A very sharp pain all the way through. How does that sound?"

"Yes. That's what it's like."

"Okay, well Lloyd says the best way to get rid of the pain is by drinking milk or eating yoghurt."

"Well, I'm not drinking milk, you can forget that!"

"That's probably why I bought you yoghurt. Can you take your tablets with yoghurt?"

"Yes."

I dish her up a bowl of mango yoghurt and tell her about how the four square closes at 7 pm. We were both wrong. I hand the bowl over with two paracetamol and two ibuprofen.

"I'm sorry I've interrupted your evening."

"I don't mind."

"You can go now."

"Is the yoghurt working?"

"Yes. The pain is getting better. It's not all gone, but it is much better."

"How about we watch some TV and I'll stick around until the painkillers kick in. Are you actually watching the cricket?"

"No, but I like listening to it. You can change it if you like."

I flick through the channels and we end up on *Mrs Brown's Boys*. Our focus switches to the tv and we sit in comfortable silence.

Thirty minutes later I head home to find my dinner keeping warm in the oven. The potato salad was spot on and my wine was right where I left it.



\*

The pain was not in her imagination. The pain was in her gallbladder and months later we have an appointment to see the surgeon. Months and months later we have an appointment to see the anesthetist. It has been a long time and the gallbladder has not been making a fuss. It has been so long that Mum cannot remember why we are at the hospital.

We see the anesthetist. She calls Mum sweetie. She asks about Mums tablets and then she says:

“Is this tablet for your Alzheimer’s?”

To which I have to reply that no one has ever told us that Mum has Alzheimer’s. Our last doctor called it ‘age-related decline’.

She asks Mum when she had TB, and I have to wonder if I know anything at all about my mother’s medical history or health. The anesthetist begins to ask Mum questions in a gentle voice and I know without being told that I am not allowed to answer these questions on my mother’s behalf.

“Do you know why you’re here? Do you know what day of the week it is? What month is it?”

Mum had been going through a rough patch of being lonely and forgetful under the guise of not caring, so she answered with confidence that we were at the hospital to talk about moving into a rest home. She thought it was Wednesday– it was Friday. She thought it was March – it was July.

The anesthetist said that if Mum could not remember why she was there and we had just discussed it then she probably wouldn’t be able to consent to the operation. I would need to get

enduring power of attorney over my mother's welfare so I could consent on her behalf. The only catch? If she is not able to consent to an operation, then she is not able to consent to give up authority over her own self.

The next step is to apply to the Family Court for me to be made my mother's guardian. What a thing.

\*

I am sitting at my mother's bedside at North Shore Hospital. It is 5.39 pm on Tuesday 6th July 2021 only five days since we saw the anesthetist. She has no idea what year it is but doctors insist on asking her. This morning I found my mother on the floor. I wonder if she slept there. I wonder what has happened between independent Mum who can do stuff, like fix her own meals, and the mum of today who can't stand up. Yesterday we discovered that she had stopped fixing her own meals and so had actually stopped eating. She was basically living on the daily cup of coffee I was bringing her on my morning visits. She had also stopped taking her medicine.

I booked an urgent doctor's visit for her. I needed help and so did she. The time of living independently was over and rest home living was on the horizon.

I went to work, knowing I would be back in the early afternoon, I may or may not have been crying a wee bit in class and the students may or may not have been super sweet. But something niggled at me and I had to return at morning tea time. She was on the floor again, shivering in the cold and I had to be the adult in the room and make a choice. Is she okay on her own until the doctors visit, or should I call an ambulance? I hated having to make the decision and was still um-ing and ah-ing when a nurse called from the doctors to confirm her

visit. I asked for advice and was told that if you are thinking of calling an ambulance you should call an ambulance. So I did, and you can't un-shoot that gun.

There has been some chatter that Mum's sudden decline could have been caused by the RS virus. The body is so exhausted from illness that the mind just lets go. Maybe the mind needed all the energy to function and now it is just not there.

\*

She will have a CT scan and a chest X-ray and stay in a ward for 3 or 4 days. I am thanking God that no one expects me to bring her home tonight. I have been in the hospital plenty of times where they have needed the bed and asked us to leave, mostly in the UK if I am honest. I was afraid that was going to happen and spent some time considering how I might respond, from just saying no, to telling them if they wanted us to leave, then they would have to take us themselves.

I am feeling hopeful that we might get the support we need moving forward. That Mum can actually have this stage of her life with some dignity, knowing that she is loved and cared about. I have been feeling like such a failure on that front but don't know how to do any better. It's rough. I have to give myself pep talks all the time of the 'this is hard, but I can do hard things' variety. All I can do is move through this moment and then the next one. People offer me their sympathy and I feel angry because I am not the one bare-breasted having yet another ECG. I am not the one suffering the indignity of aging. I don't have Alzheimer's and yet, in the future, I might.

\*

My mother is a girl playing at being an adult in an elderly woman's body.

My mother is a handbag with a remote control, one glove and a supermarket discount card inside.

My mother is a wallet in the rubbish bin and a mobile phone and house key M.I.A.

My mother is lying on the floor half-dressed and staying there.

My mother is sounds and not words.

My mother is unplugging appliances.

My mother is mistaking hunger for nausea.

My mother is this moment right now.

My mother is not knowing and being afraid.

My mother is shivering, fidgeting, confusion.

My mother is having a cough and losing your mind.

My mother is turning inward.

My mother is not there any more.

\*

"Have a sip of your coffee before it gets cold."

"I've had some."

"No, you haven't. I've been watching you."

Five minutes pass in silence and stillness.

"Mum, have a sip of your coffee."

"I just had a sip."

“Nope. No, you have not.”

“Holy Hell! Will you leave me alone to drink my coffee!”

“Sure if you were actually drinking it.”

“Oh, my Godfather!”

\*

So, I’ve just got one more question. If your heart stops, do you want us to perform CPR?”

“Yes. I want to keep living.”

\*

I don’t see anyone behind the reception desk on the way to Mum’s room. She is sitting on the edge of her bed with her lunch tray in front of her. The lid is still on. The soup is cold. With some encouragement, she eats what at first looks like a spinach and ricotta cannelloni and now looks like it might be chicken. She eats it all and then we clash over getting into bed. She can’t/won’t help herself into the bed. Can’t/won’t lift her legs up or shift her butt back. And when I pull her she cries out in pain. I am not impressed. She cowers from me and I get grumpy.

“Either do it for yourself or stop complaining.”

There are no winners here. Next, we have the coffee debacle. Round two.

“Drink your coffee.”

“I am.”

“No, you’re not. I’m watching you.”

By the time my brother James calls Mum is tetchy A.F. She stares off-screen in the video call and James and I have to take on the conversation workload. At one point she starts watching T.V. James says his goodbyes and I take the call out by the elevators so I can give him a frank update about closing up Mum's flat and selling her stuff. When I get back she's asleep. It feels not great. On the way out I ask to speak with her nurse. I tell her Mum seems really grumpy today. Then I list off what I have achieved with Mum. Lunch, conversation, getting into bed, grumps and sleep. What am I actually saying when I tell the nurse all this? I know she doesn't need to hear this and is being super polite, but I tell her anyway. I need to. What am I trying to say? What am I asking? One thing only. Please look after my Mum.

\*

Getting off the elevator I can hear Mum's voice, hear Mum's laugh, hear Mum's cough. It's closer than I expect it to be. Now I can see her sitting on a bed in a different room from last time with a nurse and another patient sitting in the armchair. Irish, Mum's nurse, approaches me and I realise that Mum is sitting on someone else's bed.

"I'm waiting for my mother." She calls out. Then she sees me. "There she is!"

"Alright! Let's see about going back to our bed," I say.

"She's in Room H now. A room by herself," Irish tells me.

"Okay, cool." In my mind, a private room is an upgrade.

I take Mum by the hand and we shuffle away. Mum laughing and me shifting my expectations of what normal looks like. The nurse comes in and Mum introduces me.

"This is my mother."

"No, you are my mother."

She just laughs.

\*

I move through my to-do list with my head bowed. Just pushing through, getting through, moment by moment. The moment is everything, almost to be endured. It surrounds me like water around a fish. We are transitioning, Mum and me, entering a new reality and transitioning equals busyness shown by endless kilometres on the road.

I step out of the car after a day of errands, worn out. It is dark and I can see lights shining out from the windows of my home, framing the life within. Candid moments of my loved ones waiting for my return. Our home is on a hillside and the land around it falls away into darkness and sky. I remind myself to look up, and take a moment to breathe. I imagine myself from up high, beyond the black night, so high the curvature of the earth is visible. Looking down on the planet everything is so small and insignificant. Everything is so peaceful and in its proper place. I feel an exhilarating sense of space. I wonder what people beyond our world might think of us, living our lives out on this planet, engrossed in our own dramas, me inside mine.

\*

We have had some okay days and some particularly bad days. We don't do walking anymore. We seem to be endlessly dozy. Some days we are so desperately unhappy that we don't do moving of any kind. We check out of this existence to a private one behind lidded eyes. We don't speak, we don't eat, we don't anything. I don't know how this story is going to end or how much time there is left to run before the end. I used to think this story was about learning to live

while waiting for death. Now I don't know if we will learn the lesson. At the rest home, they style Mum's hair with care and attention. Someone took the time to sit with her and paint her nails bright red. She is well looked after, I know that, but she has aged incredibly since being in the hospital. And there is a sadness unexpressed behind her eyes. An infinite sadness that I understand. Mum has lived a transient life since Dad passed away and every move meant letting go of a bit more. Constantly downsizing move after move until now, a whole life discarded, and the reminisce shoehorned into a single bedroom. Every decision to sell or give away objects that cannot be got back is like giving away a memory or selling a part of my childhood. Maybe Mum doesn't care anymore. Maybe she is beyond such concerns. But I am not. I walk outside to feel the breeze and look up at the watercolour sky. Clouds streak across the sky in intricate beauty. Beyond the clouds, up, up, up, there is blue sky, always blue sky. Beyond all this, there is calm.

\*

I wear a tiny gold crucifix around my neck that was discovered in an envelope addressed to my father and mother, Nigel and Annabelle, from my father's mother, Liliias, when she was organising her prized possessions to be passed on down the family line. That crucifix had sat in a locked suitcase belonging to my grandfather in a decorative stack of suitcases in my family home forever. It makes me realise that letting go of possessions is something that my grandmother had to do and now it is something I do on my mother's behalf. How to choose what gets passed down and what gets let go? I make my choices based on the memories the objects evoke, like the suede overnight bag I have held on to. I have endless memories of her packing that bag, carrying that bag, her hair long and auburn.



\*

The rest home reminds me of a children's hospital. The walls are brightly coloured and each bedroom door has its own distinctive mural, maybe part of a strategy to help residents recognise their own door. Mum's door is canary yellow with a painting of a cat coming through a cat door. When she notices it she comments on its sweetness. She sees it for the first time again and again and it is a moment of joy for her. A one hundred per cent sincere smile crosses her face and makes her eyes sparkle. There is nothing hidden in Mum's expressions now. She is always earnest. Every passing thought and emotion writ large on her face. She doesn't eat much now and moves even less. I have to suggest that my brother, James comes back from Hong Kong if he wants to see Mum again before she dies. I have to wonder if she is still there to see, alive or not. She smiles when she sees me. That's something to cling to. People suggest she might be depressed. People suggest it is all part of the settling in process. People suggest she might not want to live anymore. Legally speaking, she doesn't get to choose. I get to make that call. In reality, no one can make her eat. The decision's hers, whether she makes it consciously or by instinct. For now I wait and see.

## Epilogue

When we, human beings, look back on a time of our lives, an event, or a situation, we judge it based on two things. The most intense moment and how it ended. Take childbirth, for example. I went into labour with Ryan at two o'clock in the morning and had contractions as regular as clockwork, every two minutes until Ryan joined us at eighteen eighteen, according to the twenty-four-hour clock. I remember because I could see the hospital clock hanging from the ceiling in the corridor from where I lay on the bed, waiting for the midwife to check Ryan out and give him back. I looked up and saw 18:18 and thought, "Huh, 18:18. Cool." It was November the 18th. He had good oxygen saturation for anyone interested. That's meant to be something mums brag about.

The pain was something to surrender to. Like my body was on autopilot, and I was along for the ride. My birth plan was for a natural birth, no pain killers, but I asked for something in the throws of one of the last contractions before pushing time. I write this because it reminds me of how painful it was. Here at this time of writing, I can't remember at all. The pain is long gone, and the outcome, the ending, is all I remember now. It ended well. Ryan entered the world safe and sound. Good pregnancy, good birth, good outcome and the whole thing was good. Forget about the morning sickness, the itchiness, and the ungainliness of it all. You forget. And that's why some people do it all again. The outcome trumps all.

I often think about snippets of knowledge I've acquired by reading or listening and how they come together, coalesce around a moment to give me a new understanding. I have been thinking about this recently since Mum's death. Did she have a good life? Did she have a good death? Did the end of her life overshadow everything else?

Mum's life and death was the result of an endless parade of small decisions. Small steps down a pathway that led to that bed in that room in that place and ultimately to that death. Not a bad place at all, not a bad death. But not what she wanted. Somewhere along the line, she got wrapped in a straitjacket of her choices—only one way forward and no room to move. I felt the futility of that straitjacket, struggling to find a better solution only to end up exhausted with nothing to show for it.

When people ask me what happened to Mum, I tell them that she got sick with the RS virus and never recovered. I don't say that she lost her independence, mobility, thinking mind, and ultimately, her will to live. She went from a hospital bed to a dementia unit to a rest home hospital bed. We went into lockdown, and I was locked out. I couldn't see her for months. When I could see her, it was to be by her side while she died—a small mercy.

Now, something is missing—a layer of security I hadn't considered. I feel a level of exposure I have never felt before. There is no one above me in the family hierarchy. I am the elder with wisdom and life experience who makes decisions. It's like the atmosphere has been sucked from the world, and I will be pulled into the vacuum of space at any moment. Lost forever. It doesn't happen, of course. While she is gone, I remain. It is my turn to take the lead and move the story forward.

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Over the course of my thesis I have read widely. Each book I read contributed to my growth of understanding and exposed me to different ways of telling stories. While my personal essays are not directly inspired by these books, my writing does enter into conversation with them.

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