

On Smith Street

and

Short Stories in the
Digi-Social World

Lynette Washington

A short story collection and exegesis
submitted for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Creative Writing
Discipline of English and Creative Writing
School of Humanities
University of Adelaide
April 2016

Volume 1:
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In the case of *On Smith Street*, there will be a 3 year embargo.

Lynette Washington

April 2016

On Smith Street
Connected Short Stories

Lynette Washington

‘Yet high over the city our line of yellow windows must have contributed their share of human secrecy to the casual watcher in the darkening streets, and I was him too, looking up and wondering. I was within and without, simultaneously enchanted and repelled by the inexhaustible variety of life.’

The Great Gatsby
F. Scott Fitzgerald

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Number 40: Secrets and Plane Trees

All along Smith Street run London Plane trees. Their bark peels in flaky patches like a child with eczema. Old and high-branching, their elaborate forked leaves are phosphorescently green in winter, camp orange in autumn and then absent in winter. In spring, they scatter fibrous pollen. Branches reach over the road towards each other, monstrous, knarled fingers shutting out the sky, creating the shadows of suburbia.

At one end of the street sit flats and subsidised housing. At the other end are old stone cottages that have been extended and renovated into ostentatious upper-middle class homes. In between, like an unsure middle child appeasing competing siblings, are the cream brick family homes.

That is where I live, with my husband Dan and our daughter Ava.

Number 10/2: How to Disappear Incompletely

So we're on the tram and it's 9a.m. and standing room only. His arm is raised to hold the leather strap so that he doesn't stagger and he's wearing last night's black tank top and I can see his arm pit hair, the pale underside of his skinny arm, and his ribs poking through translucent skin. Pale blue veins run undisturbed by scars, parallel to his bones. Seemed so rock n roll a few hours ago.

I'm trying to be polite, travelling back to the hotel with him, an escort through an unfamiliar city, but he's tracing the tattoo on my forearm. Fingertips on my ink. Way too intimate, man. I flinch and he looks up, mascaraed black semi-circles under bloodshot eyes. Those eyes say 'after what we did last night?' and I look out the window and tuck my arm away.

'So I don't think I can come to the gig tonight,' I say to the blue sky outside.

'That's cool. Come by after? I'll get you a plus one for the party.'

'It's just that I've got this thing on and I don't know when it will finish,' I say.

'Babe, just come, we had a good time last night, didn't we?'

I can't figure out a way to say it nicely and there's a glint of despair hiding under his casual tone.

‘Alright, I’ll try.’

The eavesdropping commuters on the tram all know I’m lying. When we get off and I point to his hotel it will be the last time I see him. Except maybe on *Rage*.

The tram slides into the city square and people spill off in a swarm. We, in our slept-in clothes, bed-hair, pale skin and tattoos, let them pass in a puff of aftershave and perfume.

‘Coffee?’ he says.

He’ll be leaving town tomorrow. It’s just coffee. And I need coffee.

‘OK.’

We head to the markets where I know a great little café. Old wire seats with paint scratched off by anxious fingernails and pink Formica-topped tables that wobble with nerves. It’s as if the furniture itself is caffeinated. But the coffee’s as good as anywhere.

He buys me a short black double shot and we sit at our fretful table. We hold our cups with two hands and take our first hot sip simultaneously. Strange, awkward symmetry. Then a fleeting moment when I see a shadow skittering across the floor—a rat? No, it’s too big, but I follow the shape and find nothing there—a shadow that has no solid form.

The coffee makes its way down my throat. My chest constricts and my heart thumps, a racehorse is galloping its way down my oesophagus wearing hot iron shoes. I put my hand to my throat, and he’s doing the same thing.

‘Strong coffee...’ I say. But I’ve sucked down Turkish short blacks like they were air and never had this happen.

‘Do you feel it in your throat?’ he asks.

I nod. ‘And my stomach. It’s moving down.’

He puts his hands over his ears like a comic book character blocking out a painful sound.

‘Mine’s going up. What the fuck?’ he says too loudly and people eyeball us then go back to their coffees.

I grab his hand and we run, lock ourselves into the disabled cubicle and stare at each other.

‘What the hell kinda coffee was that?’

I look down at the place where I feel the warm liquid, slower now, like it’s settled in my belly. Lifting my Dead Kennedys t-shirt, I expect to find all sorts of nothing strange, but instead I can see a giant gaping hole where my gut used to be.

‘Hell...’ he says and reaches his hand out and pushes it through me. His arm is a warm breeze.

‘Sweet Jesus!’ I yell. But it doesn’t hurt.

He pulls up his sweat-stained tank top to show me his stomach. It’s all there, it’s not happening to him and that makes it worse. But then I look up and there is a hole there now, where his face used to be. Like that rat-shadow: something then nothing. No more black ringed eyes, stained teeth and stubble. All I can see is his hair; his trademark black fop which used to cover an eye now looks like a curtain opening onto an empty stage. I lift my hand up to see if I can push it through his face and he shrieks.

‘No! Don’t do it!’

He has no mouth. Where is his voice coming from? The sound of it resonates inside my skull. I don’t stop anyway and my hand goes all the way through, and I can feel a sort of throbbing inside his skull and I hear—or maybe feel—his sharp intake of breath as my hand goes all the way to the wall behind him. His breath flows over

my fist before it gets to his lungs, which seems *romantic* and makes me think of my heart. Is it still beating in there under the Kennedys?

Pulling my t-shirt down from the collar, I don't know what I want to find, but I have to know what's there. I see my bra and my cleavage moving up and down too fast, I'm gasping like a smoker on a treadmill. There is no hole there, my heart is intact. My gut might be blasted away, and his brains may be blown out, but my heart is there. Maybe that's why this somehow feels like falling in love.

Number 40: Smoke and Broccoli

The lean-to sunroom is small but bright. I've finally managed to put brush strokes on the canvas, but they are infantile and amateurish, broad and clumsy. It's yet another horizon, an open sweeping vista in the pastel light of dusk. I never paint people, houses or streets. Never trees with crooked fingers leaning over each other, grasping and locking themselves together: it's never Smith Street.

After an hour or so I wash out the brushes, skol a cold cup of tea, then scrub mould from the toilet bowl. These jobs leave a more indelible imprint than anything on canvas or paper. The steam from the kettle creates a soon-to-be pus-filled scorch mark on my wrist, the skin on my hands cracks inside my rubber gloves, my back aches from bending over the bowl. All these things are real. No matter how much colour I layer onto the canvas, it remains shallow and detached.

As I peel off the rubber gloves, Ava cries and the idea that I was allowing to fester in my mind as I scrubbed the toilet bowl—the idea of a different life—is smoke. Gone, in the face of immediate demand.

I pop a rusk in her mouth and pile her into the car. We drive to the local supermarket, her satisfaction with the slimy breadstick waning with each intersection.

My hopes of a quick trip to the veggie isle are thwarted when she spies the bright plastic toys on a spinner. Her hunger is forgotten for a while, replaced by a bigger need—an oversized pink bubble wand. I park her pram in front of the spinner, stomp on the brakes and race to the next isle, grab broccoli, potatoes and carrots and race back to her. My heart is thumping.

I shouldn't have left her there, even for a moment.

But she's fine. I let her take the bubble wand because of the guilt and I can't deal with a tantrum right now.

Back home, dinner eaten, bath taken, the bed routine hangs over me like a railway sleeper, waiting to crush me for any mistake or omission. I can't miss a step, every movement is critical to ensure a good night's sleep.

Finally, she's down.

'How was your day?' Dan asks as he makes himself a toasted sandwich for dinner.

I shrug. 'Same old, same old.' But I'm thinking about scrubbing the toilet bowl, imagining something else. I shut my eyes and am haunted again by Alexander, his eyes like secrets his face is trying to hide.

'I'm going to bed,' I say. 'Didn't get much sleep last night.'

'Hopefully she sleeps through tonight. I'll just watch some telly for a while.'

Dan kisses me on the forehead and settles down with his dinner in front of the TV.

In bed, I switch on the electric blanket and curl up. In these quiet moments my thoughts to roam free, uncensored. Of course Alexander is there. I try to

remember his smell, but can't. It's been too long. He didn't wait for me, he went on and lived his life.

What will I will tell Ava, when she's older and thinking about these things? If she falls in love and is too scared to say it out loud, what will I say to her? The answer comes immediately, impulsively, without argument or interrogation. It's so simple. I'd say to her, 'Tell him.'

One a.m. and Ava cries. Adrenalin jolts me awake and I'm staggering to her room before I'm fully conscious, and before Dan has even registered what is going on.

I know one thing for certain: there is no separation of her and me. Ava's needs are my needs. I can't find a boundary between us. I don't know where she ends and I begin. I could drown in her.

Number 5/2: Hermit Crabs

You are different people, depending on who you are with. You know this and you even know when you are self-censoring; you have that awareness. It's always with family and with work, less so with friends. They are your three groups and your three personalities: family, friends and work. You expect it's the same for everyone but maybe worse for you than others because you are prone to living inside your head. It's an occupational hazard, for at least one of your jobs. You work two jobs. The one that pays the soul is the sea shell job. The one that—surprisingly—pays the rent is the retail job.

In retail you are paid to agree with anything the customer says, unless they say that they look bad in a dress, or a pair of pants makes their bum look big. In that case, you are paid to lie.

You are aware that the list of things you are agreeing with is getting longer and more disturbing. Last week, a woman came in to buy a dress and complain about her son's teacher. Or maybe she came in to complain about her son's teacher, and buy a dress. Either way, she did one and not the other. You found yourself agreeing that teachers are lazy for having days off to write reports. 'Why should they be given a day off to do their jobs? If I asked for a day off to do my job, I'd be laughed at.'

You found yourself agreeing that chemists should sell bullets over the counter, made available free of charge to all the nut jobs who need anti-psychotic drugs to 'save us all the trouble and expense of futile rehabilitation'.

You found yourself agreeing that climate change was 'hooey' and the government just wanted to screw more money out of us. This lady bought a six hundred dollar sequined gown, made in Italy.

You found yourself wishing for that bullet, for yourself, by the end of the day.

It is hard to find complete shells these days. You have to go further and further out, away from metropolitan beaches, and you have to plan for the tides. The waning of a high tide is the only time worth going now. Or after a storm. You find yourself increasingly drawn to other detritus among the shells and wonder if you can make something of it. You talk to your other boss, the man who owns the pet shop in the mall, and he laughs like you are joking until he realises you are not and then he looks at you deliberately for a long moment before turning to a customer.

He says, 'Can I help you with anything?'

You decide to try the idea that is forming in your mind. There are fewer shells, anyway. You know that the pet shop owner can import shells, painted with just as much skill as yours are, but he does not. Yet. Maybe this kind of innovation might save your soul-job. Maybe once he sees that it can be beautiful he will change his mind. You found a curl of broken glass the other day. Its edges were smoothed after years at sea and its frosted green skin glowed when held up to the light. You decide that if it was the neck of the bottle it would have been perfect. You keep your eyes out.

You decide to experiment with shell designs. Mostly people want beach scenes. They assume hermit crabs want to live in shells that look something like their

natural habitats. They're wrong. You have had pet hermit crabs since you were thirteen and know that they have no such scruples. They choose a house because it fits, because it is the right shape for them, right now. Because they can tuck themselves in and out as they please. Not because it is blue like the ocean, yellow like the sand or some combination of the above. You discover, very quickly, that the shells you adorn with diamantes sell like cherries before Christmas. You discover, very quickly, that shells with skulls and crossbones sell—you assume to young boys with pirate obsessions. You discover that floral designs sit, unwanted, for a long time and eventually get handed back for you to 'rework'. You add diamantes to the stamens. They sell very quickly. It's not so hard to change people's views on hermit crab shells, you discover. Now, no one wants ocean pictures. It's like mobile phone covers: a hermit crab shell is an extension of the owner's personality. And you can change it. Every time your crab grows, you can change its shell like you are changing your dress. A crab can go from a semi-stormy beach scene (by far the most popular of all beach scenes) to wearing a schooner of beer or a necklace of pearls. Suddenly the possibilities of self-expression are endless. You like this idea.

You start to paint shells for yourself. You line them up on your dresser like some women line up beauty products. You start with three, for your three personalities. The shell you take to the dress shop is painted black; it's symbolic of the dark void you feel when you are there, the void that makes it easier to lie to your customers. The shell you take to the beach for collecting is painted pink, the colour of acceptance and calm. The shell you take when you visit your family is yellow, which you are pleased to learn on [The Meaning of Colour dot com](#) means both joy and deception. You wonder if it's strange that you don't paint anything other than a solid colour, then you remind yourself that these shells are just for you, and it is ok.

And then you meet someone who you think you might like and you take him home to Smith Street. Occasionally find that you self-censor with him. You don't know where this fits. You do not self-censor all the time, like at work or with family, but there isn't the same ease that you feel with your few friends. He fits somewhere in the middle. You go to The Meaning of Colour dot com and consult the charts, trying to find a colour that fits him. There is no single colour. He's a little bit red (because there is passion) and he's a little bit orange (because he has energy that is never quite exhausted). There is brown (because he is stable, earth-like, reliable). You want to add green for harmony and family but you know it is too early. There cannot be harmony when there is self-censoring.

You find yourself self-censoring when he asks about your shells one night.

'What are these?'

'Oh, that's just for work.'

'For the dress shop? Is it some kind of summer promotion? I hope they pay you for your out-of-hours.'

'No, not for the dress shop.'

'What then?'

'I paint them, for hermit crabs. The pet shop sells them.'

He laughs. Like he's never met a person who did such a ludicrous and useless thing.

You blush. It's a different red to the one you normally associate with him. This time it's shame, not passion.

'Oh, baby, I'm sorry. It's just...I've never thought about who does that stuff. I assumed it was done overseas, you know, in sweatshops. Not here, not in our sweatshop.'

He leans in, suggestively. You want to tell him to leave, but you let him kiss you.

After that you wonder if his true colour is white: the colour of mourning in Eastern cultures. His family came to Australia from Malaysia. With his eyes like rigidly frilled cone fish shells and his laconic Australian drawl, he exists in two worlds. That was why you liked him in the first place. Right now he makes you feel white.

You take your idea to the pet shop owner. Single colour shells. Sold with a colour chart next to the box, so people can select the meaning they want and then the shell they want. Simplicity in this complex, chaotic world.

‘I don’t think it will sell, but you can give it a go. On consignment.’

You agree.

You still haven’t found a nice smooth bottle neck and you think that maybe that’s just a pipe dream. You laugh at your own half-joke. You decide to tell the multi-coloured man. It is a test.

‘I want to paint bottle necks, for the crabs. They’re beautiful when they are worn down by the sea.’

‘Why’d you bother? It’s just junk.’

He has failed the test. You persist; you want him to pass. You think of all his colours: red, orange, brown, white and wonder if you could love someone who had those four colours.

‘Not to me.’

‘Babe, it’s junk, however you look at it. Why don’t you focus on the dress shop? I bet you could be manager if you tried.’

‘I don’t want to be manager.’

‘No one gets on in this world by painting shells.’

You don't speak at all. You tuck yourself into your bottle neck.

Number 4: Dear Diary

Dear Diary

(If you are reading this Jamie, piss off, this is none of your business and if I find out you read this I will tell Tarnya you dream about her every night, moaning her name so loud it wakes up the dog. Go on. Try me. I dare you.)

Today at school Michelle, Naomi, Gemma, Lucy, Kira and me talked about which movies we were going to see in the holidays, and which subjects we would take next year. Gemma is so serious. She's taking maths 1 & 2, physics, chem and for a lark, biology. She wants to be an engineer. Sounds like my idea of hell, but then I guess my subjects probably sound like hell to her.

OK. That's probably enough to have bored Jamie by now. But IF you are still reading this Jamie, this is your last chance. You bloody better piss off. Or the wrath will come down upon thee.



Dear Diary

At lunchtime today Tarnya came up to us and asked about Jamie. She's a year above us so it's strange that she would speak to us at all—no one ever speaks to anyone below their year level unless it's with some evil purpose. She has this *stride* about her—long, fast steps, like she's in a hurry and she's going to mow down anyone in her path. It screams—*get outta my way, punk!* So naturally, when she walked up to us, we all parted like the Red Sea to make room for her to pass. But she didn't. She stopped just in front of me and started talking.

'Are you Jamie's little sister?'

'Yeah.'

'Does he have a girlfriend?'

'How would I know? I'm not his keeper.'

I felt totally bad ass saying that to Tarnya, but I didn't like the way she just strode up to me and demanded personal information. Who did she think she was?

'Well, do you think you could find out?' she snarled at me.

'Who's asking?' I said.

'That's need to know—and *you* don't need to know.'

'No deal,' I said.

I turned back to the girls and saw their expressions—fear mixed with awe. It made me smile. High school sucks—all these hierarchies and rules about who you are allowed to talk to. I'm over it and I'm not playing anymore.

I heard Tarnya stalk off. Good. She could stew for a while.



Dear Diary

(Same deal, Jamie. Piss off. Or I will tell Tarnya you have an eye for the boys.)

Today, Tarnya's *friend* came up to us. I don't know her name.

'So what gives? How come you won't tell Tarnya if he has a gf?'

'Why doesn't she ask him herself? He's got ears and a mouth. He can talk for himself.'

'You don't know anything, do you? You're such a baby.'

'I'm the baby?'

That really made me laugh—I'm the baby in this scenario? I might only be fourteen but I am so much older than high school.

The friend strode off, without even half the attitude of Tarnya. Clearly had a long way to go in bitch-training.



Dear Diary

(Piss *off* Jamie, or I will tell Tarnya you have herpes. Which you caught off the dog. I mean it.)

Well today was one for the books. Jamie walked up to Tarnya at lunchtime. Michelle, Naomi, Gemma, Lucy and I were right there, in the lunch shed, on the next table over. Jamie walked straight up to her like he had balls of steel, all macho-like and confident. Chest puffed out, hair slicked back, walking like a giant. I couldn't hear what was said, of course, but I can guess. Here's how it would have gone.

'Hi Tarnya, how's it going?'

'Who are you?'

'Jamie. We've got history together.'

Pause.

'I, ah, I mean the class. With Mr Edleston?'

Beat.

'So?'

'So, I was wondering if, you know, you'd like to go see a movie this weekend?'

'With you?'

'Yeah, with me.'

'I've got a boyfriend, dufas. What did you say your name was again? Jamie? I might just tell Brock you're hitting on me.'

(I don't know her boyfriend's name. They say he goes to Saints. I'm sure he'd have to have a tosser name like Brock.)

'Sorry, I didn't know...I'll just leave you alone.'

'Too fucken right you will,' Tarnya said with a flick of her hair (this part I saw, from across the courtyard, so I know she did that).

That's when you turned and walked away, didn't you Jamie?

So from now on, when I say DON'T READ MY DIARY I mean it. PISS OFF!

Number 40: Patchwork

Ava's nappy is leaking. Wiping green-yellow smears from her thighs, back and stomach, I wonder if it's possible to clench my nose. I shut my eyes against it for a moment and a face appears: tight jaw, shadows like caves above and under his cheek bones, deep set blue eyes hidden by a long blonde fringe. Alexander.

My spirit flickers small, like fireflies in the darkest part of a cave, but I won't go back there.

I finish the job as Ava coos happily at me. She's never struggled on the change table the way some kids do. She watches me and smiles. Her eyes, brown and large like Dan's, seek mine. She is greedy for me.

Stuffing the wipes into the plastic bag, I say, 'There we go!', and plonk her on the floor. Off she trundles towards the kitchen, making straight for the saucepan drawer. She grabs the lids and starts whacking them together. Harmless, I think, and head for the studio sunroom.

The horizon canvas I've been staring at for a week still eludes me entirely. It's empty, and not in a good way. I can't find the answers because I don't even know the right questions.

From the kitchen, Ava cries. Sharp-edged disasters and panic run like arrows through my mind as I bolt back to her.

She stands in front of the fridge, covered in goo, staring at the floor where a dozen eggs have smashed and spread in a viscous muck-pool. The look in her eyes says, 'I'm sorry, Mumma, I'm sorry,' but she's too distraught to do anything but cry. I want to join her, but that would mean surrendering and I may never make it back from there, so I hold on and reach for the paper towels and begin the mop up.

A distant thought occurs to me: comfort her first. But I can't. One crisis at a time.

The towels get soaked too fast. I give up and lay them over the mess in a soggy patchwork.

Falling in love with Dan felt like creating a patchwork. He grabbed my attention with his large brown eyes and just the way he looked at me made me trust him. I trusted *this* part of him, then another part, then another part, until I trusted him entirely. Little moments built security. I didn't know it then, but security and love are not the same. Then, after a while, Dan became a weight and a regret. Now, I'm thick with resentment that has ruptured the perforated connections. They are too weak to hold.

Number 84: Sunlight Slippery Dip

He breathes little pieces of his insides into the world and says 'it's better to feel pain than nothing at all'. He has conviction on his side, but we are only nineteen. His voice reminds me of sitting around a campfire: someone has a harmonica, there is smoke in his words.

We lie under the full sized billiard table in his parents' house, at the good end of Smith Street and sounds come from brown, rectangular speakers that are covered in something resembling hessian. I don't understand how the vibrations make it through that ugly surface unscathed. Light rolls through high windows, causing dust motes to dance and flicker. A single beam slides over the top of the record player and to the carpet below.

It's eleven in the morning. Anthropology text books lay discarded in the shadow of the sunlight slippery dip.

We are talking about what we would study if we were anthropologists. He is decisive in the way that he can be. Rock and roll, he says. Indie acts. He wants to get under their skin. He is exasperated by his lack of skill on guitar and wants to get to the bottom of it. What do they have that he doesn't?

I am not so sure. I feel him pushing me to commit to something, to choose a path. But I can't. The world is big. How do you choose?

Now he is exasperated with me. He breathes no words; it's something I feel coming from him like a force field.

I stare at the underside of the billiard table—a huge slab of slate that is roughly hewn on the side no one is supposed to see—and wonder what would remain of me if it was to fall. What trace would I leave? I haven't done anything yet.

I stretch my hand up til my fingertips reach the cold stone. Undulations, ribs left over by tools pushing against the resistance of stone. I fall out of my body, becoming smaller as I sink through the nothingness of air into something unseen. I don't land. I just leave myself, disorientated as my fingers seek the slate, which is now too far away to touch. I can't answer his question or have his conviction about anthropology or anything else. I'd rather life wash over me than take a strangle hold on it.

The Doors spin around the turntable and I still want to kiss him, even though he makes me feel as though I've lost my grip on myself. This thought is dizzying and I swirl until his smoky voice brings me back.

'If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, infinite,' he quotes Jim Morrison, who quoted Aldous Huxley, who quoted William Blake. I wonder if Blake was quoting anyone, or if this idea originated with him. Either way, Blake left the first trace.

He leans over and kisses me and I'm falling again, and it's not all that different to before.

Number 1/2: Everything's Turning to White

In my white dress I am a ghost. Pale skin, blonde hair, white silk-covered shoulders. Invisible, without even putting on the veil. Imagine that.

Across town the church is decorated with large ribbons of white, the same fabric as the dress. There are white roses in bouquets on the pews. I am holding a small posy of white daisies. I painted my nails nude, but there isn't much pink there—it looks white to me. I am fading into a life that scares me.

'Oh, Suzie you look divine.'

Marie, my bridesmaid is inspecting me, fussing. Dress gets smoothed, hair gets smoothed, cheeks get smoothed. Veil is puffed over my back like a billowing benevolent cloud on the horizon.

I try to smile at Marie.

'This is the happiest day of my life,' I say, trying not to cry.

'Suzie, you're daft. You're not letting yourself enjoy this. You don't know how to be happy.'

Marie is wrong. I do. I did.

Marie reapplies my lipstick for the fifteenth time this hour and pronounces me ready.

‘But we can’t go yet. You have to be late.’

This is the final straw. These stupid traditions, absurd rules about how to be a bride. I feel like I am setting myself up for a life of unlivable rules.

I pick up my train, my ridiculous train that my mother talked me into, and walk out the door.

‘Suze! What the hell are you doing?’

I climb the stairs to Simon’s apartment on the floor above. I knock loudly on his door.

I can hear Marie running after me, struggling to make it up the stairs in her satin fishtail gown.

I knock again.

‘He’s at the church already, Suz,’ Marie says.

Of course he is. He’s never late for anything.

I want to sit down but the corridor floor is filthy and it will ruin my dress. I am enough of a bride to stop myself from doing *that* at least. I lean against Simon’s door. Footsteps come from the floor below and my heartbeat stops. Maybe he changed his mind and is coming back?

No, it’s only Faraj, the boy who lives on and off at number 6. I smile at him. His head is down, looking at his shoes, where the blinding whiteness of my ludicrous dress draws his eyes. They trace the white up up up to my face and he looks at me with his empty brown eyes and I can tell that he’s hardly seeing me.

‘Hi Faraj,’ I say.

Faraj nods and keeps walking up to number 6.

For a mad moment I consider asking him what's wrong—just to delay what I really have to do.

Marie takes my hands and draws me back into the moment.

'Suze, shall we head off to the church now?'

'I thought you said we had to be late?'

'Better early than never.'

Marie's panicking. Her job is to get the bride to the church and she knows I'm on the verge. She can see herself walking up the aisle—alone—delivering a message to the hapless groom. The scene plays out in my mind, complete with silent, dry tears from Simon and wet, messy hysterics from my mum. I let my imagination continue to play out the scenario. I go home to Smith Street. Simon and I stop looking for a bigger place to share. I come home from work at night to sit in front of the telly with wine and microwaved food. I avoid Simon in the corridor.

Any way I look at my life, it's a cliché.

Raised voices sink down from number 6 and Faraj comes back down the stairs. This time he stops and speaks. Slowly, thinking through each word.

'Today you marry Simon?'

I hesitate before I answer, 'Yes.'

'He is your home now. You always have someone. Happy day for you, Suzie.' Faraj says.

'Yes,' I say.

Simon is my home. That is the simple truth of it.

I want to hug Faraj, but he looks like he would break if I touched him. Or run.

'Yes,' I say.

Faraj nods and walks down the steps.

Number 19: Lia and Amos

Amos's wife is at the bar. Her short blonde hair with its brown roots, her long tanned limbs and athletic waist are trained on the man in front of her. It's summer and Lia is dressed in her favourite way – exposed skin showing off her hard work at the gym. Everything about Lia's body looks familiar to Amos; it is almost like watching himself.

Lia flirts with the man at the bar. She throws her head back and laughs in her deep, raw way that layers joy with sex. She rests a long-fingered hand on the man's shoulder and lets it linger there while she listens to him speak. She raises her champagne to her lips as he raises his beer to his, and lets her hand slip lower onto his bicep, gripping it a little more tightly now, no longer resting. Lia has perfected an almost clinical flirtation process, but it was her intuition that really made her good at it.

Amos turns his attention to the man now. His body language is just as important as Lia's. In fact, everything rests on his reaction. The man is leaning against the bar and his hips are pointing in Lia's direction. This is one of the signs Lia has told Amos to look out for; 'If he's pointing his groin towards me, he's interested – don't bother looking at his face. It's different for men and women – for

women, look at their face, for men, look at where their dick is pointing.’ So this is good, the man is responding to Lia’s flirtation. He smiles when she smiles, laughs when she laughs, drinks when she drinks. This is another sign that Lia has taught him to look for; ‘If he’s copying my actions, he’s interested, if he’s looking over my shoulder he’s wondering if he can get someone better.’

The man is now touching Lia’s back. His hand rests gently on the small of her spine, a finger casually inching through the belt loop at the top of her short denim skirt. This is good; ‘If his touch goes a little bit further than mine, it’s a good sign. If I touch his arm, he touches my back. If I touch his chest, he touches my arse.’ Lia’s mantras are a checklist in Amos’s mind.

Tonight is going to plan, but the next step is crucial. Amos waits.

They finish their drinks and place the empty glasses on the bar. Amos watches the man closely and knows he is asking Lia if she’d like another drink. This is the moment. Amos knows what his wife is about to say, and it has to be just right. Some men bolt at this point, although Lia is usually pretty good at picking.

And there it is – Lia leans in to whisper in his ear so that her words can’t be overheard. She puts her hand on his arm to steady him and keep him close. Her perfume is drifting up from between her breasts as she speaks. She is speaking slowly, with confidence and just a touch of vulnerability, although she possesses none of this particular quality herself, just the ability to portray it when required. She is measuring her words, weighing each one. Certain syllables require gentleness, others require force. Others require sexiness – sexiness is Lia’s trump card.

There are a couple of ways this could play out. Sometimes, but not often, the man pulls away as though he’s been slapped in the face, looks wild enough to punch Lia and then storms away breathing words like ‘disgusting’, ‘pervert’ and ‘slag’. More often than that, though, and because Lia has a knack for picking them, the man

looks over to where Lia is pointing, towards Amos, and checks him out. At this point, Amos's role is simple: raise his glass in their direction, give a small smile and hold the man's gaze. The message is clear, 'I'm in. Are you?' Then it is all up to the man.

As predicted, the man follows Lia's gaze and looks at Amos. He looks for a long time. Amos holds his gaze, just as Lia has taught him to. He is starting to feel anxious.

Amos sees a faint smile appear on the man's face and he feels his excitement build. This one looks just right, for them both. He signals for Amos to come to the bar and join them.

Amos watches as his wife pulls the thin cotton sheet away from the small sweating child asleep in bed. After a night like they'd had, he is always astonished that she can switch back to motherhood so easily. Lia turns and leaves the room where their son and daughter sleep peacefully, and goes to pay the babysitter. It is 3am: an expensive night out, even considering the drinks that the man, who Amos now knows as Steven, bought for them.

Amos follows Lia to the kitchen and watches as she makes a cup of tea for each of them.

'It was a good night, don't you think?' she says over the boiling kettle.

'You chose well, you always do.'

Lia smiles, 'I've had some practice now. I know the ones who will get it, and the ones who won't. I can tell just by watching them for a while.'

'But still, it's brave, what you do.'

'You too.'

Lia pours the drinks and puts the cups on the table in front of Amos, then sits on his lap, ignoring the way the arms of his chair gouge her legs. Beneath her, Amos knows she can feel his spindly and wasted legs, but he cannot feel her weight at all.

‘We can stop this anytime you want, you know,’ Lia says.

‘You say that every time. But you know I like to imagine it’s me you’re with,’ says Amos.

‘Yes, but...’

‘I know, I’ll tell you if it ever changes for me. And you will tell me too.’

Lia leans over and kisses her husband. ‘Of course. Shall we go to bed?’

‘Sure,’ Amos says.

Lia leaves their drinks on the table and wheels her husband into their bedroom. She helps him into his pyjamas and into bed. Because she knows he’s tired, she arranges his legs so that they can spoon and puts her arm around him, resting it in the valley where his ribs give way to his waist. There she can feel his chest rising and falling more and more slowly as he falls asleep in her arms.

Number 40: Cat food and snappyhappy stories

One of my old commercials comes on the telly. Cat food. Vivaldi's 'Winter' plays as the fur-ball (white as snow) ambles aimlessly around the (white as snow) backdrop, apparently unimpressed with life, until she spots the bowl of food. She speeds up, still managing to look languid and aloof. Takes a haughty sniff. Tucks in. Cue logo.

We had to drizzle honey over the food to make her eat it.

Dan looks over at me and smiles. He remembers the story about the honey.

'Didn't that cat scratch the entire crew raw that day?' he asks.

'Yep. She looks divine but she's pure evil.'

He reaches for the remote.

'Do you mind?'

I shake my head, no, and he flicks, murmuring to himself, 'Fifty-seven channels and nothing on.'

He pauses on SBS, looking for a doco, but there's nothing there either.

'Any word on them finally screening "Kids Behind Bars"?' he asks.

'No. Apparently we're saturated with detention stories. Compassion fatigue, they call it. They want something different. Something happy. "Snappy and happy" is actually what the commissioning editor said to me.'

‘But they bought it. Why don’t they just put it on?’

‘Your guess is as good as mine,’ I say.

I can’t be bothered trying to explain to Dan how the system works. It’s nice of him to show an interest in my work, but he’s never done it before, beyond the necessities of my travel itineraries. Now he’s clutching at relationship straws and it smells of desperation. We’re looking for dusty conversation at the bottom of a drought-stricken lake.

‘Do you think you might make one of those snappyhappy docos? Or maybe some more ads?’

‘Ava’s only just gone one,’ I say. ‘Are you worried about money?’

‘No, not so much...’

There’s something else he wants to say, so I wait.

‘I know that you’re busy, don’t get me wrong, I know Ava’s a full time job and then some. It’s just that I wonder if you’re...bored?’

Bored. The word stops me. Do I have the right to be bored? Isn’t what I’m doing too important to be boring? It’s too hard to think about, so I change the subject.

‘I don’t think I can make those sorts of films again. It seems unbearable now, to immerse myself in human misery. I don’t have the fight in me anymore.’

‘What about the snappyhappy stories, then?’

‘Is there such a thing?’

I look over at Dan, in his pyjamas already, even though it’s only 8pm. I try to conjure some feeling towards him, something *warm*, but there is nothing. No hatred, but no love either. Is there such a thing as a complete absence of feeling in a marriage? It’s not supposed to work that way. Shouldn’t I at least be mad at him?

There's nothing snappyhappy about the look Dan is giving me, nor about the look I'm giving him, I suppose. I've slipped into the cracks of my life and it's dark in here. Dan's smart enough to see through me, into my sadness, into my grief. He turns to the remote and settles on a channel—reality TV somethingorother.

Number 7/1: Jesus and the Tsunami

Donna and Damien sit on a rolled up swag in the tray of Damien's ute, huddled against the bellowing, cantankerous wind. Behind them is the headland: a colossal cyst on the arid landscape of the peninsula just out of town. Gulls swoop and dive in the winds that squall up the cliff. In the water the last surfer of the day dangles his legs over the sides of his board.

The swig Donna takes from the can of bourbon premix fizzes down her throat. She passes the can to Damien and watches his long hair get all caught up in the wind, his fringe upright in shards like the jagged volcanic rocks below them, before abruptly falling flat over his face. He's wearing his 'fuck you world' expression.

'I feel like I could jump off the cliff and fly. Lift off with the wind,' says Donna.

Damien ignores her.

'How'd you go today, Don?' He is asking about her job, but Donna doesn't want to think about that now.

'S'alright,' she shrugs. 'Nothing to say, hey.'

He turns away and his fringe whips up and flies into the air. *Take off!* Donna wishes she could do that. *Take off!*

She knows Damien is waiting for her to ask about his old man. She doesn't want to think about that either.

'Whadya reckon would happen if one of them waves came here, you know, like in Japan or New York? One a them huge mother fuckers that wipes out the whole city? Smith Street would be gone, wiped off the face of the planet,' Donna says.

'Them waves won't ever come here, ain't nothing to wipe out. Be pointless.'

Donna laughs and the sound of it is carried away, over the ochre cliff and into the quiet cove behind them where old fishers pull in nets dangling with crabs.

'Nah, seriously, if it did. And we were up here. We might be the only people left. If one of them waves came right now, *boom!* and wiped out everything in the whole sorry place. Then the tide got sucked back out to sea, and took them all with it. People, houses, dogs and cats. Then what?'

'Christ, Don, you're bloody tragic tonight.'

'I know.'

She takes a drag. Her cigarette is almost gone, even though she's only just lit it.

'Bloody wind,' she says.

The lone surfer paddles to shore.

'Shark bait's comin' in,' says Damien.

'He'd be dead,' Donna says with a nod of her head.

'Ease up, babe,' Damien says. 'D'ya wanna go get a pizza?'

'No money.'

'My shout,' Damien says.

‘Alright then. A bit later, hey.’

Donna thinks about all the old people down there at sea level and doesn’t want to go back down just yet.

‘Me old man’s back in hospital,’ Damien says.

‘I’m sorry, babe,’ she says, but secretly she wishes he hadn’t told her. She’d been imagining a wave the size of a ten-storey building crashing down on her family’s weatherboard house down south, smashing it into toothpicks. She pictures her collie, Jesus, old now and still living with her parents because her flat on Smith Street is too small for a dog, even an old fella like Jesus. She imagines him clinging to a smashed board and making it to dry land while her parents and big brother drown in a turban-swirl of foaming, angry water.

‘What’s it this time?’

‘Tumour’s back. They said he wouldn’t survive another one.’

Damien’s eyes are glistening. It might be the wind. Donna wonders if he’d want his family saved from the wave or if he’d be happy if they drowned. His dad’s a prick, but he’s dying now and that changes everything.

Donna takes the can from Damien’s hand. She stamps her cigarette butt out on the floor of the ute tray and takes a swig.

‘Who would you bring up here if you knew a wave was coming? Who’d you want to be stuck with in this washed out shithole for the rest of your life?’

‘Hell, Don.’

‘I’m just sayin’...’

‘Well, don’t. Just bloody don’t.’

‘You worried about your dad?’ Donna sighs.

‘Nah, mate. It’s all over for him. He’s cactus. It’s Mum I’m worried about.’

‘What’ll she do?’

Donna thinks that if she was Damien's mum she'd probably chuck a party when the old fella kicked it, but she figures Damien doesn't want to hear that right now.

'I'd bring you up here. You and Jesus,' he says.

Donna smiles. She knows he only said it to make her feel better. But even that's something.

Number 16: Tim and Alice—The Rider

Tim

The rider is no fun these days: peppermint tea and Cheezels. Nothing worth drinking, snorting, injecting, smoking, sticking up your arse. You love the lows as much as the highs, maybe more. Transcendental nothingness, then a conscious desire to stop breathing. Chasing the dragon even *looked* beautiful—the fiend’s dirty tail smoking up into a delicate twist as the gaudy, flamboyant flame licked the foil. There was glory in that.

It’s not good to think about this stuff, but sniffing the peppermint tea makes you ache for a hit of damn near anything and your head is in that glamourised lie. You can hear them out there, getting fired up for the gig. The band is hanging out in the corridor, because everyone knows not to bring that stuff into the greenroom. They are your personal addiction support group—the band, the roadies, the pub management. You’re known all across this wide brown land. One slip and you’re snowboarding to oblivion. Or drowning in stormwater run-off. You’re a precarious soul. They stroke your artistic temperament with a peacock’s feather. It keeps them

employed. They dance around you like you're gonna break. Because they know you will. Sooner or later.

Out front, the crowd is yelling over Eliza, the support act. Poor girl. A folk singer, pretty and small, faded blonde hair to her waist with just a guitar between her and the hundreds of drunk bastards who have come to hear you scream your anguish into a mic. She needs toughening up. You've had fifteen years of getting bottles hurled at your head in grungy pubs, all the punters judging you on whether you've given them a pound of flesh or a pile of shit. They want flesh, every time. And blood, they want to see you sweat it out your eyeballs. They want to puke in the carpark afterwards and tell their mates they've never seen anyone be such a god awful fuck-up, but hell the songs kick arse.

That's you—a god awful fuck-up with kick arse songs. Just ask your wife and kids. No need for a crystal ball.

There you go again. Crystal ball. Your brain connects dots you're trying to rub out. Now you're thinking about meth.

The tea tastes like flavoured dirt, you'll never get used to it. People who like it are lying to themselves. You spent years drinking cheap flyblown homebrew, Christ, you'd lick the dregs off the floor. But peppermint tea. Hell.

These days you like to start the gig with some spoken word. Sounds cracked, but you're trying to get them to see things are different now. If you're truthful, you're begging them to see you anew, and still like you. You make the poem funny, of course, throw in some local references so they feel loved, and recite it over a lazy drawl from the band so that they think it's a song, not a *fucken poem*. You tell them that tonight's gonna be different. By then they're restless. Shuffling, skulling, sniggering. They're wondering whether they can get a refund. False advertising; Sweeny ain't what he used to be.

Tonight's poem isn't going too well. It's hard to rhyme anything with 'Adelaide'.

City of churches, city of beaches

Wine barrels for Bordeaux, bodies

And sulphuric witches

But Ad-el-aide you give me the shits

I love you and hate you equally to bits

You are trash, you are treasure

But where're you hiding all my pleasure?

It's rotten and you know it. And if you crap on this town they're gonna want to kill you—even though it's technically your town too. And despite it all, you still want to wake up the next day. Something primal in you needs to see what's on the other side. You punish yourself so you have half a chance of waking up cured.

Then, one especially big night, to breathe or not to breathe was no longer your choice and it stopped being fun. It hadn't been fun for years, but you're a slow thinker and it took a while. You'd wake up and there was more that was lost than was there. People stopped pardoning you. You were no longer the happy rogue drunk, the artist whose indiscretions would be expunged with a chart-topper; who could laugh off incidents that mere mortals would be ashamed of. Of course your wife had stopped forgiving you long before everyone else. And to your kids you were just the drunk who slept it off in the back room in between tours.

Now you're awake and the days are long. The nights never end. The breaths keep coming and sometimes you wish they didn't. Days, nights, breathing is colour

free, additive free, preservative free. No MSG. There's no sharpness to anything—no sunlight after a bender. Now it's just life in a blender: grey slop and a dull whine.

Wine.

You hear schooners clinking through the door. For all their support, they don't know what that sound does to you. You start to shake.

You pick up the pen and force your grip. Adelaide is not going to get the better of you. There are so many bad jokes, some of them must rhyme. But tonight you can't make them funny, they only sound mean. They already hate you and they don't even know it yet.

There's a knock at the door.

'Timmy, the natives are restless, Eliza is dying out there. It's time.'

'Yeah, mate. Hang on.'

You know you could write this fucker if you had a drink in your hand. You know you could rock the gig if you'd had a hit. But tonight you're gonna suck and they're gonna know it. They're gonna go home saying Tim Sweeny's a has-been. They won't even want you on *Rise and Shine*. You'll get a job producing artists who are on the way up, or down, but never at the top. They'll slap you on the back and say 'I grew up listening to you, you were great,' without thinking about what that actually means. And they'll be snorting and smoking and injecting and doing stuff that hasn't even been thought of yet and you'll be gritting your teeth. For the rest of your life, gritting your god damn teeth, wishing on a beautiful dragon.

Number 6/2: Housing Needs Assessment

Housing Needs Assessment: Application

Date: 10/2/2013

Housing Officer: Coralie Dunbar

Client: Faraj Mohammed

Health/Disability Issues: N

Financial Issues: Y

Social/Cultural Issues: Y

Current Tenancy Issues: Y

Exceptional Circumstances: N

Suggested Category: 2

Please provide reasons for Category 2 recommendation.

Client is a 17 y.o. unaccompanied minor and asylum seeker from Afghanistan. He has limited English language skills and is attending high school. He has inadequate financial resources (his income comes from Centrelink) and is unable to secure work.

Client has no security of tenure and faces imminent homelessness. He is currently living with another refugee whose wife is due to arrive soon. When she arrives, the Client will be asked to leave the premises.

Client advised that last month he was kicked out of the house due to deteriorating relationship with the other tenant and was forced to sleep in a park for several nights.

Client has requested individual housing, but the Housing Officer does not see any circumstances which would prevent him from sharing with appropriate persons.

Please explain why Client cannot secure housing in private market.

Client faces discrimination in the private rental market due to his lack of English literacy and lack of rental references.

If there are any other issues, please describe.

The original Housing Assessment Support Letter was provided by City West College, where client is attending high school, and stated that issues included 'extreme sadness, anxiety and depression'.

The Housing Officer therefore concludes that without appropriate safe/secure long term housing the Client's ability to study and work in Australia will be severely impaired.

Housing Needs Assessment: Response

Date: 15/02/2013

Housing Officer: Coralie Dunbar

Client: Faraj Mohammed

The request for housing has been denied.

Housing Needs Assessment: Addendum to Original Assessment

Date: 28/2/2013

Housing Officer: Coralie Dunbar

Client: Faraj Mohammed

Health/Disability Issues: Y

Financial Issues: Y

Social/Cultural Issues: Y

Current Tenancy Issues: Y

Exceptional Circumstances: N

Suggested Category: 1

Please provide reasons for Category 1 recommendation.

Further to my previous report, new information has been made available to the Housing Officer through an interpreter and also psychologist report. This additional information has caused the Officer to change Mr Mohammed from Category 2 to Category 1.

Through the interpreter, Mr Mohammed has advised that he endured significant trauma and loss and is experiencing chronic mental health issues as a result. It is imperative for his mental health that he has safe, secure and independent housing. The amended psychology report (attached) attests to this and states that Mr Mohammed's mental health will continue to decline if his housing needs are not met.

The psychology report also shows that Mr Mohammed's ongoing mental health issues are exacerbated by living in a shared house. He is currently incapable of developing relationships due to severe emotional trauma. With continued treatment

he may regain his mental health, but under present conditions he finds cohabitating distressing and is not able to develop functional relationships with the people with whom he lives.

Psychology Report

Mr Mohammed's psychologist has provided a further letter of support. An excerpt is below:

'It is my professional opinion that Mr Mohammed's present medical condition precludes him from living with others and that it will be beneficial to his ongoing health if he is housed independently. I have diagnosed Mr Mohammed with chronic post-traumatic stress disorder associated with an event in which he witnessed the deaths of his parents, brother and best friend when a bomb exploded in his native country Afghanistan. All four were burned beyond recognition, while playing soccer. Mr Mohammed is currently distressed by intrusive memories and nightmares, avoidance/numbing behaviours used to cope with re-experiencing the trauma, sleep disturbance, anger/irritability, impaired concentration, hyper-vigilance, anxiety and depression. His condition is long-term and affects his day-to-day activities and ability to cope. His long term prognosis is unknown and contingent upon his responsiveness to treatment.'

Housing Needs Assessment: Response

Date: 12/03/2013

Housing Officer: Coralie Dunbar

Client: Faraj Mohammed

The request for housing has been denied.

Housing Needs Assessment: Application

Date: 26/03/2013

Housing Officer: Coralie Dunbar

Client: Faraj Mohammed

Health/Disability Issues: Y

Financial Issues: Y

Social/Cultural Issues: Y

Current Tenancy Issues: Y

Exceptional Circumstances: Y

Suggested Category: 1

Please provide reasons for Category 1 recommendation.

Faraj is a beautiful boy. Smooth, brown skin. Tall, strong. He might have been an athlete. He has black wavy hair and he wears it long. It flips over his left eye and he doesn't push it away. He's using it to hide from the world and I'm sure he doesn't know it makes him look like James Dean.

He doesn't speak much English and I don't speak Dari so it's difficult to communicate, but we have developed a series of hand signals that he seems comfortable with. Maybe it's easier than speaking. Words can hold so much pain.

Please explain why Client cannot secure housing in private market.

I want to take him home with me. Perhaps my husband and I can cure him of his fear of loss. My husband, who teaches Middle Eastern cultures at the university, will give him our most comfortable chair, and they will speak (although my husband

only knows basic Dari and Faraj only basic English). The conversation will be notable for its mutual concentration, fascination and respect. My husband will make Faraj warm Milo at night time like he used to do when our children were young.

My husband knows that Faraj means 'relief from bad times' and Faraj will be a relief for us both, a chance to focus our energy on someone who needs us, just like the old days, before we started to look at each other blankly after the evening meal. Even though he's not capable of friendship, he will help us.

But Faraj can't stand to be around people.

If there are any other issues, please describe.

One night I will knock on Faraj's door and open it before he has a chance to respond. I will find him with his sleeve pulled up and a compass in his hand. He will be scratching a criss-cross pattern in the soft skin on the inside of his bicep. There will be splashes of blood drying on his jeans and I will realise why he always insists on washing his own clothes. I will wonder where this starts and if it will ever end.

Housing Needs Assessment: File Management

Date: 26/03/2013

Housing Officer: Coralie Dunbar

Client: Faraj Mohammed

File closed and archived.

Number 8/1: Community Radio

Hey Jude is playing. I fought with Andy over whose *Hey Jude* we should play. He wanted his CD version, but of course that's only because he doesn't remember how to queue up vinyl. But what's *Hey Jude* with the chemical gloss of a CD?

The track ends and I hit Mic 1 and Mic 2.

'*Hey Jude*, for all you Beatles fans. And you know, Andy, wasn't that better than that CD version you've got at home? C'mon Andy, be honest with Jimmy.'

'Jimmy, only tossers refer to themselves in the first person. Queue the next track. This is Nine Inch Nails with a number that *was* recorded for CD. Press the damn button, Jimmy.'

Andy gets up from his chair, throws his headphones onto the desk with more than his usual disdain, and flops onto the green vinyl couch in the corner of the studio. He shuts his eyes and his arm dangles over the edge of the couch onto the floor like a lazy ape. I don't know how he can even sit on that couch; it must have been from the 1950s and had never once been cleaned. The foam stuffing is bursting out of it like pus from a green blister and whenever anyone sits on it puffs of dust form clouds like a swarm of micro-beasts. It is rank.

‘You’re on 89.9 Community Radio, it’s three-thirteen a.m. on the knocker, here’re the Nails,’ I say as I watch Andy become engulfed in the ancient spores of the couch.

‘No one’s listening, Jimmy, you don’t have to sound like such a wad. And no one says ‘the Nails’.’

‘No one’s listening? No one? I beg to differ, my friend. Last week we put a call out and the phones lit up. Two callers.’

‘Yeah, I’ve never been so flat chat in all my life. That was crazy, man.’
Andy’s eyes flick up to the On Air sign above the studio door, directly in his line of sight from his reclining position on the couch. ‘You didn’t turn the mics off, for fuck’s sake!’

I follow his glance. Andy is right, I hadn’t turned the mics off. I press the buttons.

‘Jesus.’

‘Don’t worry, like I said, no one’s listening.’

‘Really?’ I ask, pointing to Line 1, flashing red.

‘Hello, 89.9 Community Radio,’ I say.

‘I’m listening.’

The line goes dead.

‘What was that?’

‘Someone said, “I’m listening” and hung up.’

‘Proves my point, only weirdos and freaks listen to community radio at 3am on Thursday morning.’

It is hard to build an argument against Andy on this one. We’ve been doing this show together for two years now and we’ve only ever had a couple of calls. The first one was my mum, on my first show. But even she stopped listening after a week

or two. After that it was just the odd pot smoker up late requesting ‘Dark Side of the Moon’. I’d tested Andy’s theory, that no one ever listened, a couple of times by asking a trivia question and offering an old cassette as a prize. Someone always called up and answered the question and then got shirty ‘cause I wouldn’t post the cassette to them—they had to come to the station and pick it up. Don’t they know I don’t get paid to do this job, unless you count unemployment benefits?

‘Someone could break in here and hack us to bits with a cleaver and we could be yelling out a detailed commentary as it happened until the air goes dead when they smash the blood-soaked panel to smithereens and no one would come and save us because *no one is listening*.’ Andy says from the couch.

Sometimes I hate Andy. For one thing he always programs these long Nine Inch Nails songs that make my ears want to puke, and for another he has a knack for giving voice to these things that happen to me in my sleep at night. In truth, the only reason I keep him on the show is because I feel a bit safer with someone else around.

‘Or, one night, if you don’t shut up about *Hey Jude* maybe *I* might be the one to come in here with a cleaver.’

Andy thinks he is hilarious.

But, seriously, can he read my mind? I’m trying not to feel paranoid, but it is getting harder.

The phone rings again and Andy springs up from the couch, sending up another storm of spores, and grabs it before I can get to it.

‘Hello, 89.9 Community Radio, *I’m listening*.’ Andy says the last bit in a spooky voice, the kind of voice you use in grade five to scare the girls during a séance.

‘Shut up, Andy,’ I say, snatching the phone from him. I queue up the next track—‘Ingrid Bergman’ by Billy Bragg—and speak to the caller.

‘Hello, caller?’

‘He’s right you know, I could hack you up and no one would know. Not even your mother listens to this show.’

I check the panel—mics are off. This guy, whoever he was, couldn’t possibly have heard us. We are in a sound-proof studio for fucks’ sake. And anyway, that thing about my mother...I’d only been *thinking* that, hadn’t I?

‘Who are you?’

I flick my eyes up to Andy, now resting his head on the panel looking lazier than ever—maybe he’d set up one of his loser mates to spook me. I kick him under the desk and he looks up at me. His face shows nothing; no glimmer of a smirk, but no fear either. In fact he looks strangely wax-like.

As Billy spins around, I wait for the caller to answer me.

He hangs up.

‘Alright, so who’ve you set up to call?’

‘What’re you talking about? I didn’t do that.’

As much as I don’t want to, I believe Andy. I know his faces—all three of them—and the one he has on now is his ‘I don’t really give a fuck’ face (incidentally, his most common face). That face doesn’t lie, because Andy genuinely didn’t give a fuck about most things. He’s gone back to playing with his phone—another thing that pisses me off about him. We’re supposed to be working.

Billy Bragg is winding up (he’s always short and sweet) so I queue up the next track: Martha Wainwright. I just shove it in and hit play. It is unlike me to not carefully select a track and announce it. It’s fair to say I’m freaked out.

I look down at the panel to check the sound levels—sometimes Martha needs to be turned up—and see a liquid pooling at the edge of the desk. It is tan, syrupy and, yes, it smells. Bad. Like days old veggie scraps. The liquid spreads, oozing

down into the cracks of the panel. I look up at Andy, and he is still fiddling with his phone, oblivious and waxy.

‘Andy?’ I say, as Martha croons around us.

Andy looks up at me and then pointedly fixes his eyes on his elbows and I can see that *he* is in fact the tan-coloured sludge. It is dripping off him and pooling around his elbows where he’s leaned them on the desk. It is running from his elbows and into the panel.

Andy’s wax-face has changed. This is not an Andy face I know. It is melting, softly drooping downwards towards his neck. His neck is pooling around his chest. His chest is starting to look concave as things slip further and further south.

Grabbing my old windcheater, I use it to mop up the mess, soaking Andy into the fibres as Martha becomes prickly and fuzzy. The panel is dying, I can’t mop him up fast enough.

‘Andy, help me! At least get your elbows off the desk! Can’t you see what’s happening?’

I drop the windcheater—it is soaked and useless anyway—and it falls, laden with Andy, to the floor. To my horror, Andy begins to seep into the coarse fibres of the studio carpet and become indistinguishable from the rest of the dirt that has been trodden into it for decades before us. I panic. I don’t want Andy to vanish into the floor—how would I ever get him back again? I rip some old laminated posters from the walls—Beck from his *Loser* days and Regurgitator in their *Unit* era—and put them underneath the windcheater so that Andy can coagulate on the laminate.

It works. I begin to see parts of him forming over the poster images. *Unit* was a good choice—the yellow album cover is a clear backdrop and I see parts of Andy against it.

Martha has stopped and there is dead air all around. It has probably been like that for ages. I do the only thing I can: take a mic, turn it on and start a commentary.

‘Ah, sorry for the dead air folks, but the strangest thing just happened. My colleague Andy just melted into the panel. I mopped him up with my windcheater, and when he was all gone, I threw my windcheater onto the floor. He started to...hell! He’s coming back! It’s OK, folks! I can see him taking shape again. It’s starting at the floor, with his shoes. It’s slow, but it’s happening! He’s going to be OK! Andy! Can you hear me mate?’

The phone panel lights up. I pick up Line 1.

‘Jimmy, your mum called me. We’re putting the plan into action. What’s going on there?’

It is Michelle, the station manager.

‘Michelle!’

How much did she hear? Was she listening? It was a train wreck, even for the graveyard shift, one hellava train wreck.

‘Jimmy...’ her voice holds a warning. ‘You’re still on air. Queue up a track and turn off the mics.’

I do as she says, then go back to the phone.

‘All set, Michelle. It’s the strangest thing, first there was this call from a guy, he seemed to be reading my mind, and then Andy—’

‘Jimmy. I’m sending around some people. They are going to help you. Just stay where you are, OK. Promise me you will stay where you are?’

‘Sure, there’s still twenty minutes of the show left, I’m not deserting my post! But wait til you hear about Andy—’

‘Jimmy, Andy hasn’t been around for over three years.’ Michelle’s voice is very calm and soothing. Maybe she just woke up. ‘Since before you joined the

station. Remember you told me in your interview that if Andy came back I was to call the police? That Andy messed with your head, that you hadn't heard from him for a long time, but that he might come back someday? And that if he did...?'

'If he did?'

I don't want to think about what Michelle is saying. But Andy is back, she's right. And Andy means black days and bad news.

'The ambulance will be there any minute, Jimmy, just hold tight. While we wait, why don't you queue up the emergency tape? I'll walk you through it if you like. We wouldn't want dead air, would we?'

Michelle is right, of course. But I don't need to be told what to do. I know the procedure. I quickly set up the tape.

'Good job, Jimmy. Now, can you leave the studio and walk to the front doors. But stay inside until the ambulance comes.'

'What about Andy? I can't just leave him alone on the floor. Maybe they can help him? The ambulance people?'

'Andy will be just fine, you said he was coming back, didn't you? He will be just fine.'

'I think it was the spores from the couch, you should get that replaced.'

'Yes, you're right, it's a terrible couch. Now, put the phone down and walk to the front, but stay inside until the ambulance comes, OK?'

I do as Michelle instructs. She is very calm and her voice is soothing, and as soon as I leave the sound-proofed studio I can hear the sirens.

I lay on the bed in the ambulance as they ask me questions.

'Name please?' the paramedic asks.

'Jimmy Absalom.'

'Address?'

‘Unit 8, number 1 Smith Street.’

‘Suburb?’

They continue to ask questions and I continue to answer, but as I am talking what I am really thinking about is what Michelle had said about Andy. He *did* always manage to pull himself back together and find his way back into my life. If it takes him a while to soak out of the carpet and onto the Regurgitator poster and reform into his Nine Inch Nails loving self, well, that isn’t such a bad thing. We can do with some time apart.

Number 12/1: Becca's Red Dress

On stage and off, Becca only wore red. From my place behind the drum kit, I watched her Renaissance arse and tiny waist under spotlight. Against the shadowed crowd, her backside beckoned me. Energy jolted from my sutured heart to my napping groin; parts of me that hadn't done their jobs for a long time. I was too old for it, but Becca wasn't.

Hours passed at empty bars after gigs while we talked over beer and cigarettes. Becca made spaces, and filled them with her glamorous misery. She told me about her husband; aggressive, emotionally retarded. Away a lot, working shifts in the mines.

I could no longer look at Maddy, my wife. I traded on past behaviour for a while: the tour had been exhausting, I needed to sleep. I was coming down off a tour binge, I needed time. But guilt is a profitless emotion.

With the tour over, Becca and I had no excuse. She was spending time with her kids. Her husband was doing fly-in-fly-out at the mines and was gone. I wanted to go to her house, but her kids were there. Instead we sent each other texts. Agonised, like star-crossed lovers, it was intoxicating and unsatisfying.

We started off in code. We missed the road—how absurd it had been to bump along that ruined highway to Russell. The infested mattresses in Dunedin—we didn't say it, but that was where we first made love, with the mites nipping at our arses, crawling on our scalps. The high of being on stage and the post-coital come-down of the last gig in Christchurch. There was nothing to miss about Auckland, and that made us LOL.

Messages became more brazen. I told her about watching her arse sway as I tapped out the lazy beats of old blues tunes. She told me she knew all along.

Then she sent her husband a text meant for me, and my world flicked off its axis.

The miner posted details—some true—about the affair online.

Becca rang me so that I could tell Maddy before she read about it. The miner was ranting in the background. I didn't know what to do. Was Becca even safe with him?

Anyway, we were too late. Maddy, who was always reading something or other, saw the post.

At first she only wanted to know if it was true. Then she screamed and swore at me for days on end, demanding details that would only make her hate me more. Eventually, she tucked a tear-soaked strand of hair behind her ear and said she still loved me. The next day she said she wanted to try and forgive me. The look on my face must have told her that was a mistake.

Finally she said: I only need to know one thing, when it began.

I couldn't tell her. It might have begun with me watching Becca audition for the gig. It might have begun in rehearsals; late nights in darkened rooms.

Unnecessary touching and laughing at things that weren't that funny. Gazes that felt

dangerous. It seemed unfair to Becca to say it started in Dunedin, just because that was where we first made love.

As I packed my bags she said: If you need a break, you can have it. I want you back, but I won't wait forever.

I heard: Go to Becca, see if it will work.

I met Becca at a coffee shop in between our neighbourhoods. Seeing her was painful, but what came next—easy.

Becca said: I'm leaving him. We have to be together.

It was an easy decision, because Becca made it for me. We moved into a cheap, unfashionable apartment on Smith Street. The bedroom had a small window that faced a concrete wall. The pollen from the Plane trees made me sneeze and the wet leaves made the footpath slippery.

With Becca, the concrete wall and allergies were easy to ignore. But we could barely make the rent.

She left her kids with the miner. A tiny thought snuck through my bliss from time to time: why did she leave her kids with him? Were they even safe? Where did they go when he was away at work?

Becca and I were making love when my heart failed. I saw her face turn white against the blood red of the dress that I'd pushed up over her hips. Before I collapsed on top of her I felt our combined panic: she didn't know what to do, and, not wanting to feel like the old man I was, I hadn't told her about my heart. I pointed to the phone, tried to say: *Triple 0*, but I had no air left. She watched me fall unconscious, then called my wife, who knew exactly what to do.

After the surgery, Maddy was at my hospital bedside. She was reading a book as she waited for me to wake. She was always reading a book.

Number 40: All These Hours

While Ava naps, I sit with a pot of tea, glaring at the canvas. I've taken down the simple horizon I painted last week, and placed it paint-side to the wall. The new canvas stares back at me, empty. Paints crack in their tubs, creating deep crevices of darkening colour.

Painting is impossible today. My brain is stuck in a loop, replaying memories. Obsessed, deranged, I pretend to look for something profound, or some clue to unravel or explain away my mistakes, inadequacies and faults.

What I'm really doing is asking myself for permission.

Act 1

Scene: Dilapidated student house—night, 16 years ago

Jennifer: 19 years old, too tall, and in her try-hard punk phase.

Hair: short, spiky, dyed blue-black.

Eyes: rimmed with black eyeliner which is swept up in a thick arc at the outer corner in an attempt to look like Siouxsie Sioux from the Banshees.

All of it's war paint, a protective layer, and is nothing like the 'come hither' makeup of other girls her age. Jennifer sees the world with brutal clarity: tough, unfathomable, cruel, indecent. She hides behind a constructed image and skulks away. She wants someone to follow her, and ask her why she's hiding.

No one ever does.

The man Jennifer is in love with, Alexander, is dating one of those Come Hither girls: Kerry.

Alexander: short, Czech, vodka-drinking alpha-male. Or so he appears. Jennifer has known him since they were both six years old, so she can recognise his war paint, just as he can see hers.

It's very inconvenient for Jennifer to be in love with Alexander, after all he's dating Kerry.

Kerry: petite private school girl with perfect skin, perfect diction and unsnagged tights.

Jennifer, Alexander and Come Hither Kerry are at a party. Kerry sits on Alexander's lap and doesn't look too big for him. He loops her long, sleek hair around his finger like it's precious silk. He whispers in her ear and makes her smile.

Colette sees what's going on; she's followed Jennifer's gaze, and she figured it out ages ago, anyway.

Colette: stirrer, manipulative as hell, although she'd never admit it, and Jennifer's best friend.

Colette bundles the group together: Jennifer, Alexander, Kerry, Mike and Simon, and takes them outside for a cone. She might have Jennifer's interests at heart, but her methods are cruel and unusual.

Sitting in the banana lounges in the backyard of some distant friend's house, overlooking the dried out swimming pool, and passing around a cone, Colette starts up The Game.

'Let's play Jen and Alex Are Perfect For Each Other Except! We haven't done that in ages!'

'Nooo!' Jennifer says, weary and embarrassed.

Mike: Colette's boyfriend, borderline sociopath, gigolo.

Laying back in a self-assured, casual pose and with Colette on his lap, Mike says, 'Yes! I'll start. Jen and Alexander are perfect for each other except...he has to stand on a crate to kiss her!'

Everyone except Alexander, Kerry and Jennifer laughs.

'Don't you mean a ladder!'

That is either seriously amusing, or the weed is really good. Tears begin to run down their faces. Kerry is subdued and sullen. Who can blame her? Colette and the others are being arseholes. Jennifer almost feels sorry for Kerry.

'Jen and Alex would be perfect for each other except they would argue about *everything...all the time!*' says Simon.

Simon: normally very nervous and sweet but tonight, rendered childish by overindulgence.

'This game *never* gets tired,' says Alexander. He stands, takes Kerry's hand and walks back inside.

And that is the end of that.

The rest of them drift back inside where the music is loud enough to cause brain contusions and the atmosphere is accented by little corners of smoke. Glasses and bottles are on every surface like a modern art depiction of excessive disarray. Bodies are close, limbs entangled, intimacies on display everywhere. Colette and

Mike have found a dark corner to be indiscreet in. Alexander and Kerry are nowhere to be seen and Simon is mixing complicated drinks in the kitchen, chatting to a handsome stranger.

Above the music, a door slams and Kerry emerges, teary and puffy but somehow still sophisticated and beautiful. She runs for the front door and in a screech of expensive tyres, she's gone.

Jennifer waits for Alexander to race out after her, but he doesn't. She wanders aimlessly around the unfamiliar house, expecting to find him tearful and bereft and despite it all, wanting to console him. But he's nowhere.

She thinks, *I'm coming down and everything looks stupid and ugly and pointless*. She heads for the backyard to be morbid in private. All that remains in the empty pool are sharp salt stalagmites growing on the little blue tiles, pointing up at the stars. An orb weaver spins a web in the tangled garden. From nowhere a pair of arms fold around her waist, a flop of silky fringe tickles the back of her neck, and Alexander sighs into her ear, 'JenJen, will we ever get it together?'

And in those few words, with Alexander's arms around her and his body pressing into hers, what she hears is: *I choose you. I choose you.*

Jennifer knows she is fooling herself. He is in pain and confused. Kerry has probably told him she's had enough of his stupid friends and their idea of fun.

But. Finally, finally, someone has followed her and it's too much to ignore.

She turns to him and although she doesn't want to, she picks a fight. It's the only way she knows how to talk to Alexander.

'Something tells me you and Kerry have already "got it together", more times that I care to think about. Anyway, it's not the getting together that's the problem, it's the *staying* together.'

In the process of her little speech she's extracted herself from his arms, managed to make herself angry at him, and ruined a perfectly perfect moment that could have turned into a romantic moment.

'Are you deliberately misunderstanding me? Since when is "get it together" a euphemism for sex? And why are we even talking about sex? And Kerry? I was talking about you and me.'

'Clearly not a topic at all related to sex.'

'Clearly.'

What is that she detects in his voice? Bitterness? Distaste? Sadness? Regret? She can't tell.

'So did Kerry finally get sick of us all? I couldn't blame her if she did.'

'It's not about "us", it's about her and me. It's just not working.'

'You might think it's not about "us", but it is. We are vultures. Carnivorous. Ruthless. Kerry was the weakest link. Only the strongest survive and earn our friendship.'

'You might be right about that,' he sighs.

'Oh look at that, something we can agree on,' Jennifer says sourly.

'JenJen, why do we do this?'

'Do what?'

'Pick fights with each other.'

'You're fun to fight with. You bite back.'

Alexander takes a step towards her, his hands held up.

'What about a peace offering? I don't want to fight with you tonight.'

Jennifer feels like snarling, *I'm not a replacement! You can't come to me for comfort when your girlfriend walks out on you.*

Instead, she says, 'Peace offering? Exactly what is on the table?'

‘Sometimes I want us to be...different...kinder. I care about you, JenJen. Can’t we have both? Can’t we challenge each other and...I don’t know...love each other too?’

Jennifer wants to kiss him right now, there is nothing in the world that matters more. Not a damn thing. This is the grand moment she’s been waiting for. *I’m going to do it*, she thinks. She takes a step and hears a sharp gasp from behind Alexander.

Kerry.

Alexander turns to her and drops his arms. Jennifer flees making a much noisier and less stylish exit than Kerry did, in her backfiring Corona.

The sun has set and it’s dark in my studio. Hours have passed and I’m still staring at the canvas, only now it’s not blank. I’ve painted Alexander’s face. I stand up and put my fingers to the wet paint on his lips, drag them down and smear his chin, which I’ve painted with exaggerated lines that make his intractability look more like my own. I put my paint-wet fingertips to my lips and send him a kiss.

Number 18/1: I Go To Rio

The woman sits on the tall stool in front of me and asks for a flight to Rio de Janeiro. I have to look up the airport code: GIG. Won't forget that again.

The brown leather strap of her bag is almost the same colour as her skin, and is the same width as the shoulder of her tank top. She puts her green beaded necklace in her mouth and sucks on it like a nervous child.

'Return?' I ask.

Masses of tight dark brown curls spring out around her face and look like they could never be brushed. They bounce on her bare shoulders, even when she is still. She spits out the necklace so she can speak.

'No. One-way. I'm going home.'

Her eyes flick to the floor before her expression catches up with her words and she remembers to smile.

From the stool she is much higher than me. They do that on purpose—so that the customer feels uncomfortable and doesn't settle in for a chat about bus routes in Cairo or the safety ratings of minor airlines in Russia. It also means the customer is

conveniently able to look down their sales consultant's blouse, or directly at their groin, as they prefer.

'Can I have your name and date of birth, please? So that I can start building a quote?'

She gives them to me.

'Contact number? Email?'

She gives them to me.

I have all the Key Information now and she is in our database. We can stalk her with advertising and QuoteBeats.

'Great, thanks, Juliana. Do you have a preferred airline?' I use her name, the way I have been trained to, to create a false sense of friendship between us.

'The cheapest.'

She has an accent I find both charming and confounding. It makes me hang onto each syllable to make sure I've deciphered correctly.

'OK. What date do you want to fly?'

This should be an easy fare. In theory I could add a sizeable commission to the base. But her eyes flick to the carpet every time she speaks and the necklace keeps going in and out of her mouth and it makes me reluctant to rip her off.

I type in ADL-GIG and the date and give her the cheap options: Aerolineas Argentinas and Emirates. I explain to her about the layovers associated with each flight, heavily emphasising the benefits of Emirates—making 23 hours in Dubai into a selling point—because this month we have a deal with them and if I can sell another five Emirates fares I get a free return airfare to any Emirates destination. It's a helluva reward and no one else in my office is even close. I really want that free flight. I want to go to Casablanca, walk into a piano bar and say 'Play it again, Sam.'

‘Dubai? I don’t know. That’s a lot of extra miles. I’ll take the Aerolineas flight. Do you need a deposit now?’

This is the easiest sale I’ve ever made in the four years I’ve been doing this job. They *always* try to get you to hold the fare while they shop around and come back to you with a quote they want you to beat.

‘You’re sure? Dubai is *amazing*! Have you seen the shopping malls and the indoor parks? It’s like nothing else on earth!’

Desperation is creeping in. Nothing kills a sale faster than desperation mixed with a sniff of insincerity. It’s obvious she doesn’t care about shopping malls or indoor parks. I’m an idiot.

She shakes her head, glossy curls bouncing away, and waits for me but the only sentences I seem to be able to form are not appropriate. Why are you so anxious? Have you always sucked on your necklace, since you were a child? Did you need braces for that? What’re you going home to? What’re you leaving behind? Is there a *who*? Or is it just a *what*?

‘Aerolineas, please. Do you need a deposit?’ she repeats.

I snap out of it.

‘\$200 is fine. And the rest within the week. Is that OK?’

‘OK.’

She fishes around in her purse and hands me flat and tidy notes—straight from the ATM—then she’s gone before I remember to tell her to bring her passport in.

‘What was with that commission? You could have doubled that, easy,’ says Ruby from the desk next to me.

‘What?’ I say, catching up too late.

‘You just blew Casablanca, babe,’ Ruby shakes her head. In this line of work there is no greater goal than an airline reward. And no greater chump than me.

But Casablanca seems unimportant now. Because I’ve fallen in love with a girl who’s going to Rio and I have five days to sell five more fares. Emirates fly ADL to GIG. The image of Sam sitting at his piano crooning ‘As Time Goes By’ is replaced in my mind by Peter Allen swinging his maracas as he dances around his grand piano singing ‘I Go To Rio.’

I’m going to Rio.

Number 16: Tim and Alice—Reruns

Alice

Like reruns of a bad show on telly, his habits came and went. I counted them like the hours on a clock. One would pass—though it took longer than an hour or even a day—and then come back again. I knew the people he was with when he was on a habit, and that he would return to me when he was off. Those teeth rotters are fair-weather friends, there for him when he's got a taste to share and off looking for someone else when he doesn't. They came to the house and sometimes smiled apologetically when they saw the children, fatherless and floating. But they still asked, they always asked for him.

He writes when he's on a habit and tries when he's not. When he comes home to me, to the kids, trying to get straight, he doesn't remember who to be, or how to be. How to even hold them. Maybe he thinks they will break, but he looks more breakable than them. Skinny as tin foil, grotty as an unwashed dog. They hug him like he's fragile or maybe like he's smelly, because he is, and he hugs them like they are fragile, because *he* is. I ache when I see it; every cell in his body is a pin and

the kids are the pin cushion, only they push the pins deeper into him. Between it all, no one gets a decent hug.

There's damage that can't be undone. I count it up like the seconds on the clock. They tick past too fast, and just when I get back to 12 and think that maybe he can change—'cause there's nothing he hasn't done yet and he must be running out of time to live like this—the damn red hand keeps going around, around, around.

Now I'm a catastrophe of responsibilities and exhaustion. Trying not to snap at them when they pine for him, the man who would turn up to sleep it off and then play with them for half an hour before it got too much to be strung out with noisy kids.

It's impossible to hate him, in amongst it all. He's a good man. I still love him. He told me he's gone straight and he's touring. He sends cheques from time to time. He used to pride himself on being bad at managing his finances, like it was some kind of badge. Used to say that it made him a better artist to be shit at everything else. Like being my husband, their father.

I look at other men. None of them measure up to his five feet ten of skin and bones. His oily hair and no-longer cool retro clothes. His pointy shoes—always shiny. And yellow, bloodshot eyes. No one else has that thing he has, that ability to see through life like he's x-raying it. It's his superpower. But the rays reflect back and burn a hole in him. No one can live that way and not get scathed by it. The thinness of him; he's been shaved away.

Jacob is just like his dad. Anabelle is like me. She'll be fine. Unless she marries someone like her dad, god help her. But Jacob. I'd been too busy telling his dad to fuck off and not come back that I didn't see that Jacob was a living breathing replica. From his skinny limbs to his highs and lows. Jacob probably knew he and his dad were peas in a pod and I was pushing one of the peas out.

Last week there was a letter with the cheque. The bastard didn't have the guts to talk to me. I read the letter then food-processed it with a dash of oil, wishing it was him. There are gaps, white lies, but I can fill them in without too much trouble. We remind him of his other life. Going straight was a roller coaster that always ended up where it started. I want to shred what's left of his skinny carcass, but there is an echo in my head: he's gone straight, he's gone straight... He would never have bothered to write to me while he was high. Then, nothing really mattered except getting the taste on the bedside table ready to wake up to in the morning.

Someone else will get the straight Tim Sweeny. I got the crap one, the one who was always high or always low, never just right. But I can't hate him for it.

Number 640 South Road: The Theatre

Driving down Smith Street, on my way to work in the city, I shut the vents in my car. The pollen from the Plane trees, like yellow puffs of fibrous fairy floss, has bothered me since I was a child.

Faraj, one of my clients used to live on Smith Street and I briefly consider an unscheduled visit to try and unravel the mystery of why the child is homeless now, but it's a busy time of day for everyone so I decide against it.

Nearing the corner of South Road, where the theatre is, old memories settle over me. The curl of the purple and green ornamental façade, crumbling at the corners, the doors settled closed with rain-warped, drafty gaps. The empty billboard. Tunes whisper to me as I come closer, songs long gone and impossible to forget. Days of rehearsal and nights of fevered performance prickle my skin. People tucked close in the crowded backstage, hours of preparation in the green room, giggling leotard-clad girls and mothers fussing over hair and makeup.

The traffic is bad this morning, even on Smith, and I wonder if I will be late for work. I mentally check my diary for early appointments as orange cones direct traffic away from the theatre and squash us into one lane.

Sitting in the right lane, creeping forward towards the theatre, I watch a man in a hard hat yell instructions into a walkie-talkie, gesticulating aggressively to someone in a bobcat. Machinery, scaffolding and fences engulf the theatre.

Are they doing it up, or pulling it down?

I feel sick all day. As I talk to clients, I barely register any of it. I go through the motions; grant temporary extensions, book inspections, call Family Services three times. I try to retain a veneer of compassion. Faraj comes in again, but I still don't have anything to offer him so I send him away, knowing full well he might be sleeping in the park again tonight.

I knock off at five and race through the city, driving recklessly. Pulling up across the road, I watch from my car. The crane is still. The men in hard hats and bright jackets are gone—all but one. He wears a suit underneath his safety gear. He is looking up at the sky. Imagining what? Ten sterile storeys?

I jump out of the car and dodge the peak hour traffic to cross the road.

'Hey!' I call out.

His gaze drops from the monstrosity in his mind and turns to me.

'Hi.'

'What's going on?' I ask.

'We're tearing it down.'

The words registered brutally, as if they were wedged into my brain with a block splitter. I reach out and curl my fingers through the wire fence. The worn and patchy velvet on the chairs, the embellished wallpaper, the ancient splintery floorboards. All gone. The chandelier. Oh, the chandelier.

‘Are you OK?’ the man asks, obviously sensing an old duck like me might pass out any second of the day, forcing him to write up an incident report.

I ignore him and walk back to my car.

Sleep doesn’t come easily, but eventually I fall into a dreamless torpor that is broken by my canaries. They don’t care that it’s the weekend.

I shower, dress, eat and drive to the theatre.

It is quiet and Smith Street is deserted. The houses are silent, sitting placidly in the shade of the Plane trees. It’s still early; the frost is still on the grass. I walk to the stage door and try the gate: bolted and chained. I return to my car and haul out the heavy bolt cutters. After working in public housing for a lifetime you learn a trick or two. As I try the chain I wonder what will give first—my bones, or the hardened steel—then the lock snaps and I ease the gate open. Signs scream at me to WEAR SAFETY GEAR AT ALL TIMES and REPORT TO THE OFFICE BEFORE ENTRY TO SITE.

The alley behind the theatre is disgusting these days. Sheets of newsprint like urban tumbleweed. Corners used as a urinal and worse. Bits and pieces of shabby lives scattered into a windblown wound. In my sensible shoes, I pick my way through it to get to the stage door.

Not much has been done yet. It looks like they are still setting up the machinations of their destruction. The stage door is unlocked, presumably the locked gates are considered enough protection for the old building, so I walk into the dark corridor that leads to the green room. As a child I ran these corridors barefoot, leaping and laughing as we practiced the routines in any space we could find. Later I brought my own daughter here for her dance concerts.

The green room is a sad place; empty, hollow, cold. It was never decorated gloriously like the rest of the theatre, but had been filled with the warmth of a hundred bodies and needed nothing more.

I keep walking, leaving the green room, and find my way onto stage. I am ten again, dressed in flowing pink tulle and sequins, arms and legs smeared in orange Leg Tan, eyelids electric blue, hair scraped into a painful bun. I spin and stretch; each step is like putting on an old coat. Mum and Dad smiled when we took our bow. Their pride glowed like lanterns. We scampered off stage, in our excitement forgetting the strict instruction to exit stage left in a tidy line with toes pointed and chins high. That didn't matter. All that mattered were the waiting hugs.

Now, I sit on the boards and wind my arms around my waist, allow myself to be flooded with melancholy. Until a sound disturbs me. A bird, no doubt nesting in the old ruins. The birds will lose their home too. There will be no place for them in this new structure. I briefly consider trying to catch them but my husband won't tolerate any more strays being brought home. And my neighbours already complain about my squawking canaries.

Monday, Monday. It always comes around too fast. I take the quick route to work, unable to bear the thought of being stuck in traffic in front of the theatre as a wall crashes down. But by the end of the day my curiosity, and many years of habit, get the better of me.

The man is there again, looking up at the sky. Again. Either he has very little imagination or he is trying to predict the weather. I walk up to the fence and clutch the cold wire.

'Hi,' he says.

'Hi.'

‘It’s going to be beautiful. They’re calling it Theatre Apartments and there’ll be a monument.’

I scoff. ‘Huh!’

He looks at me closer.

‘Do you know this place?’

‘Better than you do if you think anything else could be more beautiful.’

‘But it’s crumbling. It’s dangerous. No one uses it anymore,’ he says.

‘You don’t throw things away because they are crumbling. You nurture things that aren’t strong,’ I say.

He pauses for a while, trying to understand. I can see he wants to. But he can’t. He lives in a world where things that aren’t perfect are replaced. He’s so young.

‘I’m Daniel,’ he says.

‘Coralie,’ I say as I walk away.

‘See you!’ he calls out.

I make it a habit. I drive the short way to work to make it easier to get through my day, and on the way home I go and see what layer they’ve torn down. Elements are thrown into bins to be reused or dumped. At least some of it will be recycled. The floorboards will be sanded and oiled and used to fancy-up some run-down Eastern suburbs mansion. The glass doors might be used by someone wanting to add character to their severe modern home. The ragged red velvet curtain will be dumped.

The man isn’t looking at the sky today. He is smiling at me.

‘I have something for you,’ he says.

He strides towards a pile of rubble at the back of the site.

‘Come to the side gate,’ he says. ‘I’ll let you in. You don’t need your bolt cutters this time,’ he winks.

He unlocks the new padlock, opens the gate, slips a fluoro jacket over my suit and puts a hard hat on my head.

‘Sorry, I’ll be fired if you don’t wear it.’

He is still smiling his goofy smile.

‘This way,’ he says.

We walk through the front doors, now just empty frames.

‘Watch your step,’ he says.

‘OK,’ I say, thinking that I couldn’t fall in this place in a million years; I know it too well. But he’s right. The floor isn’t there anymore—just struts and dull, tired dirt remain. I pick my way over it and follow him to the foyer.

‘I found this.’

He is shy now. His offering in his large, rough hands, held out to me.

‘I don’t know what it is, but it looked beautiful. I wanted...to save it.’

He holds a small brass fixture, newly polished. I don’t know exactly what it is either, or where it came from. I take it and its chill shivers through me.

‘Thank you,’ I say. It is an unknown piece of me, given back to me by this unknown man, and I am overwhelmed.

‘I didn’t want it to end up in a salvage shop. Don’t ask me why,’ he laughs nervously.

I smile at him and notice something different about his face that I can’t quite register.

Daniel and I talk every day; he tells me what they’ve done. It seems peculiar to me that so much care is taken to destroy something. They could have just put a bomb

under it. But as it turned out, the theatre is still a valuable commodity. In pieces anyway. Famous light fittings and rows of seats are to be sold at auction. Apparently there are people, past performers and patrons, who want to hold onto it more in its demise than its life.

One day Daniel comes to the fence with a look of sadness I've never seen before. Normally he is so invigorated by his work.

'What is it?' I ask.

'Coralie, tomorrow they blast whatever's left. I've grown quite attached to the place,' he laughs his nervous laugh. 'Do you want to come in? One last time?'

I do, I do. But. It will make it harder to walk away.

'No.' I say.

He looks like I've slapped him.

'Please come in. I want to show you something.'

I sigh and follow him in. As we pick our way through the rubble I say, 'We're all growing old, after all. I guess this will be your fate eventually, too.'

I'm talking to his back, but I see his steps slow. He doesn't speak til we reach the stalls.

'I'm supposed to have this disconnected by now...Wait here.'

He runs off to the back of the room and flicks a switch.

The darkness is obliterated and the theatre is washed in the crystal glow of the chandelier. Shadows are cast in patches but it is impossible not to see the place has been gutted and tortured.

Still, with the graceful light of the chandelier it seems almost unspoilt.

'They can't get it down. We've had experts come in from all over. They want to save it of course, it's worth a mint. Tomorrow we'll take it down with the crane and hope for the best. Weighs a tonne.'

The songs return to me like an echo. ‘The Good Ship Lollypop’ when I was just five. ‘Thriller’ when my daughter was twelve—her last performance before puberty got the better of her. Dozens in between. They course through me, wave upon wave. Applause. The acrid smell of Leg Tan and hairspray. Cheeks sore from smiling. Mum’s perfume when she hugged me, forgetting or not caring that I was covered in orange goo. Dad mimicking the steps in a hilarious melange, laughing as he tripped and stumbled. My senses drown me.

‘I know it sounds crazy but I like it in here at night. I hear things I can’t explain. Like it’s alive. That’s why I’m always here when you come by,’ he says.

‘It was never alive, it was the people that made it come to life.’

He walks back and stands next to me.

I reach out and take his rough, young hand.

Number 4/1: Lists

Today:

- *Above all else, I cannot have him.*
- *Just behind that in a very close second, I don't want him. I don't.*

At the pub, after work:

- *I came out of the toilets and he was standing there, his beer glass tipping slightly in his hand.*
- *I wiped my hands on my skirt to dry them properly. Just in case.*
- *He grabbed me by the waist as I walked past and pulled me in. I leaned against the wall next to him. He didn't take his arm away.*
- *We're the same height, he said.*

- *I'm in heels, I said.*

Last week:

- *He locked/stared at me, twice, in the lunchroom.*
- *We email-flirted on Tuesday AND Thursday.*
- *He fiddled with his wedding ring when we talked about the Monthly Report.*

Yesterday:

- *He looked so sad.*
- *He didn't talk to me all day.*

These are the parts I want:

- *He understands this piece of me that is small but I want to be bigger.*
- *By understanding that small part he **makes** it a little bigger, and he makes me better at growing it.*
- *His huge hazel eyes are rimmed with lashes so long they look like feathers.*
- *His long blonde hair makes him look like a surfer, even though he's not. (This is good, I don't like surfers. In my experience they are at best selfish and at worst pretentious and completely unaware of this.)*

These are the parts I don't want:

- *He is married. I don't want the married part of him.*
- *He has children. I don't want the father part of him.*

These are the contradictions that I have not yet decided on:

- *He controls every aspect of his life with precision. This allows him to be very good at many things. It also makes him frustrating because I will never be his equal. I am too messy, despite all these lists I write to try and become neat.*
- *My thoughts are messy things. I suspect his might sometimes be messy too but he would never let the world hear his unordered thoughts.
(Maybe he allows himself this luxury with his wife.)*
- *There are two things in his life that he doesn't control:*
 - *His shaggy blonde hair.*
 - *His drinking. I'm not sure which list to put this on. On the one hand, it is frightening. He might crash his car. Or his careful thoughtfulness will slip away like the disguise I fear it is and he will say something*

ugly. On the other hand, to see him be free is exhilarating. I want to be reckless with him. I want to get drunk with him.

These lists, the ones I've just written, don't comfort me. They are not simple enough. I would like to rewrite the above like this:

- *I do not want him.*
- *He frustrates me.*
- *I suspect there is ugliness under the surface.*
- *I do not want him.*

That is a comforting list; it is a list I can work with. It has a positive purpose, like all the best lists do. But it is also untrue and I cannot make it true by repeating it like a mantra or Blu-Tacking it to my fridge.

This is true:

- *Many times I have left him, quietly drunk at the bar, and gone home alone. It is possible to walk away from him.*
- *After a bender his hazel eyes are shot through with blood and not nearly as attractive. He is imperfect.*
- *Still I want to feel his lashes dusting gently over my face. I'm scared I'm in love with him.*

- *He has never turned ugly, not even a little bit.*

This morning:

- *He didn't come in to work.*
- *He spoke to Amira, which was a mistake.*
Everyone knows she's the office gossip.
- *Amira said: His wife is pregnant. Twelve weeks! She had to go to hospital. They think she's miscarrying. He was crying when he spoke to me. Crying like a baby! I could hardly make out what he was saying. I had to ask him to repeat everything! It was hideous. I felt like such a bitch, but I couldn't understand him!*

Tomorrow I need to start another list. I will call it:

Characteristics of The Man I Deserve.

Number 7 and Number 21: Scarlett's Shed

I'm old and deaf and have nothing to do. My daughter visits less now. She gave me the computer and sends me emails, which I loathe. I prefer slicing the dry fold of an envelope with a letter opener to pressing a button and waiting for the whirl of the machine. My daughter said, 'You never leave the house...at least with the Internet you can see what's going on with the world. You don't even need sound!' I have to admit that I have become a little obsessed with this World Wide Web. I can find out what's happening anywhere on the planet. War in Syria. Abductions in Africa. Mud slides in Peru. The planet is a mess, quite frankly.

I push the little button with the circle and line and wait for the machine to switch on.

It would be nice to read something harmless for a change from all this war and terror, so I go to the OnlineShopper website. I leave all the search boxes blank, except for location. There I enter *Smith Street*. I want to know what's going on in my neighbourhood. Is someone selling baby clothes? Maybe someone wants to buy a bookshelf. Perhaps someone is selling a guitar that has been discarded by an ungrateful teenager.

Two entries come up—one is Jill down the road who is always selling agaves she's propagated from her garden. And the other one is Scarlett's Shed.

Ad placed 6 months ago

Category: Outdoor

Sub Category: Sheds

Sub Category: Other

The shed has been made from corrugated iron, Mangrove Colourbond, very discreet, and has a solid iron roof. There are three steps up to enter the shed—you must be able to walk to enter.

There is no rust on the panels and there are no holes.

Inside the shed is fully lined with ply wood and red velvet wallpaper, providing a warm and sensual feel. The floor is fully carpeted with hard-wearing, easy-clean, commercial-grade carpet.

Fitted with electricity and running water, including a bathroom with spa and double shower. (Please note that you will be asked to shower in the shed prior to services being rendered, towels and soap are supplied.)

The shed is fitted with a king sized bed and other miscellaneous purpose-built equipment.

Please note that there is a side entrance off Jessie Street and your discretion is essential.

Phone Scarlett for an appointment to view the shed.

Price: \$200 p/h (note: ONO not accepted, extras charged accordingly)

Location: 21 Smith Street

Replies

Mike1968

I'd like to see a picture of the shed before I buy.

5/8/13

JesseJames69

saw the shed last week. top notch product, but a bit past its prime.

5/8/13

Stew9999

The latch on the gate sticks. You gotta jiggle it. Could do with some oil.

6/5/13

BobMcBobby

Is that a euphemism?

6/5/13

Stew9999

Nah mate.

7/8/13

BobMcBobby

I took some oil and fixed the gate. Scarlett's happy coz it doesn't bother the neighbours now.

JesseJames69, past its prime? Don't think so mate.

7/8/13

JesseJames69

i got standards mate.

7/8/13

BobMcBobby

Yeh, me too mate. And I know a good shed when I see one. Blokes like you don't know your sheds from your shoes.

7/8/13

Stew9999

McBobby I'm with you. Scarlett's is one of my favourite sheds.

7/8/13

BobMcBobby

Scarlett's shed is going on holidays. Closed until further notice.

28/11/13

Stew9999

You can't do that, McBobby. Scarlett, what's going on?

28/11/13

ScarlettsShed

Scarlett's Shed is still for sale. Business as usual.

28/11/13

BobMcBobby

Scar, what about Bali? I thought you were coming with me?

28/11/13

ScarlettsShed

Bob, darlin, what happens in the shed stays in the shed, including the fantasies we act out AND the dreams we talk about after.

SCARLETT'S SHED IS OPEN FOR BUSINESS

28/11/13

BobMcBobby

Some dreams are bigger than your shed, Scar. I had dreams for us that are bigger than it seems you can imagine.

28/11/13

ScarlettsShed

ALL DREAMS COME TRUE IN SCARLETT'S SHED.

BUSINESS AS USUAL ;)

28/11/13

TonyTone01

Make my shed dreams come true, 10pm tonight?

28/11/13

ScarlettsShed

TonyTone01 all bookings done by phone, please call me.

I go for a walk. Mercifully, it is a bitterly cold day and there is no one around as I make my way to number 21.

It looks just like any other house. In fact it looks almost the same as mine. Built around the same time, possibly the same builder. The frontage is the same cream brick and I can identify the main bedroom on the left and lounge room on the right, with a corridor down the middle. I can imagine the entire floor plan, even the decor. It could have been my house, except that the front yard is a shambles of weeds and rampant couch grass. It's funny that I'd never really noticed the house before—it's nonchalant, if a house can have such a demeanour, or any demeanour at all. It looks like it doesn't care what you think of it and dares you to pay it any attention at all. Maybe I'm being fanciful—a house can't have a demeanour. But the curtains are all drawn, silent, like a secret, a cat on the still-warm bonnet of your car in the winter; if it could talk it would say *mind your own business and leave me alone*.

I turn down Jessie Street. The Shed can be seen from Jessie Street, even though the house faces onto Smith. I can only assume Scarlett had a gate installed on Jessie Street so that her patrons have direct access to the shed and didn't need to enter through the house. But Jessie Street, being one of those small utility streets that

is all backs-of-houses, has the benefit of anonymity. Residents only end up on Jesse Street once a week, when they put their smelly bins out. I walk up to the gate and examine the lock. It has not been oiled in a while. Dried up grease has attracted grime from the road and gummed up the lock. I feel sad for BobbyMcBobby, his greased latch neglected along with his heart.

It occurs to me that I have the right to feel angry or indignant, but although I can access those emotions as *ideas*, I can't summon them as *feelings*. I find it impossible to care, although there is a small flicker in my heart for poor Bobby taking his trip to the mountains of Bali alone.

I turn back to Smith Street in time to see a figure disappear into the front door of Scarlett's house. It has to be Scarlett—all I can see is a tangle of red hair, fluorescent like fireworks, trailing down her back as she passes through the gaudy green door. She's left a grocery bag on the porch and the door reopens, pushed by buttocks, and Scarlett reaches down to pick up the bag. She sees me staring at her. She winks at me, grabs the bag and disappears inside.

I feel like I've been the one who's been discovered.

Number 3/1: Promise

The rain that came two days before did nothing for the powdery earth. Footprints from naked and sandaled feet skip towards patches of shade under ancient and lively fig trees.

Stages are set and the timbre of unfamiliar music draws people in. Dry and dusty bodies ignore the heat and move as one to rhythms they understand and words they don't.

A young couple embrace and move to the sound of African drums, their bodies like vines. Their mouths, a breath apart, smile and seduce each other with unspoken words: we will dance, we will be free, we will live in love.

A woman dressed in purple hemp totes her children through the dust, one on her hip, the other holding her hand. All three are weak with heat and fatigue but stop to hear the arresting sounds of a Didgeridoo.

Across town, in a flat on Smith Street, a baby cries. The woman walks out of the house and down the street, under the canopy of the Plane trees. She keeps walking and the cries are gone. She reaches Main South Road, finds a pub, puts down ten bucks and orders beer. She hums a tune that brings back a pleasant, distant feeling.

The song transports her and she starts to feel the memories trickle through her like a warm shiver.

A man enters through the unlocked door and hears the crying. By now it is subdued, rhythmic, pleading. He searches the house and finds the baby in her cot, alone. He picks her up and says, 'Fuck it,' when he smells her nappy.

He debates what to do. He's been at work all day. And she's down the pub again.

The front door swings open and the smell of beer forewarns him. He puts the child in her arms and walks out.

She wasn't ready. The beer has loosened her grip and the baby slips to the floor with a thud.

The woman cries as finally she feels something other than a blanket of fog. There is nothing left to do.

Darkness is falling on the festival dust. Tranquil, satiated crowds meander out through gaps in temporary cyclone fences. People are smiling, arm in arm with strangers and friends.

The young couple, deep in cavernous desire, grasp each other in the twilight of a shady hollow, moving to echoes of sounds, promising themselves they will always remember this.

The mother carries both her sleeping children—one on her back, one in her arms—past the lovers and smiles to herself as she remembers being free. The songs of her youth flutter through her mind, familiar as a smile on a friend's face.

Across town, a woman who has become a mother holds her baby too tight and weeps. The sound reverberates around her flat but doesn't leave its walls. The sirens come.

Number 9/1: Ferris Bueller, James Stewart and Buddha

The wet heat dragged my bones to the ground in a soggy war of attrition. Two hundred and sixty-eight steps; I'd climbed forty of them. The huge bronze Buddha loomed over me, his serenity irritating, his raised right hand supposedly signalling the removal of affliction, but only when you got to the top. A cruel joke. I was afflicted alright.

I remembered a line from *Rear Window*, a remnant from a Film Studies class: 'You'd think the rain would've cooled things down. All it did was make the heat wet.' I adored that line and had had a little crush on Jimmy Stewart from then, just for the wry way he uttered those words. That was writing. And here I was, supposedly 'experiencing life' in order to be able to write about it, and all I could do was rehash a line from a movie that was nearly sixty years old. Maybe everything *had* been said before. Maybe all the world was left with was bits and pieces that we could chop up and reconstitute, like the orange juice in my hostel this morning, to find something 'new'.

As I pondered this I climbed another 40 steps. My footsteps had a metronome-like effect, keeping my stream of consciousness thoughts flowing,

editing odd memories together like film clippings. I see Ferris, leaning in to kiss me. I see the back of his head, bowed over a sketchpad, his hair tucked, then falling free, tucked, then falling free from behind his ear as he draws with a pencil that he brutalises with the force of his grip. I see him tell me goodbye. He is crying.

Furiously I tell myself I'm halfway there, or thereabouts. Step one hundred and thirty-three. Four. Five. Past halfway. I stomp Ferris from my mind and try to laugh at the absurdity of his mother naming him after a character in a film who is basically a charming teenage con man. Ferris doesn't live up to his namesake—his earnestness is his downfall. His ardent adherence to personal truth. That's why he dumped me—I didn't fit his image of his personal truth. That's actually what he said to me, 'You don't fit my image of my personal truth.' Has anyone ever been dumped in a more pretentious way than that? But maybe that's what Ferris Bueller was all about after all—only *his* personal truth was bludging school, and my Ferris's is dedicating himself to his art like some 1950s Parisian god-complex genius.

Two hundred and fifty. I'm sweating salt and blood now. I stare at that raised right hand and ask it to take away the affliction of my raging glutes and searing calves *NOW*. But Buddha has more important things on his mind and maybe I should save my moment of salvation for my greater need.

At the top the lack of serenity disturbs me. There are more people here than in central Kowloon, or so it seems. Everyone is here to either worship or be vicarious about other's worshipping. I wipe the sweat from my brow—a useless waste of time—and begin the unanticipated task of walking *around* the giant Buddha, passing by his protectors—the Six Devas. I pause at the Deva who represents morality. I look at her and ask: what is more moral—following personal truth or allowing yourself to love someone? She doesn't know. Or at least, she doesn't answer me.

I sit in her shade because I can't think of what else to do. I'm here now, this was the goal, to make it to Tian Tan and sit in awe and wait for inspiration. Or salvation. I can only wait as long as my bottle of water and snack sized packet of peanuts lasts. I don't have the endurance of the Buddha.

Shutting my eyes against the crowd, I allow myself to indulge in memories. He did love me, he *does* love me, but he isn't ready for me or what I represent. I hate those people—*old* people—who tell me I am young and it will pass. Like my love for Ferris is a kidney stone. These are the same people who tell me that nothing feels like it does when you are young. Nothing is as intense, nothing is as important as being in love when you are twenty. So why should I want that to pass? So that I can grow old and disappointed?

Memories of Ferris keep pushing in. We have just made love and we are sweaty, like I am now. It was a hot summer's day and my skin itched, red raw from his stubble. Next we are driving home from a movie, arguing about whether Leonardo di Caprio is the real deal yet—or if he ever will be. Of course we didn't agree, but it hardly matters now.

It always ends with Ferris crying and saying goodbye. It is the unresolvableness of it that keeps it stuck in the groove. I don't understand how he can love me but need to be away from me. It's selfish. He's telling me to go without releasing me.

The Buddha's crowds are thinning—the sky is brooding darkly, preparing to pour down monsoonal rain. Before it was drizzle; now, it is working up to something much bigger. I welcome it, wait for it. The darker it gets the emptier the monument is, until I am all that is left. Just me, Buddha and his six mistresses. The sky opens and pelts me. I am used to dry places where rain is a novelty, and this is awesome. I mentally file away the feelings—the comparative gentleness of the large drops on my

arms and the shock and awe of it covering my face, the dripping clothes that had *seemed* wet before, the smell of damp dirt rising up from two hundred and sixty-eight steps below like a tangible mist of decay—and wonder if I will ever use these descriptions. The novel I'm supposed to be writing gets further from me every day.

Not many people get to experience Shao Lin in solitude; maybe this is Buddha's gift to me. Strangely, the rain is louder than the hundreds of people who were here half an hour ago. There was a reverence about that bustle. Now, a person could be hacked to a screaming death and the sound of it wouldn't carry a metre. I think about James Stewart in *Rear Window* looking into the apartments across the way. Observing his neighbours, tracking their moves, cataloguing their suspicious behaviours and coming up with a conclusion: his neighbour, Raymond Burr, had killed his wife and buried her in the courtyard. I wonder what he would make of me, if he were watching me now. Could he tell from the painful contortions of my brow, mouth, nose and eyes, that I am experiencing a kind of death too? That I'm exorcizing Ferris up here, leaving him to live with the Buddha and his girls, where ardency and earnestness are more of an asset than in the real world.

The monsoonal rain stops as suddenly as it started. I smear the rain from my face and nibble on my damp, saltless peanuts as people below begin the ascent again. I feel the implacable urge to write but my paper and pencil are soggy and my eyes, which I have rubbed raw, won't focus. I stand. I will walk again. One step at a time. Grace Kelly would not approve of me sitting here in a dirty puddle, moping about a man who doesn't love me quite enough.

Number 90: Kind of Blue: Doug

A large rectangular leather box is beside me. The yellowed stitching is fraying and it reminds me of Florence's dress. Birds the colour of an overcast sky swoop at my car windshield. People in small swimming clothes sit under colourful rain sticks on the sand.

I open the leather box. Inside is an instrument I can play but not name. I take it out and put it to my lips. My fingers twitch in patterns, up and down, up and down. There is something old in them. I perfect my embouchure and blow. Fingers go up and down, up and down. The overcast birds stop attacking my car and fly away. Tasteless critters don't like jazz.

Every note from *Kind of Blue* comes to me like a gift but I can't remember how to get home. I throw the useless instrument onto the passenger seat. My empty hands are blotchy, papery and crumpled. Nails yellow, too long and brittle. These hands have their own knowledge aside from my pitiful brain; of jazz and blues and a woman called Florence.

I get out of the car and walk to the sand. It's hot and there are people everywhere. I go from towel to towel, looking under the rain sticks.

'Florence! *Flossy!*' I yell.

Children see me and cry.

We got married on a day like this. Florence wore blue and looked like the sky. We danced for hours to Miles Davis.

She is not here.

In 1959 Florence's blue dress had tiny fabric-covered buttons from her neck to the floor. My fat but nimble fingers undid each of them: she became my symphony. An azure butterfly, her dress floated to the floor. I imagined her naked belly swelling with the babies we wanted and time stopped.

So much has been taken.

Number 40: Milk Cup

‘Ava, when you ask for something, use your Mighty Girl Voice, not your Mouse Voice,’ I say.

Ava is talking lots now, but when she asks for something it is in such a quiet voice that I have to strain and lean in to hear her.

‘Milk please, Mumma,’ she repeats. Her voice is still so small that I can barely understand.

‘I can’t hear you, darling. Speak up. Remember, Mighty Girl Voice. You are a Mighty Girl!’ I put one hand on my hip and the other, fist clenched, I raise to the ceiling.

She looks at me like I’m a bit mad.

I sigh and pass her the milk cup.

Number 25: He Said/She Said

Her: This conversation gouges tracks in my brain. It makes my synapses bleed just to *think* about talking about this again.

Him: You and your bloody tracks and synapses. Can't you speak like a normal human being for once?

Her: OK, here's something you might understand. *Nothing with you ever changes!*

Him: I'm an optimist. My glass is always half full.

Her: My eyes are half shut. I'm so bored. Bored with you. Bored with this argument. I need to sleep now. Tomorrow we will wake up and pick up where we left off. And next week, and next month. We go in circles. Over and over.

Him: Maybe *that's* what the celebrant meant...

Her: What? You're mumbling again.

Him: The celebrant. When he gave us the rings and said it symbolised the circular nature of love.

Her: He was an idiot. You are an idiot.

Him: He was a good man, may he rest in peace.

Her: Don't worry, he's resting in peace. He got the prime spot on the red velvet club chair. He's eating grapes that were peeled by Botoxed angels. His toenails are being nibbled by grooming mice who have been starved of cheese for this very purpose. His shoulders are being massaged by gnarly fingered deviants who have been released from hell on temporary visas. His—

Him: I want a divorce.

Her: Well. That's new.

Number 12/2: Into the Rain

He swirled his beer inside the sweaty glass. Froth spilled over, dribbling down and wetting his fingers. She took them off the glass and licked them clean. Withdrawing his hand, he tipped the rest of the beer into his mouth, swilling it around. He stood, waved and walked away.

‘It’s done, you know,’ she called, her voice spiking with hurt.

He flicked his collar up against the cold. Rain spat on his glasses. He took them off and put them in his pocket, tucked his chin into his chest for a while, then decided it was pointless. He pushed his collar down, unbuttoned his shirt. Let it in, what the hell, he thought.

A busker sheltered in an abandoned doorway, plucking his recycled guitar, his toes resting on the peak of the baseball hat he used for donations.

The song stopped him in his tracks. He found a note in his pocket and placed it in the hat, under a coin so it wouldn’t blow away.

When the song was finished, he spoke.

‘You like that song?’

‘Nah, it’s just easy to play,’ the busker said.

He was tempted to take the note back, but he just walked away.

The new songs were too sad to be sung by buskers in doorways and laneways he thought; only sad folks alone in their bedrooms would attempt them. People searching for meaning amongst the overwhelming proof that there was none.

Street lights lit his way through the grubby urban tangle. He took a shortcut through the park, past the rotunda where people got married in sunshine and rain, and walked into the darkness and the bats. He found a spot under a tree, dryish, and sat.

She'd once told him he'd dreamt something into life, and she was right. Now it was real and had to face up to the world. How does something created from darkness live in light?

He picked up a fallen leaf and crushed it. The damp brown papier mache stuck to his hand.

A little way away a bottle fell onto a path and smashed. A shuffle and giggle, then bodies crashed to the dirt.

He got up.

The park led to the sea and he stood at the cliff top listening to familiar inky waves he couldn't see. Leaning against the guard rail, he pushed into the wind.

Gulls flew against the weather in suspended animation.

'Thought you'd be here. I s'pose this is your spot. Your Inspiration Point.'

He turned.

'Something like that. I wrote the album here. Well, in my head I was here. Even when I was in a hotel room or a bus or on Smith Street, or...'

'You can say it. With Audrey.'

'Yeah.'

'Is this where it happened?'

'Nah.'

‘I was sure it was here...“you stood at the edge of the land/you wouldn’t take my hand”.’

‘That’s just a lyric.’

‘Oh. Hey, the rain’s stopped. I’m freezing, let’s go home. We can throw figs at the old bat in Number 7 and freak her out. C’mon, it’ll be fun!’

She held her arm out to him, wiped a spot of rain from her cheek and shivered before folding her arms around her waist.

‘C’mon, we’ll stoke the radiator, make some coffee and put on Otis Redding. He always makes you smile,’ she said.

She made their place on Smith Street sound like home, but it wasn’t. Neither was she, despite her best efforts. He hadn’t hidden any of it from her, the story had been in the papers after all. But she didn’t seem to care that he was broken by it. She still saw something left in him that could be coddled back. Perhaps she was right. Maybe another place and another person might feel like home again.

He stepped towards her and wrapped her up in his wet jacket.

‘Figs? Where’re we gonna find figs?’ he said.

Number 638 South Road: The Bedside Cinema

The Bedside Cinema, opposite the old theatre they are pulling down, used to be a church but the priests abandoned the building and in came the porn stars. They kept the pews and the pulpit, for those patrons with God issues, and added a silver screen.

Sitting in the back row, underneath the projectionist's booth, I can see the smoke stains from the votive candles.

I catch an unexpected smell and look around to see where it's coming from. It smells like fire. The whole audience—there are seven of us day-time viewers—notice. It takes everyone's eyes from the screen at a critical moment in the 'plot', if you know what I mean. A man in the front row stands, puts his hands on his hips—I can see the silhouette of his erection—and swings his torso from side to side as he looks for the source of the smell. Others follow suit—showing off their erections, putting their hands on their hips and swaying their torsos. Like some sort of horny aerobics warm up.

I don't have an erection to show off. (In fact, I have been questioning why I still come to this place. It never seems to do anything for me anymore.) I stay in my seat, which makes me look guilty. Everyone stops swaying and points their erections at me. It is very threatening.

Their stares incriminate me and I want to say something. ('It's OK, I didn't summon the fire. It wasn't me!') ('Do you think we are damned?') But I keep my mouth shut and spin my head from side to side, looking from the vestibule to the pulpit, seeking answers. The men, hands still on hips, turn to look at each other in a coordinated movement that is so silken that it might just be preordained.

Light flickers behind them as the movie splutters and splurges through the first orgasm scene, and white overtakes flesh as whole frames disappear into blinding silvery nothingness. The amplified moans and groans stop and start as the movie flickers in and out until the woman and her fireman have disappeared into a hot glow, illuminating every dust mote on every pew and every frayed edge of velvet curtain and every votive candle smoke stain on the wall. The light fills the room with heat too, and, as panic starts to rise, I understand the strange smell—the film has burned up, it has been razed as it whirled through the spool, too hot for its own good.

Intense light spills from the projection room. I stand (my fear of being burned alive has finally overtaken my embarrassment at not being aroused) and run out from under the projection room to get a better look at what is going on. The others, who are no longer pointing with their genitals, follow my gaze. Our heads lift to the high raked ceilings, into the room where the images are projected onto the screen, from which a pure light is emanating gloriously. It is not fire, it is too bright. I squint and shield my eyes from the searing light. The others are all in prayer, heads bowed against the glare. Or perhaps they are cowering in fear.

Then the light splits, a peach's flesh under a knife, and a figure appears in the booth. A woman.

'It's the woman from the film!' someone calls.

'You're an idiot!' I say to the man. 'Are you OK up there?' I call up to the projection room.

She waves, or at least I think she's waving. Then a burst of white smoke comes from her hands and I realise she's waving a fire extinguisher over the flames of the celluloid.

'Can I help you? How can I get up there?' I yell at her, but she ignores me. I wouldn't want me up there either, if I was her. It's obvious I'm a creep.

I race to the back of the theatre, push open the door that says 'No Entry Staff Only,' and follow the flight of stairs up to the projection booth. The smoke gets thicker with each step, the smell of burning film acrid and abrasive. Opening the door to the booth, smoke billows out like a parachute filling with air, covering me, suffocating.

'Are you OK?' I yell again.

'Over here!' she shouts back. I fight my way through the smoke to get to the other side of the booth.

She passes me an extinguisher and I fumble with it, inept and useless, as usual, at important tasks. Finally I figure out the pin, and depress the handle and the white powder billows out. Like water from a fire hose, it throws me against the wall. But the fire is dying out and the woman grabs me by the arm.

'C'mon let's get out of here. There's too much smoke.'

Following her down the stairs, I'm convinced she is some kind of superhero. Back on ground, the sirens wail in the near distance.

'Kind of ironic, don't you think?' I say to the woman. 'A film about firefighters, and here we are...'

'Not really,' she says and turns to walk towards the fire chief.

Her disdain is obvious and it stings. But what do I expect? She's a superhero and I'm a creep and a weirdo and just smart enough to know it, which makes me the worst kind of creepy weirdo.

I hang around to answer the firefighter's questions, and then the police's questions and overhear conversations about the place being beyond repair, likely to be demolished. Looking along Smith Street, the Plane trees are in full orange glory and I'm glad the fire didn't spread. Those leaves would have been perfect tinder and it looks like such a nice place to live, aside from the smouldering old church cum porno theatre on the corner.

Number 16: Tim and Alice—Fast Forward

Alice

Nearly forty. Husband MIA. Body no longer firm. If only I'd known then what I know now. Now my traitorous skin gives me plenty to care about but I just don't. I don't care.

Break away. Rerun. Reinvent.

The kids stay at Mum's, although Anabelle is disgusted at the idea—she's twelve and thinks she's old enough to be on her own. She probably is, there was never an older twelve year old than Anabelle, with all that she's seen. The older she gets, the more capable, the more I want to wrap her up. I never did it when she was a kid; I was brave then. Now I feel her slipping away and I want to pull her in.

Turning the Top 40 music up loud, I dress and dance around my room like a teenager. It's a kick in the teeth to Tim. He hated that music, or anything that was designed to make you feel good, or at least not to think. Freedom wells in me making my toes tingle. My house is a blur as I spin—the green silk cushions my grandma made when she was a young wife, the lacy sheers that I've always hated, the floral carpet that is so pounded down by feet that it's almost as hard as floorboards. The

vinyl couch Tim brought to our first shared house, the only piece of furniture he ever owned. We used to slip off it in the summer, our sweat pooling in the creases. Now one of the seams is torn and every day I poke the stuffing back in. It can't be restitched and can't be thrown out, and I get the analogy, really I do. I stop spinning and look at the tear. I touch it, run my fingers down the hard, shiny edge, feeling the indents scratch my finger where the stitching left gouges. In the winter Tim would pre-warm the vinyl with a blanket or a quilt. He always stretched out first, warming a patch and then moving over to make space for me. I grab at the torn bit of fabric and I rip it. It tears down the seam and stops. It won't come off. I pull and tug and scream at it. I pull out the stuffing and throw it to the floor. He's finally, actually, truly gone.

Outside the Plane trees whisper secrets to each other. They don't believe me, they don't believe that I can say goodbye.

Number 91: Four Forgotten Objects

Packing up a house, more than anything, is an exercise in dust and grime. You have to enter all those nooks and crannies you've avoided for years, the places where you've put things in order to forget about them. This dust, you realise, is mostly made up of particles of skin left behind by you and your family. Microscopic reminders, genetic markers, proof of life.

Secondary to the immediate, tactile demands of this dirt is the more reflective experiment in letting go. You quickly discover the things you are capable of leaving behind. The empty space you create is slowly filled with a seeping ache. Without it, this thing made of plastic or wood, you are not quite yourself. Things remind you that forgetting is impossible.

Back then I told people my name was Sandra, and even the teachers entered into this lie. Towards the end of high school my life appeared remade, but Sandra was window dressing. Shellacked like the tables and pianos Dad restored for a living. Time after time I'd watched as Dad ground down ridges with pumice and filled gaps

with bee's wax before polishing over the top, but I polished over myself before the ridges and gaps had been filled.

June 1964: The Beatles are in town. I stuff my mother's work uniform and our best white towels into my school bag. Adelaide is powerless to defend itself against the mania. The police are taut, and my all-girls school is in the news: the gates are locked and there are threats of expulsion for any student who joins the mob in town. Headlines call it 'Adelaide's prison school'.

I don't care if I get expelled. I'm in my leaving year so it makes no difference; my parents expect me to get a job in a shop. Jumping off the school bus, I wave goodbye to my friends and walk away from the school gates and into the city.

Pushing into the muscular knot of the crowd I am subsumed by bodies. The bracing and shoving, the firm hands of the police maintaining lines, the heels shaving ankles as girls and women jostle for position, the elbows and unladylike scowls, the enlarged, expectant eyes, the squeals and hysteria. I am indistinguishable amongst two hundred and fifty thousand people.

I get changed into my mother's cleaner's uniform in the John Martins dressing room and skulk around to the back entrance of the South Australian Hotel. No one notices me. I climb the service stairs and look into each hallway until I come to a busy and energised floor. I take the fresh white towels from my bag and make my way towards the room where the windows overlook the street.

'*Entschuldigen,*' I say, forgetting myself for a moment. 'Excuse me, please.'

They part without seeing me.

'Housekeeping!' I say, knocking on the door.

A man opens it and strides back to the window.

Standing in the doorway, my arms full of white towels, I take in every detail. The floral upholstered club chairs, bulbous yellow and brown lamp shades, strewn suitcases, empty tea cups. Everything seen through a haze of cigarette smoke. The unBeatleness of it all is breathtaking. A couple of men are chatting and looking out the window onto the madness below. There are no Beatles, there isn't even music playing. I don't know why, but I expected to hear 'Please Please Me'.

Finally someone notices me.

'Hey, love, can I help ya?'

'I have fresh towels. Where should I leave them?'

'I'll take 'em.'

He walks over to me and tries to take the towels, but I tighten my grip and he figures me out.

'Alright, so, who'r you 'ere for, then?'

'What? I mean, pardon?'

'Which one o' them, eh? I can get you an autograph, if you don't make a fuss.'

'Fuss' sounds like 'fooss' with his accent and I can no longer speak. I nod like a maniac, my head bouncing up and down like I am trying to shake it loose. As I reach into my pocket to get the notebook and pen, the mood in the room shifts and the noise lowers to a hum. I know what this means: it is John.

'Ave you ever seen anything like it? Ever? It's like we're tossin' tenners out the window at the track! It's choss down there!'

Someone by the window, unaware of the holy presence in the room, has spoken loudly. A collective breath is drawn, as we all wait for John to respond. He doesn't. He ambles past them all, towards the door, towards me. He has something in his hand.

He looks me in the eye and I remember the seasick feeling I had on the boat to Australia. He takes the towels from my hands and passes me the thing he is holding: a shellac-covered cufflink.

‘Can you see if they can fix this for me, love?’ he says in that sing-song way he has and turns and walks away, carrying the towels, back to the adjoining room.

I close my hand around it, shut my eyes and tip my head back to the ceiling, thanking the god of rock and roll for this gift. With this one small thing I have solid proof of who I really am.

I am a Beatles fan.

Someone closes the door. I didn’t get my signature, but I have an item that belonged to John Lennon. I study it. There is a chip in the shellac finish.

I watch the news with my parents. I don’t tell them where I’ve been and when they ask me about school I lie, making up stories about being one of the girls shaking my fists at the gate, demanding to be set free. My parents tut-tut and sigh, unable to understand having a fire in your belly for something so silly. When they were my age, their country was at war. I hope Mum doesn’t notice the missing towels.

After dinner I go out to Dad’s workshop and turn on the light. I fiddle with his brushes and tins, smell the metho, benzyl and turps that he uses so frequently that they have become his aura—there is nothing of skin and sweat in his smell, it is all ethanol and turps, whether he is in the workshop or not. His fingers and the rims of his fingernails are the deep red brown of Australian Jarrah, so profoundly stained that the colour never comes out, no matter how much he scrubs.

I run my hand over the old, soft fabric of the drop sheets he uses to protect finished furniture. I slide my hand under the sheet and along the exquisite surface of a table top: the gloss is fine, feather-like: my hand is gliding on a warm film of ice.

I take the cufflink out of my pocket. Dad could make it good as new. Better.

There is a soft knock on the door.

‘*Kann Ich reinkommen, bitte?*’ Dad asks, even though I am in *his* workshop.

‘*Ja,*’ I say.

He comes in and swaps to English, a sign that he is pleased with me.

‘Vat are you doing out here, Stella?’

‘Just thinking.’

He sees the cufflink in my hand and takes it, inspects it, turns it over, runs his fingertips over every surface. Somehow his fingertips are simultaneously coarse and smooth; veined with deep calloused cracks and polished with Jarrah.

‘Very bad vorkmanship. No vonder it’s *kaput*. Who gave this to you?’

‘Oh, I just found it,’ I lie. Lies are so easy now.

‘I can fix it, you vant me to? It could look very nice. Ve can make the colour better, even. Do you have the other one?’

‘No, I don’t. I don’t want it fixed, it’s ok.’

He gives it back.

‘I vould never make something so poor. They should be ashamed, selling such rubbish.’

He rolls the ‘r’ in rubbish to show his contempt.

I tighten my grip on the cufflink until I can feel its imprint in the fleshy part of my palm, and kiss Dad on the cheek.

‘*Gute Nacht,* Dad,’ I say as I walk back to the house.

In my room, I pull out a small box that I have secreted under my bed. It was one of the few things we brought from Germany, and like everything else we brought with us—accents, history and shame—I have hidden it. I wipe the dust away from the wooden carving on top: stained red, yellow and black, the flowers are absurdly

nationalistic. Inside are the treasures I'd been unable to leave behind. A small doll with raggedy hair and a palm-sized leather money pouch with a few silver Reichsmark. The coins feel hot in my hand, like they hold the fire of evil right there on those embossed swastikas and eagles. I put the coins back in the pouch and lay the cufflink next to them. I pick up the doll; her tangled hair catches on my broken fingernail. I smooth her hair in long slow strokes.

The next day at school my friends want to know whether my crazy plan worked. I tell them about John Lennon taking the towels from my hands, from my very own hands. They don't believe me, of course. Who would? But despite their accusations of bald-faced lies, I'm not tempted to tell them about the cufflink, not even for a moment.

The Smith Street house is too big and old for me now. It's taken weeks to pack up. Finally the only room left to tackle is the storage room, where I find these things, forgotten for over fifty years. The small wooden box, the doll, the silver coins and John Lennon's shellac cuff link.

I wonder at how, for so long, I needed these items, and then forgot them suddenly as an adult, when life got busy and parenthood took over. But holding the Reichsmark I remember that keeping it was a kind of mental self-flagellation. By contrast, the doll confirmed that I was a child, I had not been responsible, I had not even been born. These two items—the coin and the doll—cancelled each other out. The wooden box, which was beautiful with its intricate carving and bold nationalistic flair, allowed me to see some good in my heritage, if I could just look past the shame. The box tipped the scale.

And the cuff link, well there was nothing complex about that: I was a Beatles fan.

I stopped stockpiling objects soon after that day I met Lennon, although I suppose this house is a collected thing, as well as a repository of all the other collected things. Family, vases, sheets, coffee cups, photos have all been collected inside these walls. And now I have to distil all these things down to three rooms' worth so that I can fit in the unit. What would Lennon say, if he hadn't been killed that day? Something about my attachment to possessions? Maybe. But I like to think he'd understand.

Number 90: Kind of Blue: Florence

I'd cut up Doug's sausages, mashed his potato with butter and dried chives, and cooked the peas and carrots until they were too soft. Our little dining room is dark now; the mottled pink Formica table is half in shadow.

As always, when Doug is late, I fret. Why didn't I put my foot down about the driving? The problem's not the forgetting, it's how the forgetting makes him feel.

Car wheels crunch the gravel in the driveway and my skin tightens.

He curses as he fumbles with his keys. I scuttle to the door as fast as these old legs will go and let him in.

'Hello, dear. How did it go?'

'Do you think I can't open my own front door, woman?'

He slings his trumpet to the floor. It hits the side table and dents the wall. I follow him to the bedroom.

'Are you hungry?'

'I let them down again. A three-piece with two players.'

'Doug, they understand.'

His face constricts and releases like a contorted heart at the word 'understand' and his eyes burn at me.

Of all the changes, the carelessness with which he treats his trumpet surprises me the most. It had been his third arm, his great love, not to mention his income, for over fifty years. There was a time when he treated it as though it was as delicate as fairy floss. There was a time he treated me that way too. He used to call me My Fragile Flossy, and I let him do it because we both knew it was ironic.

I pick up the instrument and put it in the cupboard. On the carpet there's a small chip of paint from the wall. Another fracture, another token to collect.

Back at the bedroom, the door is closed.

'Shall I put your dinner in the microwave?' I ask through the door.

Doug pulls the door open, pushes me aside and strides to the kitchen. He picks up the plate and throws it at the wall. Mash splatters and sausage slides. Peas roll and carrots drop. The plate is melamine. I've learned not to use china.

He shoves me against the wall too, my scapulas press and feet slip. He pushes his forearm across my throat, the skin-sheathed bone of his arm juts into my windpipe. He stares at me like he doesn't know who I am, then releases me and walks away.

Shaking, I clean up his mess.

In bed, sleep doesn't come for a long time. Then Doug is on top of me and his weight forces the air from my lungs.

'Doug, stop, please,' I beg.

Doug's body is old and frail, his muscles long depleted, but so are mine. He grabs my shoulders and violence contorts his face. I don't like to use the word rape, but there is no other word for it, even though he is my husband and he is so very unwell.

When Doug is finished with me he sits on the edge of the bed. He takes the glass of water from the bedside table, has a sip, then smashes the glass on the

bedhead. This is new and my heart gives a jagged flutter. His hand is cut and droplets of blood fall onto the quilt cover, mixing to pink in the spilt water.

He studies the broken glass in his hand and even his blood seems slow to come, melancholy. Sitting up, a piece of glass pierces the palm of my hand.

Doug's bleeding doesn't stop so I find the antiseptic and bandaids. When I get back, he hasn't moved. I gently dab his cuts. He flinches, but remains impassive. The bandaids will rupture his old skin when they have to be peeled off, but those cuts won't heal on their own.

'I don't think you'll need stitches,' I say. 'Let's go back to sleep. We're going to the Barossa tomorrow, remember?'

The word 'remember' is a mistake.

The Park: Faraj

Tonight is cold, for spring. There were no clouds in the day, and from this I know it will be a cold night. There is a park I can go to where no one will be, a safe place, but the wind comes through there.

At Smith Street the faces were cold but the bed was warm. Ahmad did not want me. In Kabul we would not have been friends. We would have walked past each other on the street and I would have looked to the ground to avoid his eyes. He might have spat at my shoes. But here, we have something in common. We are asylum seekers.

Ahmad expects me to be his slave because he is older than me and because his skin is lighter than mine and because, back in Afghanistan, he was from a tribe that slaughtered my tribe. But I tell him here no one talks about ancient tribes and history seems very short. Here, the tribes are different. Football Team Coloured tribes. Size-of-Your-House tribes. Cost-of-Your-Car tribes.

Ahmad and I could not forget the history that lives in our bones. That history was told to us in dangerous words after dinner, since we were alive. We cannot live in that little flat and pretend we have no history.

On the street here it is also better to not look at anyone in the eye. At least here I don't have to face Ahmad's scowls and his threats that as soon as his wife arrives I will be out on the street. Better to be out now.

Opposite the park is a hospital where people go to be healed and doctors drive in and out in Mercedes Benz and Porsches. But in the park there is darkness and there are tall trees with dry leaves. There is some shelter, although the wind does not stop, rushing through like *whoosh* of a bomb.

I sit on my backpack. The cold coming through the ground is old and it goes into my bones too, just like the stories from Kabul.

There is a shuffle in the trees and I know that it is not wind. I grab my backpack and stand. I thought this place was alone. Maybe I can sit in the hospital waiting room until the nurses look at me like they want to call the police.

'Hey, lad! What're you doin' here?'

The voice comes from behind me and I stop. It's a big voice, high like a whistle but strong like a wall. I turn and in the darkness it is hard to see, but there is a person.

'Just looking for a place for sleeping. I will go,' I say.

'Why're you sleeping here, lad?'

I don't know how to answer that.

'I said, why're you sleepin' rough?'

'Nowhere to go. Ahmad kicked me out.'

'Who's this Ahmad? What did you do to him?'

I can't answer that either. How do you explain years of ancient history that is not even your story?

'Come here, lad. I won't bite. You're shaking like a leaf.'

I move closer and I see it's a woman and I can see she's not sleeping rough. She's here for something else. Her clean clothes tell me that, and her smooth hair. She has dark skin, like mine, but her face isn't like mine. Her nose is broad and her eyes are wide set. My features are smaller than hers, tightly packed on my face.

'What's your name, lad?'

'Faraj,' I say.

'I'm Coral,' she says. 'Come and meet the other black fellas.'

She holds out a hand to me. I can't take it, but I follow her deep into the park, a place I've never been before. It is sheltered and around it sit a group of people, all black and broad like Coral.

'This is my mob,' she waves her hand at the group. 'This lad is Faraj.'

A few of the men nod and Coral clears a space for me to sit, next to her. I sit as close to her as I can without touching her, for the warmth.

She hands me some food in a plastic bag, half eaten. I take some and pass the bag back. She waves the bag away and I take it back and eat it all.

'What are you doing Faraj? Where's your mob?'

'What is a mob?' I ask.

'A family. A history. Your people. Everyone has a mob.'

I shake my head. Coral is wrong. My mob are all dead.

Coral starts talking again, slowly as though she's told this story a thousand times.

'Just because you can't see it, or it isn't in the books, doesn't mean it's not real. My mob, my history isn't in the books, lad. There's no white-fella history that tells my story. My story is here,' she points to her heart 'and here,' she points to her mob, sitting silently listening to her. 'We know our stories. We tell them to each other, so that we remember. Always remember, lad.'

But to remember is to hurt and I want to forget.

Number 16: Alice–Play

Alice

Shaking, I unlock the door. Adam is not a stranger, he's a friend. We've always had that thing between us, chemistry. Neither of us willing to explore it, before. We smell of the pub. Pubs smell different these days, with the smokers always outside, but the beer smell is there. Stale and yeasty. It's a heady smell made worse by his breathing behind me. I want to run. Instead I unlock the door and my arm invites him in.

In the kitchen I pour wine from a bottle that was left half-empty in the fridge. It's stale, but I've got beer tastebuds now. Adam takes the glass and clinks mine. I wave him into the lounge and throw a blanket over the tear in the couch before we sit. Awkwardness is everywhere.

'Music?' Adam asks.

I shake my head. There is no music now that doesn't conjure Tim. Even in the music he hates, even in a Top 40 hit or a doof-doof dance track, I can hear his voice, his disparaging voice, analysing, criticising, annihilating any shred of credibility in any music that isn't pure Aussie pub rock n roll. With Tim, music featured in every part of our lives. It set the mood, created the feel for whatever we were doing, night or day. Would it be slow and tender, hard and fast, strange and

adventurous? There was always a track that suited our mood, and each of those tracks is now a part of my brain that just won't go away, no matter how beer sodden I get.

Adam nods. I can see he knows enough to regret asking that question.

Without music I don't know what to do. I have nothing to guide me, no script to give me a personality to inhabit. My elbows are pinned to my sides.

The choices we have are to talk about something real—our mutually ruined lives?—or to touch each other. Four hours ago I would have said all I wanted to do was touch another person, just to prove that I could. Now? Not so much.

'I feel awkward, Adam.'

'Oh, thank god you said that Alice. So do I. Haven't done this for a while, you know.'

Adam is a bit new-agey. Tonight he is wearing a hemp shirt and old denim jeans. He is greying and his hair is long and in a fluffy pony tail. Tim would have hated him, called him a cliché because he dressed that way with a day job in the government.

The clock ticks in the kitchen. Counting down the seconds, each one diminishing my determination to break free. Each tick a reminder of the old patterns, a reminder of Tim. A step towards fear. Impulse is my only chance. I lean in and kiss Adam. His face feels fleshy, Tim's was bony. His lips are full, Tim's were thin. Adam kisses me back. He lacks the rhythm Tim had, or maybe it's that Adam and I haven't worked out our rhythm yet. I persist with a mule-like determination. Adam puts his arms around me and moans. Tim would have whispered a lyric in my ear. Adam's body presses into mine and the fullness of it is shocking. His arms feel muscular but soft, like he's all there, every part of him, nothing is missing. With

Tim, there was always a part of him that he'd shaved off and given away. Each difference is a gift. I am suddenly and surprisingly happy.

Nummer 44 Kiefernweg: Telgte Tiddas

For weeks now I've been cataloguing all the *last times*. Everything, from the last time I saw my ex to the last time I went to a supermarket where I could speak in English. Counting down to my new life. I have: a one-way ticket, money for a few weeks, and the name of a family member I've never met and with whom I share some diluted genes but no common language. I also have: his address, photo and some family fact (or folklore). Despite this tenuous connection Uncle Dieter has offered me his home, his *Doppel-Haus*. I'm to live in the top floor and recover from various personal disasters. If stereotypes can be believed, they will feed me on sauerkraut, wurst and beer.

Not being able to speak to them is a blessing.

I will look for a job and even though I'm really too old for it, try work as a barista or waiter or shop assistant, something that requires very little mental energy and certainly no commitment beyond the paid hours. I will gradually learn the language and my heart will heal. With each new word I learn—*Auf Wiedersehen*, *ledig*—I will come closer to accepting that I can say goodbye and that I am now *ledig*, single. This is not a bad dream. This is a beginning.

My plane lands in Berlin after hellish connections in Kuala Lumpur and Amsterdam, and I catch the first of three trains. I don't see Berlin, aside from a blur out the window of the S-Bahn. Right now all that's important is that I get on the right series of trains and get to the *Hauptbahnhof* in Münster before it gets dark. There are people waiting for me there.

I study his photo on my laptop screen as the countryside flies by. He's as old as my dad, which I guess would place him in his seventies. Grey and rotund, he looks stern, but I'm told he's kind. According to my mum, who met him once, he's 'not like most German men'. Whatever that means.

The train slows and pulls into the station. The platform is busy, filled with people and I'm struck with fear—how will I find him in all this? I lift my heavy legs and get off the train.

The crowd thins fast, bags are swiftly collected, no one lingers in the cold. Even leaving the train station seems to be an exercise in German efficiency. I button my jacket and feel sharp pinpricks in my eyes that I convince myself are everything to do with the piercing wind and nothing to do with tears.

What am I doing here?

'Maddy? Ist das du? Du sehen genauso aus wie deine Mutter!'

I know immediately it's Dieter—he looks just like his picture—and I understand what he's said. It's his tone that tells me he said *I look just like my mother*, not any recognition of the words. I can recognise that tone in any language.

Dieter looks nothing like any other family member I know. There is nothing in him that suggests my grandmother or my mother. Nothing. No family resemblance.

'Guten tag. Ya, ich bin Maddy. Du bist Uncle Dieter?'

My German is rudimentary and embarrassing, but he understands me.

‘Ja! Ja! Kommen hierher, mein Liebe!’

I take a step towards Dieter’s outstretched arms and he hugs me tight, like he’s a bear and I’m a tree he’s clinging to. I wonder if perhaps he too is desperate for something.

We drive in near silence. After the excitement of the meeting, and the realisation that we truly share almost no common language, we are exhausted. I’m grateful for his silence. Anything resembling a question seems too much to cope with right now. I wonder how much he knows. Has the family grapevine extended this far? Maybe they knew Becca was fucking my husband before I did.

We’re doing nearly 200ks on the autobahn, heading towards Telgte, the small hamlet just out of Münster where Dieter and Ulrike live, but Dieter keeps looking over at me and smiling, shaking his head with disbelief—meanwhile, all I can think is *Uncle Dieter, please keep your eyes on the road*. He can’t believe I’m here, and I can’t believe it either. Twenty-four hours ago I was home. Three days ago I was packing everything I owned—that he hadn’t taken to Smith Street—into six boxes and one suitcase. A week ago he was released from hospital with a swathe of drugs and strict instructions to stop smoking. Two weeks ago I’d sat by his side in hospital reading books while he slept, post-bypass surgery. A month before that, he’d gotten Becca pregnant. Three months before that, I was happily married. How does so much unravel in so little time?

I steel my mind away from these thoughts because I feel the sobs coming. I’d cried for most of the flight—the poor man next to me was quite gracious about it—and it gave me the headache from hell. I am done crying.

The scenery changes as we drive. The houses thin out, making way for small farmlets with postcard perfect houses that looked like they are made from gingerbread—high pitched roofs, white icing for gables and shutters. I hope Dieter's *Doppel-Haus* looks like that. Like a fairytale, nothing like home.

Dieter starts talking to me. I look at him, terrified, with no idea what he is saying.

When he takes a breath, I butt in with, '*Ich verstehe nicht. Traurig.*' It was one of the phrases I'd committed to memory, knowing I would need it. A lot. 'I don't understand. Sorry.'

Dieter nods in acknowledgement, then keeps talking. I decide to follow his tone. There is no point trying to understand the words, they are coming at me like bullets—he speaks so fast it sounds like all the letters are joined. There are no words, just sounds that roll endlessly together. But his tone tells me something. It rolls up and down and around. There is excitement then sadness, hope then fear. What is he telling me, knowing that I can understand none of it?

We pull off the autobahn and into a small cluster of houses.

'Here we are!' Dieter says. His English is slow, unlike his German, and perfect. He laughs and shakes his head. That was something he learned, just for me. Just like my '*Ich Verstehe nicht*'.

Dieter's *Doppel-Haus* is like all the other fairytale houses we passed on the way. I look up to the steep pitched roof, built so the snow can fall easily away—peek into the small window and think *That's where I'm going to live. Where I'm going to heal.* Dieter busies himself with my suitcases and I scramble out of the car and follow him. We stop at the door and he delivers another perfectly practised sentence in English.

‘I am sorry for my wife, Ulrike. She is not well.’

I nod. Mum had warned me that Ulrike was probably undiagnosed OCD.

Dust sent her into a flurry of panic and disorder rendered her foetal.

I follow Dieter upstairs in the wake of his rapid-fire German, still not picking up even the basics of what he was saying, and so tired after 24 hours of traveling. We reach the door, he opens it, hands me a key and together we walk into 1970. I cough on the cloud of dust that billows up from the couch when he thumps my suitcase down. I run my hand over the coarse orange and brown woven fabric of the curtains, study the wood laminate table and chairs that look just like Oma’s. It was as if I’d walked into her house, on the other side of the world and could almost feel her, smell her baking biscuits (which she pronounced *bis-queue-wits*), see her powdery white skin and her short grey curls.

‘Tomorrow, Ulrike,’ Dieter mimes shaking hands, and I assume he means tomorrow I will meet Ulrike. He beckons me to the tiny kitchenette and opens the fridge door. The fridge is packed to overflowing with beer, cheese, cured meats, pastries and wine. The tears, which were always too close anyway these last few weeks, well up. Dieter, like my Oma, equates food with love.

‘*Danke schoen,*’ I say. ‘*Ich schlafe, bitte?*’ I’m so tired I can hardly stand, all I can think of is *schlafe*: sleep.

‘*Ja, mein Liebe, ja!*’

Dieter backs out the way he came. I collapse on the couch in a cloud of dust and wonder how unwell Ulrike must have become to have allowed so much dust upstairs.

Dieter drives me to the car hire place and I pick up my little Skoda. Dieter does all the talking for me—I have no idea what I’ve signed up for, but I trust him. I haven’t

met Ulrike, who Dieter tells me is still feeling unwell. Dieter hands me the car keys, says goodbye to me with another hearty *mein Liebe* and heads home to Ulrike.

I have a map and a plan.

I type *Waldfriedhof Lauheide* into the GPS, which has been programmed to English, and let the mechanical voice tell me where to go.

A new feeling registers: excitement. This is an adventure and I am completely detached from my other life, from everything and everyone. If Dieter and Ulrike hide their lives from me, it will be because of language, not because of deception. It is time to create a new life, one with its own personal history.

Thanks to the GPS, I find the place without trouble. It's on a lonely country road, nothing but farmland on either side. I park the Skoda and walk in. The cemetery, beyond huge, is divided into sections with street names and roads that go for kilometres. Walking along the roads feels more like a Sunday stroll through a forest than a walk through a cemetery—there is not a grave in sight. Each family plot is secreted away in an enclave. It is impossible to accidentally, voyeuristically, read a stranger's headstone. The place echoes with damp and emptiness.

After following the map for half an hour I find the place where my great-grandfather, great-grandmother and step-great-grandmother are buried. The three of them, side by side in a small grassy patch ringed by fragrant pine trees. There is almost no sun here, and it's cold in the shadow of the trees, but the abundance of greenery is heartening and the smell revitalising—now I know why all those air fresheners try to replicate the scent of the forest. I squat down to get closer to the damp soil where the three of them are buried.

Hildegard and Bertha were best friends. When Hilda died, her husband waited just three months before marrying Bertha. I never could understand it. Wasn't that betrayal of the highest order? Were Bertha and Rudi messing around while Hilda

slowly died? Maybe she died of a broken heart because she knew her beloved husband and her best friend were sleeping together. Or maybe it wasn't like that at all.

Dieter invited his English-speaking friend, Anton, for dinner. As Dieter fried potato fritters and warmed applesauce I asked Anton to translate.

‘Uncle Dieter, why did Rudi marry Bertha so soon after Hilda’s death?’

‘It was different back then,’ Anton translates. ‘In those days a woman was essential in a home for raising children, and Rudi’s children were very young. A man could not look after the little ones. He only knew how to work. If Rudi did not marry Bertha, the children would have had no mother. They might not have survived. Life had to go on.’

‘But why Bertha? Why Hilda’s best friend?’

Dieter does not pause before answering.

‘They were a good match,’ Anton translates simply.

‘A good match?’

‘Yes, she knew the children, loved them like an aunty. She knew what Rudi expected from a wife.’

I watch Dieter flip the fritters.

‘Also,’ adds Anton without Dieter’s prompting, ‘Bertha loved Hilda like a sister. She wanted to help Hilda’s children. Bertha would have done anything for Hilda.’

Dieter flips another fritter. All these years I’d thought *poor Hilda, her rival buried by her side*. But it was not like that. *Love* was not just for husbands and wives. If there was one thing I knew it was that the love between a husband and a wife

could be the most fraught kind of love. But this love, between Hilda and Bertha, was different.

‘Did Bertha ever love Rudi?’ I ask and Anton translates.

Dieter shrugs. This was part of the family history that was not important, not recorded, not written into the folklore. It was irrelevant. But Bertha’s love for Hilda was known, even to Anton, a family friend.

‘Bertha and Hilda were *tiddas*,’ I say, almost to myself, remembering a book I’d once read.

‘*Tiddas*?’ asks Anton.

‘Sisters. Friends. Women whose love for each other is powerful. It is a Koori word,’ I explain.

‘Koori?’ asks Anton.

‘Aboriginal,’ I say. ‘The first people of Australia.’

‘*Tiddas*,’ Anton says. ‘Yes, you are right, Bertha and Hilda were *tiddas*. Bertha nursed Hilda through her illness, and promised her she would care for Rudi and the children. It allowed Hilda to pass peacefully.’

The fritters are all done and Dieter sets the table.

‘Ulrike!’ he screeches and I hear a shuffle from the bedroom. Ulrike appears, slight and frail.

Without formality or even looking at me, she sits down to her meal. I realise I am a huge particle of dust to her, a massive rupture in her carefully controlled world. It makes me all the more grateful that she and Dieter have accepted me into their home, under such difficult circumstances. They are good people.

Anton makes an attempt at introductions and Dieter begins talking to his wife in what I now know is his standard one-hundred-miles-per-hour German,

occasionally glancing up at me. I look to Anton for interpretation, but he is focussed on his food.

Finally, Ulrike, who is picking at her fritter like a bird searching for a worm, looks up at me.

‘I’m sorry about your husband, Maddy,’ she says in English, and I realise that they had been talking about me, which explained Anton’s reluctance to translate, or even look at me.

‘It’s OK,’ I say to Ulrike as I tuck a strand of hair behind my ear, because I want to mean it.

Number 68: Need

The phone rings. I keep breathing.

‘Hello?’

‘Hey, how’re you doing, Lauren?’

Keep breathing.

‘Sorry...what a stupid question.’

‘I wonder how many times I’ve heard the word “sorry” in the last six weeks?’

You could probably give me a formula for it, couldn’t you?’ I say.

‘Probably.’ His laugh has an anxious edge.

Phone calls are awful for this kind of thing: the silences.

‘How are the boys holding up?’ he asks.

‘Oh, they’re not. Not really. But they are better than me, somehow,’ I say.

‘Lauren, I - .’

‘Pete, can you come over? The boys are with their grandma and I just need something more human than the telly tonight.’

I make an effort to clean myself up. Since the funeral I've lived in tracksuits that are faded or stained. I have enough pride to pull myself out of my grief-lethargy, even if it is only for one night.

The knock at the door startles me and the lipstick I am attempting to apply jolts a fat pink line up my cheek. My jeans and jumper are a pitiful attempt to be normal: the smeared lipstick seems to suit my state of mind so much better. For a moment I consider leaving it, answering the door just like that. Pete wouldn't mind. He's seen me worse.

No, he hasn't.

Tears run down my face. I dab them with a tissue, using the damp fibres to wipe off the lipstick.

Opening the door, we look at each other and hug awkwardly. Already I know something has changed between us.

In the kitchen, I put on the kettle. Pete opens the fridge and plucks out a bottle of wine. He chooses glasses from the cabinet—two of them—and pours them to the rim. I let the kettle boil.

'How's Sandra?' I ask. 'Did she mind you dropping everything to come rescue me?'

'Sandra doesn't mind what I do these days. Since she moved out I haven't been up the top of her list.'

There is a snag of guilt in my gut: I've been a bad friend.

'Pete, I'm sorry. I didn't know.'

'Hey, it's ok. You've had bigger stuff on your mind.'

We both take a gulp of wine.

‘So Jacob said to me the other day, “Do I still belong to Daddy, Mum?”. And I said, “Yes, of course, darling, you always will”. And then he said, “Are you still my grown-up, Mum?”’

Pete reaches out and touches my shoulder. I feel his hand cold from the wineglass, through my jumper.

‘I don’t feel like the grown up anymore. I don’t want to be.’

‘I don’t remember ever hurting much as a kid. Apart from when I broke my arm...’ Pete say, obviously at a loss.

We move to the lounge room. Pete sits on one couch and I sit on the other. People often got the wrong idea about the two of us so it was easier for all concerned—especially our partners—if we just kept our distance. Now our habits are embedded.

I curl my legs up, uncomfortable in my jeans.

‘You know this is the first time I’ve been out of tracky dacks since the funeral,’ I say.

‘Lauren, you don’t have to be together, no one expects you to be.’

‘Jacob and Ethan do.’

‘Do you think they care what you wear?’

‘It’s symbolic, Pete.’

‘It’s just clothes.’

We smile wanly at each other. Oh for the days when all that mattered was talking about things that didn’t matter.

‘Do you know why I wanted you to come over tonight, Pete?’

‘I assume it’s because you want to fuck me.’

It was our standard joke. People think men and women can't be friends. Pete and I relished ambushing that idea by calling their bluff. Craig and Sandra had been in on the joke.

But tonight it isn't a joke. I need to feel something other than grief and all I can think about is fucking. There is no one else I trust enough. Pete and I have never so much as kissed before, but tonight I want him. It is selfish and I don't like to admit it to myself, but I'd orchestrated this whole thing. The boys sleeping over, the wine in the fridge, the condoms by the bed. Somewhere in my muddled mind I'd planned *this* when I couldn't even plan getting out of my tracksuit. The guilt feels like a hypodermic needle to my heart. I can't feed my boys more than toast and jam. Did I actually leave the house to buy condoms? I should be steaming vegetables and talking about Daddy always being with us in our memories.

The tears ransack my whole body. Pete comes to me and holds me tight. He is rocking me gently and whispering, 'I'm sorry, it was our joke, I'm sorry.'

I stop crying. His arms are strong, his back thick with muscle. I've never noticed his smell before. It is a combination of faded aftershave and something garlicky.

Maybe this is enough, I think. I will just hold him. I haven't been held by a man for so long and it feels so good it almost hurts. The tide is ebbing away, for now at least.

He stops whispering and starts stroking my hair. It was something my mother used to do when I was a kid, and Pete knew it soothed me. He's never done it to me before, but we've talked about it. We've talked about everything.

I don't want to be soothed. I take his hand and stop him, pull back just far enough to see his face. His brown eyes are bloodshot. He is absorbing my pain, taking it away by feeling it himself. God, that only make me want him more.

I kiss him, tentatively because I don't know how to kiss another man and I don't want to kiss Pete the way I had kissed Craig. With Craig it had become perfunctory. We were very much in love, but so busy. If I'd known he would be taken so soon, I would have savoured each of those brief touches.

Pete isn't responding. I can feel him subtly pulling away, not wanting to kiss me but too fearful to stop my madness. There are no words for it so I keep kissing him, drawing him, thread by thread, into my need.

And then kissing him stops working. I need to be lost, engulfed, subsumed. He lets me take off his shirt. His chest is smooth and then that delicate skin on my hands isn't enough. I take off his pants and feel the coarse hair on his legs. It gives me a moment of satisfaction, but then it is gone. I feel like an addict, clawing for more even as I get more. He doesn't stop me, but he doesn't *do* anything either. Is he going to perform a sacrificial function? Do me a favour? This isn't right, I need a connection. I stop kissing him and force him to look at me. He is crying now and I am confused.

And then I see it: Craig was his friend too.

He finally touches me and too soon it is done and we lay down, face to face, breathing each other's air as we sleep.

When I wake, crumpled and cramped on the narrow ledge of the couch, I am alone. Pete has returned to the other couch, curled into a tight ball, and turned away from me.

Number 90: Kind of Blue—Florence

It was an invitation we couldn't turn down; there was a need in Gloria's phone call. That's the irony of old age: it brings back the urgency of youth. Gloria is dying.

When Doug used to drive, he would rest one hand casually on the wheel with his elbow poking out of the open window, and the other hand would rest not so casually on my thigh. Country drives—the silences that didn't need to be filled, and the depth of the land that defied explanation—used to be a comfortable part of our lives. Now they're another lost thing.

Doug looks out the window as I drive.

'Not far now,' I say.

Doug grunts in reply and a few more kilometres go by quietly until he finally speaks.

'Look at that beautiful water-nest,' he says.

I look at the dam Doug is pointing to, a muddy indent in the rolling green hills, and think, *what a pretty thing to call it*.

At home I change the quilt cover. The dry blood looks like pretty impressionist blossoms before I rip the sheets off the bed.

That night I dream a distant memory.

I am cuddling Tom, our youngest child, on my knee. He has his fingers in his ears. The girls are built for this life, but Tom doesn't like the noise and bustle of his dad's gigs. He is the black sheep in a way, a loner in a family of gregarious people. But Doug, the girls and I adore him for it; we love him excessively and almost competitively.

The girls are dancing in front. I smile as I watch them. In the dream, with Tom on my knee, I'm conscious of wondering what will become of them all.

Doug is watching the girls dance as he plays. It's hard to smile and play the trumpet, but it sneaks up to his eyes.

The set is over, not soon enough for Tom, and Doug tucks his girls under his arms and walks over to the table where Tom and I sit. He waves to the barman—lemonade all round. Doug takes Tom onto his lap so that I can get the circulation back in my legs. Tom smiles at his father, a man he loves but doesn't understand.

'What's say we go to the beach tomorrow?' Doug asks us all.

'Yay!' sing the kids. The girls do a little jig.

Tomorrow is a school day, and bursting the bubble will make me the bad guy. The idea will be forgotten by morning anyway.

I wake to the phone ringing and the dream is gone.

'Hello?'

'Mum, it's me.'

'Oh, hi Tom.'

'You sound shaky. Are you OK?'

'Yes I'm fine, just woke up. How are you?' I make an effort to control my voice.

‘Sorry, Mum, I forget you don’t have a 6am live-in alarm clock. How’s Dad?’

‘Not good, Tom. I think,’ I lower my voice, ‘I think we need to contact the nursing home.’

‘Mum, come on. He just forgets, you can’t lock him up for that.’

‘It’s not locking him up, Tom. They can care for him better than I can.’

‘Can’t we just let him enjoy the time he has left?’

I recognise my granddaughter’s mournful wail in the background. Mia, who is just learning to walk, probably fell over.

‘You go look after Mia, Tom. I’ll speak to you later.’

I hang up the phone and close my eyes. I am still protecting my children.

‘Flossy? Flossy? Are you there?’ Doug calls from the bedroom.

My skin tightens.

He finds me and puts his arms around my waist, nuzzling me like a kitten.

‘There you are,’ he says.

Number 40: Retreat

I dreamt about Alexander and woke feeling peaceful, calm. With Ava's hungry morning cry my peace ruptures, and where there should have been happiness there is loss and empty desire and sadness. The gaps in my life stretch and I can't fill them the way I used to. I want to fall into them. Someone else is inhabiting my body now and she is empty, dull and sleepy.

Today I have to pack. My dream has left me sodden with sorrow on a day that I should be joyful: I am going on a painting retreat. I have signed up to go away with fifteen strangers for three days and do nothing but paint. I told Dan that I need to rebuild my sense of self, that I am lost in nappies and sleep deprivation and I need to be away from it all for a while, and to focus on something challenging, something creative. With something that I take for understanding in his eyes, Dan agrees without hesitation. He knows that I am lost, and bless him, he wants me to find myself again. He says, 'Whatever you need, darling,' and takes the Friday off work to be home with Ava.

The retreat is in a bushland setting, and damn it all, there are trees everywhere, crowding up to the little barracks that we sleep and eat in. It's supposed to be cosy, but it takes me straight back to Smith Street, where the trees are like bars

on my cell. I want to see the horizon, paint the horizon. When I suggest this to the instructor, a red-head called Maureen, she laughs and tells me, 'I've seen your horizons, Jennifer. You need to challenge yourself. Paint a tree for a change!' She's right of course, but that doesn't mean I have to like it.

In groups of four we are sent into the bush to choose a small detail of some kind and paint it. The plan is that we compare the four visions of the same object and examine how four people can create something so different from a single object.

Ben and I paint the burrow in the same terms. Our brush strokes are almost identical, the colours we choose cannot be told apart and the burrow looks as though it was painted by the same person. We share the same inability to see beyond the burrow and into its abstract nature. We are literalists. I feel certain that we see the world through the same lens and that we will have the most fascinating conversations. I feel completely exposed.

That's when I notice: I'm *feeling* something other than fatigue and boredom and guilt.

That night Ben and I sit in front of the radiator with Maureen and the rest of the group, scrambling for heat like we're on power rations, stomping our feet quietly to keep the blood flowing. Ben and I steal glances and smiles. I feel raw. My toes are tingling, the ground underneath them unstable and crumbling away with each stomp.

Talking to the group, Ben is earnest, restrained and intelligent. I can see him holding back when someone in the group says something patently stupid. There is something else I see in him. It's something I saw in Alexander—he's constantly *constructing* himself, proving himself to the world. With Alexander it was his foreignness that made him scared of himself. I don't know what it is with Ben, but I see it in him too. He's presenting the Ben Who Is Acceptable To This Group Of

People. It makes me want to deconstruct him, shake him up, the way I wanted to shake Alexander up when I used to pick fights with him.

These thoughts are hazardous. I get up and walk to the kitchen. As the kettle boils a voice comes from behind me. Someone has followed me. I turn around.

‘What do you make of that “four painters four burrows” business?’ Ben says.

‘It’s nonsense. We like to think we are incredibly unique, but in fact our brains are pretty much hardwired by convention by the time we are three or four,’ I say. Ben is leaning on the kitchen bench that is between us.

The kettle boils and I pour my cup of tea, holding the kettle up to Ben in a question. He puts his cup down and plonks a tea bag in it. I pour.

‘And here I was thinking you and I were cosmically bound by mirrored thought patterns or something. But really were just being conventional. Buzz kill,’ Ben smiles.

‘Yep, that’s what they call me. Buzz Kill Jennifer.’

I hold out my hand, a formal introduction. He takes it and we shake. We don’t let go. He holds my eyes and my hand and I feel perilously exposed.

‘It is a pleasure to meet you, Buzz Kill, and to finally find another person whose brain and brush understands my own brain and brush. I’ve been accused of being too literal, you know. Of not looking beyond the object and into its essence, but that’s just bollocks. The object *is* its essence, don’t you think?’

We are still holding hands.

‘So you’re not a surrealist, I take it?’

Ben laughs—throaty, deep, gruff.

He looks at my hand, turns it over.

‘You don’t have painters callouses. Or paint under your nails. Are you a fraud, Buzz Kill?’

‘Afraid so. I’m a filmmaker. Painting is...stress relief.’

I like how my hand feels in his. His examination of my skin is gentle, mostly done with his eyes. He traces lines with his left hand, which I notice does not have a wedding ring. His fingers find *my* wedding ring, a thin band of gold with a small diamond, and trace that too, then he lets my hand go.

I notice his hands are deeply stained.

‘You’re no fraud, that’s for sure,’ I say. ‘Do you ever wonder what it’s like to be totally free? Not to be concerned with convention or social rules. Just to be.’

‘No, I don’t wonder. You’ve just described my life from the age of fourteen to about...oh, last year.’

It makes sense now, the construction I saw as Ben talked to the group. He is creating himself, building himself up from the rubble of some kind of life.

‘What happened last year?’

‘I decided it was time to grow up.’

‘I’ve been grown up my whole life. Trust me, it’s too hard and it’s overrated,’ I say.

‘Yes, it is. I’m discovering that’s true.’

‘I could do with a little grown-down for a change,’ I say.

‘Grown-down? That’s a thing?’

‘Yeah, it’s what adults do when they are sick of rules and responsibility.’

Ben leans forward and takes both my hands and this time I know we are approaching a line.

‘I like the sound of that. Feel like being grown-down with me?’

Every sensation hits like I’ve been given a new body, one that’s never felt anything before, one that’s never been touched, never been hurt, and never been loved. None of this belongs to me. He flattens my fingers between his two hands so

that there is no space between where we touch and where we don't. He curls his fingers through mine. It is soft and careful.

I shut my eyes and when I look again, Ben's question still hangs between us, papering his eyes. There are only two possible answers. He takes my wrist, where I have a small tattoo of a hummingbird that reminds me of being free, and when he kisses it, he snaps the last part of me that's holding onto the reigns of my life. I'd never noticed before how intimate the inside of a wrist could feel.

Ben is untying me.

From around the radiator in the next room we hear the others rise and chairs scrape as they say their goodnights and go to bed. It's been a long day of hard work, where we have all been eager to achieve more than we would normally achieve in a week, keen to prove that we are serious about our work, that the people who are waiting for us back home did not sacrifice their time with us for nothing. We are exhausted with the effort of proving that we are more than the sum of the parts of our daily lives.

We wait for the commotion next door to die down and skip our eyes across the room. My attention is on everything *else*.

Finally there is silence from the other room and we are alone. I nervously reach for my tea cup. Words are beginning to congeal in my mouth and the spell is broken. He searches me for eye contact, which I avoid. He takes my hand, fiddles with my wedding ring, and says, 'See you tomorrow, Buzz Kill,' before walking out of the kitchen.

In bed, I curl into the unfamiliar sheets and try to get comfortable on the too-soft pillow. Restless, I pick up the book that I brought, *Tender is the Night*. I read until Fitzgerald's words swim on the page and my brain gets stuck on a sentence and

won't read any further: 'I don't ask you to love me always like this, but I ask you to remember. Somewhere inside of me there will always be the person I am tonight.'

Somewhere inside of me will always be the person who loves a man she cannot have, who time and circumstance and fear, mostly fear, conspired against.

Number 78: Lottery

Wednesday: I put on my rain jacket and slip off my leather Florsheim work shoes in favour of my waterproof boots and drive to the newsagent.

They greet me the same way each time. Hello Gary. How's the rain? How's the sun? How's the wind? We never have anything more to say to each other. It's always a young girl and I'm an old man, to her at least I'm old. There is nothing to say. I feel her contempt, she acknowledges mine with her paperback smile. She takes my eight seventy-five, chucks it in the till and runs the machine. One of these days it will spit something decent out. She hands me the ticket and I take it without smiling. I feel her eyes follow me, and it's raining, bugger it, and I step into a goddamn puddle the second I walk through the door. I look back at the girl, still watching me and I scowl. Fix this damn footpath, I yell to no one in particular.

She looks back at her counter and starts straightening magazines.

I'm wet when I get back to the car and sitting in my bucket seat makes it wet too. I just cleaned it last week. Another pointless task I'll have to repeat for no decent reason.

At home I stick to my routine and attach the ticket to the fridge in exactly the same spot with the same Gold Coast magnet—the one with a sun-filled beach scene

that my sister gave me when she came back from a holiday. Funny the way my brain works, because every time I stick that damn ticket up, on Wednesday and Saturday, I always wonder to myself if I should change my routine, because clearly it's not bringing me any luck. But I never do. I'm not superstitious. I know it's all out of my control.

I don't cook dinner on Wednesdays. I eat toast and baked beans, imagining it's my last meal in this life. I sprinkle grated cheese and cracked pepper over the beans to make it seem more interesting and I sit in front of the TV waiting for the two minute interval in some crappy show that will give me the magic numbers. A bottle of beer is waiting by my side, but I won't crack it until I win. I change the bottle each year, to make sure it's fresh. Can't imagine anything worse than finally winning this bloody lottery and drinking stale beer to celebrate. If it was Saturday, I'd be sitting there with the real estate pages too, planning the mansion I would buy when I could finally afford to leave Smith Street.

Of course I don't win.

At work the next day I know that if I'd won I wouldn't be at this job I hate, talking to people I can't seem to get along with and feeling my blood pressure rise with each hour that passes.

They tease me every Thursday morning.

Pity, Gary. I'd hoped we wouldn't see you in today.

Cheryl says this with a nasty edge and a false smile. I know she's pretending to make a joke. I know what she really thinks too.

Gaz, maybe Saturday, hey mate?

I hate Darren for calling me Gaz like I'm some sort of brickie out on the tools, but at least he's not nasty.

Wonder who got it this time? Wonder what they're gonna do with it?

They're not at work, that's for bloody sure, I say as I make my way to my cubicle.

I turn on my computer and stare at the screen as the black zaps to Microsoft blue and then the icons pop pop pop like numbers dropping into an electronic barrel.

Emails file into my inbox and Cheryl throws my mail onto my desk.

I think about saying thank you to her and decide against it.

Each email is a problem I have to fix. Me. No one else. And none of them are fixable. This is my job description: fix this, sort that, but don't forget your hands are tied behind your back.

Most nights I'm there til eight or later; it's only Wednesday I go home on time, so that I can settle in for the draw. That means on Thursday morning there is always an unusually high stack of problems to sort through.

I pick through the emails, choosing the problems that have some small hope of being resolved and putting them aside. I look at the demands that will never be fixed and I reply to them. Sorry, read your contract. My hands are tied.

I get up for coffee, returning the silent half smiles of my colleagues as we hover around the coffee machine like the twitchy addicts that we are. Finally it's my turn at the hissing machine and I take my drink back to my desk to think about the energy expended/outcome returned trade-off of trying to fix those problems that might not be fixable after all.

When Saturday comes around I go to the newsagent again and have the same conversation I always have with the young girl. The Saturday girl is a little less obvious in her condescension. She occasionally asks me how my day is going. Don't know yet, I always reply.

Once I asked her a personal question. What do you do when you're not working here? I saw the disgust cross her smooth-skinned face as she tried to decide

whether I was about to ask her out. She realised I wasn't—of course—and told me she studied. Economics.

I never asked her a personal question again, although I always want to, just to see that awful expression cross her face and make her ugly for a moment.

Today she seems to be in a good mood and she asks me about my day.

I wave the ticket she's just given me in the air and tell her she'll know by next week.

A thought shadows her eyes for a moment as she tries to decide whether to say what's really on her mind.

You know if you saved the money you spent on tickets each Saturday you'd be better off. Because in ten years you still wouldn't have won, she whispers.

And Wednesday, I say absently.

I shouldn't be telling you this, you're a customer after all. But you know...

I look at the ticket and know she's right. I'm not stupid. I went to university too. I get paid well above the average. On paper my life is good—it's just that living it isn't.

I put the ticket in my pocket.

See you next week, I say, and walk out of the shop.

I get to the footpath and change my mind. I turn around and walk back to her.

It's hope, I say. A small price to pay for a little bit of hope.

Maybe one day she will understand.

Suite 5, Bundaberg City Motel: Tim

Tim

In the letter you tried to tell her. There were no excuses for why you couldn't do it for her or the kids. Just explanations. They say the truth sets you free, but that's bullshit, the truth's a prison. You've told her the truth and you know it will lock her away.

The funny thing, the thing you never expected, is that everything is dull except for Alice. It's the one thing that seeps through, a kind of punishment, a repentance for all of it. Nearly twenty years of it. You should be buried under the weight of it and sometimes you think you are but you still breathe when you wake up in the morning, rolling over and looking at the bedside table, looking for the taste, knowing it's not there, then there's the fits and sparks of energy through the mental aerobics of needing it, knowing it's not there and finally convincing yourself you can actually keep going without it.

And that's when Alice seeps in. And Alice being locked away forever is even worse than knowing there's no taste waiting for you. You can smell her, somewhere in the membranes of your respiratory system is a piece of her, stuck there, a piece of her forever in you. You curl up and make yourself smaller than you already are and

focus on feeling Alice in your nose, imagining it's all of her, buried in you waiting for you to say the magic words like she's a genie in a bottle, ready to materialise next to you. You cradle her there, her memory, her smell and you catalogue all the things you did together. You start from the first time you saw her, jumping around at a gig, covered in sweat, hair matted and making her head look too big for her body. You offered to take her backstage to meet the band. She said no, but she talked to you instead and that moment, when she said no, you fell in love. Then you remember the first time you touched, the first time you kissed, the first time you made love. Each of those memories is a layer of skin, protecting you from the world. You remember moving in with her, taking your pathetic possessions to her place and feeling like you didn't have enough stuff to make an impression on her life. It never really looked like you lived there, and you guess you never really did. There was always a gig, there was always a late night and a couch to sleep on. Then the babies. Those moments of finding out together: this week the fingernails grew, this week the eyes opened, and your favourite: this week your baby can hear you. From that week on you sang to them both, it was all you had to give them. Their births were horror stories. Blood, screaming, panic, pain, torture of an ancient, ancient kind. Something in you broke with both of them; you got a little bit more lost. You floated, you flew, you did everything you could to keep your feet off the ground that she walked on. You had nothing of substance to give those kids, apart from wretchedness. Alice became their everything.

You curl up and remember all this, and all the while you smell Alice and you want her back, but then you get up and reread the letter. You've told her you're straight, have been for six months. You put a cheque in the envelope, a meagre amount, but something. You breathe slowly into the envelope, seal it and post it. You imagine it travelling to Alice. Her surprise when she sees the cheque causes her to

inhale sharply. She breathes in a part of you. You enter her mouth and are a part of her.

Number 65: How's Your Roof?

I don't bother to clean the window sills, although Evelyn always did. If anyone ever came here these days, it might be different. Visitors, I imagine, give you motivation.

But now there is a knock on the door and I have to make a decision: let them leave, or let them in. What if I open the door and see the recoil on his/her face when they see that I'm the worst kind of lonely?

The knock comes again. I don't have any friends anymore—dead, the lot of them—and the neighbours leave you alone in this place. I scan the room and realise it's futile. There is nothing I can do to fix it up for guests. I smooth down the t-shirt I'm wearing over saggy grey tracksuit pants and slippers and open the door. I hold my breath, hoping somehow that the person behind the door will do the same.

The face smiles at me. He is well-dressed. Hair slicked back with some sort of product. His suit is clean and his tie is straight. He's a hundred years younger than me and I can tell this is his first job. He has a freshness about him that will evaporate with time.

'Hello, Sir. How are you today?'

His voice is so bright it's like tulips.

His teeth are so white they are like icebergs.

There is one pimple on his left cheekbone. His only physical imperfection, and it's temporary.

I don't answer him, I've forgotten the protocol.

'Ah, well, I'm Rory. I see that your roof needs a bit of TLC, Sir.'

I look around behind me searching the room for the mysterious Sir he's referring to. Of course, he means me.

'Name's Hal, not Sir. Yes, yes it does. Do come in.'

'Well, thank you, Hal.'

He looks into the room behind me. Senses the shambles.

'We can do this right here, Sir, no need to put yourself out.'

My eyes narrow into cat-slits. What would Mitzy do now, if she were still here? Turn away in disdain or give him a warning blow, a slight scratch and a meow?

I step back from the door and wave my hand towards the couch, looking him pointedly in the eye. For a moment I hold the power in this exchange.

I can see the hesitation in his eyes, he's not sure what to do. Maybe he's desperate for a sale. He walks in.

I don't want to worry him, so I don't deadlock the door behind him, although I want to. It's a battle to stop myself from playing with him.

'Sit down, Rory. I'm sorry about the mess. I wasn't expecting visitors.'

I move a pile of papers to make space on the couch and I see Rory hold his breath as a smell wafts in his direction.

'Sir, I'm here as a representative of Halloran's Roofing, we are a local business, no gimmicks. I noticed that the capping on your roof is cracked. And several tiles are also cracked. There is a disturbing slump in the middle of the south-facing pitch that might indicate structural problems. We have a special on at the

moment. If you have your roof restored or replaced this month we will throw in a flat screen.'

'A flat screen?'

'A TV. Fifty centimetres! Digital, remote control. You wouldn't have to leave your couch and you'd have access to all the free to air digital channels, right here in your own home. And no worries when it rains, you'll be snug as a bug in here.'

I have to admit he's got me pegged: he's sniffed out my loneliness, my desperation for company *and* my desire to never leave this house again. He looks about twenty, but maybe he's not as green as I thought. Or maybe he lucked out with me—perhaps that's his sales pitch at every house.

'I'm listening.'

'Well, sir, all I have to do is get your signature today—just to authorise us into your roof to get a quote, no obligation—and you're on your way. Is next week OK for the boys to come along and measure up?'

He holds out a single sheet of paper covered in letters and words and numbers. I see some future in this. I can drag this out, maybe get 'the boys' here next week, and then the lad back again the week after to explain some misunderstanding with the terms and conditions, and then ask for the manager to come along to inspect a troublesome issue. The next thing you know, I've got people in my life. Conversations to be had. No more looking out the window watching for the postie to pass me by. No more imaginary conversations with a cat that died fifteen years ago. No more looking at Evelyn's urn on the mantle wishing and wishing that she hadn't died too.

Number 90: Kind of Blue—Gloria

From: Gloria West

To: Florence Freedman

Subject: Libertarianism

My dearest Florence

In '55, all we wanted was freedom in love. Do you remember what we said? 'Freedom in love is the condition for all other freedoms.' We weren't free to love more than one man. A Black man? Forget it! A woman, of any colour? No way. We weren't free to join the blokes in the Public House. How dull life was! Corsets and curlers. No wonder we did what we did. You and I were never meant to be Women's Weekly housewives, but anarchy didn't suit us either. 'The desire for security and sufficiency is the very mark of the servile mentality.' Boy. Fighting words! And fight we did.

Despite all that, I did love just one man, as did you. It was enough, wasn't it? But we needed to know that it would be, didn't we? We needed to choose. Anarchy turned out to be overrated, but I'm glad I gave it a darn good shot.

Nearly sixty years later, my dear friend, and I still love Neville, and you Doug. But here we are, in the twilight of our lives, as my silly daughter says. Twilight? Twilight implies some kind of gentle setting sun, softening everything. What could be more wrong? There is nothing soft about dying. No light can hide the wrinkles on my skin. And cancer is like a stubborn bastard of a boulder, not a setting sun. There is nothing subtle about the way our bodies and minds fail us, one creak or crack at a time.

Thank you for visiting us last week. But my dear, you looked worse than me that day. *You* are not dying, you're strong as an ox and always were. So what is it, Florence? You wouldn't talk to me on Sunday, so I'm emailing you. Let's pretend we are twenty again and nothing in our lives is secret from the other. Let's pretend we are still sharing that flat we had in teacher's college and it's the end of a long night with our fellas and we are sitting on our lumpy beds gossiping about men.

So, I'm going to guess, and then you are going to write to me and tell me if I'm right: Doug is getting worse and you can no longer manage it. I know we don't talk about this, especially not in front of Douglas, but let's stop the silliness. I might be dead next week, and if I go without telling you this, I'll be sent straight to hell. Never mind all those immoral things I did with young men, beer and cigarettes when I was just a girl, that's nothing compared to this.

I can't go without telling you this: Florence, don't wait til it's too late. You are too utterly precious. Go back to 1955 and remember what it felt like to value yourself more than you valued society's rules, and bugger anyone to hell if they stand in your way.

Gloria

From: Florence Freedman

To: Gloria West

Subject: Libertarianism

Darling Gloria.

It turns out I did love two men. This disease has split Doug in half and somehow I do love them both because I can see them meeting in the middle from time to time. There is a glimpse of one always in the other. How can I send one away, knowing he takes the other with him?

Florence

From: Gloria West

To: Florence Freedman

Subject: Libertarianism

Florence

Ah, I see. But he is taking *all* of you.

Neville is growling at me to stop on the computer. He wants me to lie down and die but I refuse.

Love to you, and both your men.

Gloria

From: Florence Freedman

To: Gloria West

Subject: Libertarianism

Gloria

Lie down, but don't die. I'm coming to see you. On my own this time.

Florence

Number 97 & 95: Jeremiah the Cat

Angela's house sits at the very top of Smith Street, and from her second storey balcony she has a view into our pool. A fence has been built around a huge gum tree that straddles our two properties. The tree allows Angela's overfed cat to roam freely into our yard. The cat, called Jeremiah and named after a bullfrog, refuses to play on the playgym Angela bought for him, refuses to use the run she built for him, refuses to stay in the house at night. He finds a way and quick as lightning, he's out the door. He's a nimble and speedy animal, despite his size.

He refuses to use his litter box, too. Instead he likes to use our pool. He can hold on for days until he has an opportunity.

The tree is heritage listed and cannot be cut down. Never mind that it drops leaves all year round which stain the pool water, making it look like tea. Never mind that the limbs creak and groan murderously and threaten to fall right onto my bedroom roof. Never mind that they give that cat an entry into our yard so that it can defecate in our pool. My daughter thought it looked like Tim Tams floating in tea and wanted to know could she eat one. 'Tim Tam slam!' she said as she reached into the water.

Never mind.

‘The cat has to go,’ I say to my husband, Martin.

‘Yes, yes, but what can we do about it, Marg?’

‘Plenty. Leave out poisoned meat. Set a trap. Plenty.’

After years of cleaning cat crap out of my pool, I’ve quelled any notions of animal rights.

‘Can’t we complain that it’s killing local fauna or something? Get the council to put it down?’

‘I don’t think the law allows that,’ Martin says.

‘Well it should.’

‘Yes, yes. It should.’

Jeremiah, fat as a bullfrog, likes to swim. Since when did any *normal* cat like to swim? There’s more than a little bit wrong with Jeremiah. One day he climbs down the tree into our yard and sits by the pool, sunning himself for a full hour before going to the toilet, in the pool, and *then* having a swim.

I watch the whole thing.

As Jeremiah swims, I go to the garden shed. He circles his floating faeces like he’s training for water ballet. I take bits of old chicken wire and fashion them into a funnel-shaped net. I attach it to the end of an old broomstick. I sneak out of the shed and watch Jeremiah swim. His mottled tabby fur looks darker, tea-stained from the pool water. I stalk him from behind and slam the net down over him. Jeremiah remains nonchalant and continues to swim.

‘Got you!’ I say, giving Jeremiah a look that might well have stopped a lesser animal’s heart from beating.

‘Now what?’ Jeremiah says, not bothering to hide his disdain.

‘I hadn’t thought that far ahead,’ I say before I realise I am talking to a cat.

To a cat. ‘Wait, you *talk*?’

‘Don’t you?’ Jeremiah says.

‘I don’t like that sneer in your voice,’ I say, as if I were speaking to a wayward child.

I squat down to look Jeremiah in the eye. I decide to try reason.

‘Why do you defecate in my pool?’

‘As good a place as any,’ Jeremiah says.

‘No, not really. Not at all. I can think of many better places. Like your own yard, for example.’

‘Would you shit in your own yard?’

‘Well...I...no I wouldn’t,’ I say. ‘But, you *swim* in it after you do it, so what’s your point?’

‘My point is not about hygiene. You humans are all the same. You will never understand cat logic,’ I swear I hear him sigh. ‘Now, will you let me out of this ridiculous net? I can’t swim for much longer, I’m getting tired.’

I see my opportunity. Clearly. I can just make him swim a bit longer and he will drown. Nobody will question it. Everyone knows the cat swims in my pool. I feel murderous. Mad enough to do it. I push the net deeper into the water, making it harder for Jeremiah to come up to catch his breath.

‘Can we come to an...arrangement?’ he puffs.

‘No, no we can’t. The time for arrangements passed when you defecated in my pool.’

‘Are you sure, now? I can be very,’ he splutters as he inhales a mouthful of pool water, ‘...helpful.’

Despite myself I am intrigued. ‘What kind of arrangement? Helpful how?’

‘Well. You know that old nut in number 47?’

‘Yes, the one with a dog. I know that nut well. He’s crazy.’

‘Yes, no one likes him. He talks about you, you know. I would be doing the whole neighbourhood a favour, really, when you think about it. I could really tip him over the edge. You know, white jackets and padded walls, that kind of thing.’

‘What do you mean, he talks about me?’

Jeremiah splutters some more, gasping for air as his legs slow to a near stop. He can’t tread water any longer. I ease up on the net, allow him to stick his paws onto the broomstick so that he can rest and catch his breath.

‘Thank you. That’s terribly kind.’

‘Well. Go on. What does he say about me?’

‘He calls you crazy.’

‘He does?’

‘Yes, says you walk past his house talking to invisible people.’

‘Well. Well.’

‘So, let’s give him something to really be concerned about.’

‘Such as?’

‘What if I, say, start having chats with him? He’ll think *he*’s gone mad, won’t he? He’ll stop calling you crazy!’

This gives me pause. ‘*I*’m standing here talking to you. You are talking back. That must make *me* the crazy one.’

Jeremiah realises his tactical error.

‘I’m struggling here, can you let me out, please? We can keep talking on dry land. I’ll explain. I think I’m over swimming pools anyway.’

‘Let you out? Why, so you can go around telling people I’m the crazy women to talks to cats! I know your plan!’

I press harder on the broomstick, pushing Jeremiah under water. I have to lean in to push it deep enough, and that is my mistake. Jeremiah's claws are poking through the wire and he swipes at me, drawing blood on my forearm. I scream and pull my arm back. In a flash, he has swum to the edge of the pool and used my broomstick to crawl out, while I drip blood onto my pavers.

'You vile creature! And to think I was about to trust you!'

Jeremiah is breathing heavily. He shakes furiously, hisses at me, just like a regular cat might, and scoots up the tree and into his yard, as though the whole thing never happened.

'There you are, Jeremiah,' I hear Angela coo from over the fence at number 97. 'Why are you so wet? Come here, darling, let me dry you off.'

'He's been in my pool again, Angela!' I screech over the fence.

Angela pokes her head over the fence.

'Goodness, what happened to your arm, Marg?'

'*He* happened to my arm, Angela! Your cat scratched me as I was trying to *rescue* him from our pool!'

'Oh poor darling Jerry, are you ok?' Angela says to the dripping cat. 'Hope you've had your shots, Marg.'

I don't answer her because I'm already forming a plan. I wonder how many of Martin's EpiPen shots would be required to knock out an animal that weighed, oh, about eight-to-ten kilos.

Number 98: Gaps Between Boxes

Dear Charles

Last week I tried to tell you all this, but you wouldn't listen. I know it's hard for you to hear, but it has to be said. You want to live here forever, just to keep it clean. You want me to keep the garden neat and plant new pansies each spring. You'll trim the fruit trees and I'll nip the flower buds off the herbs, to drag out their productivity. I'll mulch. You'll dig trenches for the rainwater tank drip feed to keep my flowers fresh in summer.

On Sunday night we'll sit at the dining table and go through the bills, just like we've done since 1975. On Monday I'll wake up and remember I don't have to go to work anymore and neither do you. I'll look at this house—this beautiful house—that we built together and made into a home and wonder what actually needs to be done.

Nothing. There is nothing left to be done. We ticked all the boxes.

So now are supposed to hang up our desires and dreams and settle in with a cup of tea and the telly, passing each other the heart-smart margarine over our toast in the morning?

Is that what you want, Charles? I know you've always wanted an easy life, but I never did. Please be honest. What do you want *now*? Do you still want to take the easiest path, meander slowly towards death?

You know all those boxes we ticked? The house, the kids, the jobs? Whenever I ticked a box, I was wondering, 'what's in that gap, in between the boxes?' That's where my heart lies, the in between. But how do you do the in between when you are on the path that we were on? A path laid out for us by our parents and their expectations, and the society we were raised in, and its expectations, which were one and the same because in those days people did what was expected of them: get married, buy a house, raise kids, retire silently, get sick and die. I remember telling Anna when she was 14 to always question other people's expectations to see if they sat well with her expectations of herself. But I never took this advice myself.

Now I am taking it. No more regrets, Charles. No more pining for the gaps in between the boxes.

You can come with me, if you like. We can take this journey together. I still have enough love for you. Just not for our life.

Here is a suggestion for how to start: let's sell this house. Smith Street has been a wonderful place to live and raise a family. But now it's a millstone. The garden that I cherished and tended to for decades now makes me angry when I look at it. I think of all the hours I spent in it instead of traveling the world. I walked the paths between the citrus trees when I could have been walking on cobblestones in Damascus. The floorboards I have vacuumed more times than I've drunk champagne make me wild with a rage that scares me because I imagine all the railroad tracks I've never seen and the rattly carriages I've never sat in and all the windows I've not looked through onto blurry landscapes. The kitchen. Oh the kitchen. How many

meals have I prepared in it? Let's work on averages. Forty years of marriage. 365 days in a year. Three meals a day. 4 family members. Charles, I can't look at that flashback anymore without wanting to take a hammer to it, turning it into the mosaic of a Barcelona garden.

Will you come with me? I am leaving Smith Street, with or without you. We can still have great adventures together, you and I. We can seek out the gaps between the boxes. We are not too old.

Martha

Dear Martha

I'm leaving this letter on the kitchen table because I can't face you right now and talk in a civil way.

Meander slowly to death? That's what you think I'm doing? I just don't want to fight, Martha. I want peace in my home. Is that so bad?

I know you will sit down at the kitchen table tonight, even though I'm not there. Forgive me for putting the electric bill underneath, but it must be paid.

Don't worry. I haven't topped myself or taken off with another woman. I'm staying with Anna for a few weeks. I suppose you will be gone by the time I'm back, but I need to clear my head. Your letter and its talk of boxes and gaps has me feeling wretched. I can't begin to order the thoughts in my head.

All I can say with certainty right now, in this hour before I put the letter on the dining table and leave the house you now despise so much, is that I never looked between the boxes. For me the boxes made a darn good life. I have always been satisfied and it frightens me to learn now, after so many years together, that you were not satisfied, as I imagined you were. How could I not know? Why didn't you tell me?

Charles

Dear Charles

I'm terribly sad that we can't take this trip together.

I've booked my fare: Adelaide–Singapore–Dubai–Dubrovnik. It's one way. I don't know when I will return, but you will receive enough postcards to repaper the hallway, which I know is a job that vexes you.

Auf weidersehn, au revoir, so long my dear.

Martha

P.S. In your last note you asked why I didn't tell you how I felt for all those years. I was trying to make myself fit into the life that made *you* happy.

Dear Martha

I am writing to you care of the post office in Florence. I do hope you are still there, and still checking in for mail. Tell me when your email is up and running, it's driving me mad waiting so long between postcards.

The house has a buyer. They have offered the asking price. There are papers to be signed. The buyer wants a quick settlement. I fear that if I can't get papers to you in time the sale will fall through.

Please get in touch. Now that the sale is real, I am feeling quite relieved of it and want it done.

Charles

Dear Charles

I have opened an email account, although I have to admit I've enjoyed my trips to the post office enormously. They know me there and it is lovely. They

tolerate my stunted Italian and compliment me on my postcard choices. Each time I visit they teach me a new word. Today it was *tramonto* which sounds much more poetic than ‘sunset’, don’t you think? You must try to say it with the Italian flourish, not our flat Australian accent. It always sounds better if you use your hands.

Can you attach the papers to an email please? Get Anna to help.

Martha

Martha

Anna laughed at my incompetence in scanning and attaching documents, but I’m learning new things. She’s happy you are having fun and says to say *ciao*.

How is Florence? Have you seen Michelangelo’s David yet? And the Ponte Vecchio? I’ve been reading up. It sounds wonderful. I would love to buy you a little gold pendant on the Ponte, a house on a chain. Do you think they sell such things?

Charles

Charles

You old fool. Go to the Flight Club on Goodwood Road. Ask to speak to Gemma. She has a ticket for you: Adelaide–Singapore–Rome. The train to Florence is a piece of cake. You only need a few words in Italian to get around here.

Let’s learn new things together!

I’ve been strolling the Ponte Vecchio daily, looking for the pendant you describe. There is no kind of jewellery you can’t buy on that miraculous little bridge. It’s just a matter of finding the buried treasure. It’s a wonder it doesn’t collapse under the weight of all that gold.

With love and anticipation

Martha

Dear Martha

I went and saw Gemma and it was all arranged, just like you said. Even the train from Rome to Florence. You are a marvel.

Martha, I can't do this. I know you spent many years trying to fit into my life, and maybe it's my turn. But...flights, trains, passports, speaking Italian? I've told Gemma to put a hold on it all.

Keep looking on that bridge. I know you will find that pendant, in a little gap between the boxes somewhere.

With love

Charles

Number 40: The Exhibition

I have a little exhibition of my paintings. Not a proper one with media and VIPs, it's just for friends and family. I have a dozen paintings hung on the walls of an old green grocer's shop that's been converted into a gallery about the size of a pea: Mrs Ferris' Grocery Shop. The room is full with twenty people in it. We serve orange juice and vodka and put out bowls of roasted chickpeas and Kalamata olives. The paintings are OK, but nothing special. There are eleven horizons and one burrow. People look at them and smile and say encouraging things. My mother buys the smallest horizon. She'll hang it in the hallway where it's dark and the globe is never switched on because in two steps you are in another room anyway.

The stunning, svelte Alice from Number 16 buys a medium-sized horizon. Maurice examines every single piece carefully and with a gentle respect. He treats it like it's real art and I love him for it. Florence sits quietly on a chair looking forlorn and doesn't speak to a soul. Nothing else is sold. People hug me and leave after an hour. Dan takes Ava home so that I can tidy up, and soon enough there are only two people left in Mrs Ferris' Grocery Shop.

Scene: Mrs Ferris' Grocery Shop, 81 Smith Street—night, now

Jennifer locks the door and lowers the Venetian blinds, shutting out the street.

'I didn't know you painted,' Alexander says.

'I am a woman of myriad mystery,' Jennifer says with a wink.

'No you aren't, I know all your mysteries. Except for the painting.'

'Sadly, you're right.'

'Tell me about the burrow,' Alexander says.

'It kind of stands out, doesn't it?'

'Like dogs' balls.'

'Well, I went on a painting retreat and there were bloody trees everywhere.

I'm sick of looking at trees.'

'Smith Street, you mean?'

'Yeah, Smith Street.'

'So you found a burrow. What about a bird or a leaf or a person? Why a burrow?'

'I don't know. Have you ever tried to paint a bird? The buggers won't sit still.'

Alexander laughs.

'Are you still making films?' he asks, taking a sip from his neat vodka.

'No, I'm making play doh.'

'That bad, eh? The light's gone off in you, JenJen.'

Something tries to rasp its way out of Jennifer's throat and she coughs it back. This exhibition was supposed to be her light.

'I know,' is all she can say, but in a small way she hates Alexander for telling her the truth.

'Maybe we're only meant to have that light when we are young,' he says.

‘No, that can’t be true. What a waste. What did we know back then? I have to believe the best is still to come, otherwise what’s the point?’

What Jennifer really wants to say is that Alexander’s light is stronger now than it was when he was a child.

‘Life doesn’t always have a point,’ he says.

He rests his body against the wall, between horizons, and stares at the floor. ‘When I was little, my grandparents were murdered by soldiers. Mum and Dad packed up me and Victoria in the dead of night and we got on the first train—going anywhere. It took seven months altogether, but we ended up here, in Adelaide. A month later, I was at school and you were teaching me English in the schoolyard.’

This is a story Jennifer’s heard many times. She knows other details too—about the fear of those seven months, of the money running out and documents being stolen, about nights sleeping underneath his parents’ bodies so he could remain hidden from child smugglers and thugs.

‘Do you think your life has a point?’ she asks.

‘I used to think it did. Not so much now.’

‘Why not?’

‘Things haven’t turned out...I don’t know...*profound*. My parents used to tell us that we were lucky to be in Australia and we had to make the most of this new life. That we had been given a gift. Now look at us. Victoria is working for the tax department and I’m designing shoeboxes that pass for public housing. There is nothing profound about our lives. Maybe we wasted the chance we were given.’

‘Life doesn’t need to be profound. It just needs to be well lived. Your work helps people. You’ve been honest, you’ve made good choices.’

‘No, I haven’t. I haven’t been honest.’

Jennifer doesn't say anything because he's not talking about his childhood anymore; he's looking at right at her. He looks so different now. Different to the way she sees him when she closes her eyes. Then, his skin was smooth and his hair was long. But he's aged, of course and there are lines around his eyes, which are no longer hidden by his fringe. He's a man now, not a *young* man. There's a difference and it suits him, Jennifer decides.

'We hid behind The Game, Jen. It was easier to do that. And it was so much harder to be honest with you after you met Dan. Then I could never tell you. But now I think I can. Now it seems like I have to. If I don't, I don't know...Anyway. I love you, Jen. Right from that first day I've loved you. I was so scared and you were so kind. You made everything ok then, and you still make everything ok. I want to make everything ok for you, too. I can't stand to see you like this, looking half-alive.'

He is talking so fast that the *I love you* is almost buried, as if she imagined it. She has no idea how to reply.

'Alexander, I don't know what to say. I don't know where to start.' Jennifer wonders how they got to this point—how they are suddenly, easily, *finally* talking about this.

'Start with what's most important.'

She takes a deep breath. 'I used to believe the Except Fors. I wish I hadn't. They don't matter. It feels like all those differences have been whittled away. Why did we think they were so important then?'

'That stupid game used to shit me,' he says, but she's not thinking about The Game anymore. She's thinking about fixing this, because it all suddenly makes sense.

‘We were so vulnerable when we met. You were a refugee, weeks away from being homeless. I was a prickly rebel in a family of conservatives, feeling like a freak day in, day out, treated like an outsider in my own family. Somehow, growing up together, we left our fingerprints on each other. All over. Outside and in.’

She takes a deep breath.

‘It feels like love, but it’s not. I see you twice a year and think about you on the other 363 days. But still, that’s not love.’

‘What is it, then?’

‘Obsession. Regret.’

‘What do you regret?’

‘I was always so scared. I regret being too scared to tell you how I felt when it *was* real.’

‘Tell me now.’

She takes another deep breath and talks to the floor.

‘I loved you so much it hurt. I loved you as much as any teenager ever loved anyone. Like Juliette loved Romeo,’ she smiles at the melodrama of her words, but she also knows they are true.

‘I don’t want you out of my system, JenJen. I don’t know if it’s even possible.’

Alexander leans in, takes her face in his hands and kisses her on the lips. Her heart is galloping in her chest as she tastes him for the first time and her entire life coalesces right there, amongst all the horizons with their cliff tops and sweeping winds and she can’t stop kissing him. He tastes of twenty years of longing.

It’s not awkward with bodies thrown up against walls and clothes torn off, it’s quieter than that. They’re ravenous but they are patient too, drawing out moments as long as they can, knowing that this will never happen again. She wants every

touch to be imprinted on her skin so she slows everything down until the end, when it's impossible to be slow.

Afterwards she knows she has solved everything.

Number 5/1: Car Park Job

Some joker has walked through seven floors of the car park and left fliers on every windscreen. The fliers, about the size of a wallet, are photocopied on the cheap. The writing is cut off at the top and bottom, but there is no mistaking the message: there's a phone number and a picture of a woman, hands scraping her blonde hair from her face, lips parted in phony ecstasy and breasts fairly bursting out of her triangle bikini. I have to take those bloody fliers off every windscreen before the car owners come back, or I'll have mothers screaming at me about mental scars. Makes me feel like a dirty old man just touching those photocopied breasts.

The car park is full, that means three hundred and fifty fliers. I'm about halfway there and I take a break—my fingers are tired from puckering the corner of the paper so that I can grab it and slip it out from under the wiper blade. RSI. I think about all the trees that had to die to make this pornography, and then I think about how that girl, whose face I've seen having the same sham orgasm a hundred times, is someone's daughter, some girl who grew up right—or maybe not—and then ended up doing this. Puckering her lips like some bloody gawping fish so that men can get off.

And then I think about my own daughter. Sarah hasn't spoken to me for six weeks. She's some big corporate deal and wears suits that cost more than I make in a month. Her shoes are peacock-coloured weapons, but she walks in them as if they are slippers. The last time we saw each other she sat across the table from me and pushed the mashed potato and sausages around on her plate like they were nuclear waste. She'd brought wine and drank more than she ate. When I told her she was too thin she said, 'Thanks.' When I grew up, being too thin meant that you couldn't afford to eat, now it means you have more money than God.

I take a break and look over the barricade to where the cars are banked up on the street below. It's a nice way to see the city, everyone on their way to something important.

I always think of Sarah when I lean out the window like this. She's in one of those big office blocks, somewhere out there. I go back to picking fliers off windscreens.

The boss showed us video footage of the flyer guy this morning, we're supposed to look out for him and tell him to piss off if we see him. He's skinny as a reed, dirty blonde hair, dressed in an old flannel shirt and those tracksuit pants with the stripes down the leg. It'd be my pleasure to tell the weasel to bugger off but I know he's not coming back, not today anyway.

Molly would have told him to bugger off, too. Never met a broad who loved a fight more than my Molly. I drove her mad with my attitude. She called me 'lackadaisical', she loved to use words like that—she would spend hours on the crosswords. I know she would have liked a husband who got fired up from time to time, but I was never gonna be that fella. Sarah never forgave me for Molly dying. You'd think it was me driving the car that hit her, the way little Sarah turned on me. Poor blighter, I was about as much use to her as a shovel without a handle.

I've stuffed all the fliers into the plastic bag now so I take my place in the booth. All this thinking about Sarah and Molly has made me melancholy and I want to pick up the phone and talk to my wife but I can't of course. No phones in heaven.

I call Sarah instead.

'Sarah Wilson speaking,' she says.

'Sarah, love, it's Dad.'

'Oh?'

'Just wonderin' how you are. Haven't heard from you in a while.'

'Is that a car? Are you at work?'

'Yeah, it's OK. Abdul will get this one, I've got my sign up. Just wanted to say hello.'

'I'm busy, Dad.'

'OK, love. How about coming over for a fish meal next week?'

'I'm pretty busy, you know.'

'OK,' I say.

'Well, bye then.'

'Wait!'

'Yes?'

'How's work?'

'Really, Dad? How's work? That's all you've got to say to me?'

'No, of course not, love. You know I'm not much of a talker.'

'And I'm busy, so...if you've got something to say?'

'No, no. You get back to it.'

I hear the line go dead. I say into the beeping phone, 'Your mother wouldn't like what you've become, Sarah. No time for family. Rude to your father. She'd be ashamed of you, and she'd tell you too.'

I try to imagine the impact of those words, if she'd heard them. I can't. I don't know her well enough.

'Thanks Abdul,' I call over to the other booth. Abdul smiles and give me his 'no worries' wave as I take my sign down and open up the booth.

A woman drives up and hands me a flier.

'This was on my car,' she said. 'It's disgusting, I might as well park on the street.'

'Sorry, ma'am. I tried to take them all down, must have missed one.'

I hold up the plastic bag to show her all the fliers I've collected and a tear in the plastic splits clean down the middle with the weight of it and the fliers, hundreds of them, get caught in the little fan in my booth and blow straight into the woman's car.

She screeches like she's been slapped in the face as the paper breasts and puffed-up lips settle on her face, lap and cleavage.

Before I can get out of my booth and around to her car, Abdul is already there.

'So sorry, ma'am, let me help you,' he says.

I watch Abdul as he picks up the pictures, one by one, from around the woman in the car. He holds the paper carefully, as though each piece is precious, even though of course it's not.

Number 48: The Support Group

I pull my chair in tighter and lean over the Formica-covered table. My hearing hasn't been any good since 1945, and the new woman, Lucille, speaks softly, when she speaks at all. I squint at her, trying to follow the movement of her lips with my rheumy eyes, but those eyes haven't been any good since 1998, and the lighting is bad in Gladys's house.

There is a respectful hush over the room. This is the first time Lucille has spoken to the group. She has sat there more or less mute for six months, listening to everyone else. When she does speak, people pull their heads closer to her, hoping to catch her words, perhaps expecting that something rarely spoken might be more valuable than the words that come from a chatterbox like me. Or perhaps because all of us in here are hard of hearing.

Lucille has been staring at her computer-printed pages for a long time now. People are starting to reposition their sore buttocks on the unforgiving plastic chairs and lean more heavily on their elbows. Most of the group are old, keeping active in their retirement. Lucille is the exception. I often wonder why she keeps coming. She's too young for this group of mouldy oldies. But she comes every second Monday like the rest of us and sits here quietly in her uncomplicated floral dresses

and cardigans, her hair long and soft over her shoulders, her neck, hands and wrists unadorned by jewellery, aside from a simple wedding band. She might be considered plain, except for the impression she creates with silence, which makes everyone lean in when she is about to talk. There is something about her that I can't quite put my finger on, but I know it exists.

The silence in the room has become awkward.

Lucille shakes her head and speaks.

I'm sorry, I just don't think I'm ready. Maybe next time.

She looks up and smiles, showing her teeth and doing all the right things, but even with my rotten eyesight, or maybe because of it, I can tell the smile is all on the outside.

Mary is sitting next to Lucille. She puts her veiny, thin-skinned hand on Lucille's, pats it, and says,

Go on dear, you can do it. We are all friends here. It's time.

Mary catches Lucille's eyes and holds them firmly. Mary is a formidable woman who has raised children, nursed soldiers during the war and lived through the Great Depression. Mary is all non-negotiable stoicism and expects it from everyone else.

Lucille nods.

She looks down at the paper and begins to read.

At first everything went to plan. But plans are made to be broken. Or was that rules? There are no rules for having a baby, and all the plans in the world won't make your hopes come true. Your body has other things in mind for you, the minute you decide to grow another life in it, before it's even conceived, that life has already taken over. By the time my baby was born, he was damaged beyond repair, and so was I. He was

ripped from me with bloodied, latex-covered hands, his nerves snapped and torn, as I watched the TV screen high up on the wall in front of me, playing the *Big Brother Final Eviction* episode. The worst part of it all took about two hours—I know this because I watched the whole show from beginning to end, and that’s what haunts me now. When I hear the theme music to that show I shake, my eyes can’t focus, my heart seems to be jumping hurdles in my chest. They call it a PTSD trigger event. Sounds are the worst for me. But the images come too, blood-wet, everything blood-wet and violent. Doctors’ calm faces, but with knowing looks between them. Stitching, cleaning, bandaging, the swift cleaning away of human fluids by efficient nurses. All while Ben is evicted from the house for not doing the dishes.

Lucille stops at this point. It’s clear she hasn’t finished, but she can’t go on. Mary, next to her, pats her hand again with the knowing look of a woman who’s also seen too much blood. And that’s when I realise I’m shaking too, and people are looking at me, saying Jon? Jon? in harried voices. I’m clutching the table in front of me, eyes twitching, blood pumping, just like poor Lucille, and I’m back there in the trenches. Hollow echoes bounce off mud walls amongst the boom of gunfire: the Jerries are coming, the Jerries are coming. There is running and dust and blood and bodies and thundering noise and I can’t move.

Now, I fight the urge to cower under Gladys’ Formica table, where all those ancient legs are resting like a dormant forest, withered and aged and increasingly useless, just like me. I clutch the table in my bony hands, arthritis preventing me from holding it too tight and I nod my head at them, yes I’m fine, yes, yes. I push the images out first, and then the sounds, just like I’ve learned to do. Before I knew what this was called, my wife used to call it a ‘turn’. It was much worse then, in the early days. Of course she didn’t sign up for that—night terrors that happened in the days as

well, too much drinking, too much sadness, too much violence. No one can bear that and stay whole. Certainly a marriage can't.

Lucille is bearing into kind Mary's eyes, matching her rapid breathing to the old lady's slow and steady rate. They are holding hands. Mary knows, she knows. We have all seen too much of this damn world.

Do you have a photo? Mary asks Lucille.

Lucille fishes into her handbag and pulls out her purse, flicks it open and shows Mary her broken boy. Mary touches his image with her dry fingers. She smiles at the boy and then at Lucille.

He's a darling, isn't he? Mary says.

Lucille nods.

And all I can think is that at least no one can send him to war.

Number 40: After

The waiter brings out the last plate of food to complete our banquet—a sticky plate of sweet, seared beef—and lights a small sparkler. He places it in Dan’s rice bowl and gives a little bow.

‘Happy birthday, Dan,’ he says with a grin.

Dan forces a grin back, ‘Another year bites the dust, Sam.’

‘May you have many more, mate. Doing anything special this year?’

‘Dinner with the family, of course. Then tomorrow I’m taking off for a weekend hike with some mates.’

‘Well, have a good one.’

Sam makes a subtle exit and Dan, Ava and I are forced to look at each other again without the buffer of a near-stranger.

‘The food looks good,’ I say.

‘As always,’ Dan says.

Ava picks up a chopstick and pokes it in her rice, trying to imitate what she’s seen us do countless times.

‘You need two, darling,’ Dan says. ‘Like this.’ He picks up Ava’s other chopstick and places it in her hand, trying to rearrange fingers and sticks into the

right places. Ava resists the strange feeling and gives up, throwing the chopsticks on the table and using her fingers to pick up individual grains of rice, fascinated by the texture on her fingers and tongue.

‘We could be here all night at this rate,’ Dan says.

I pick up my own chopsticks. I’m aware that I’ve ruined this and we will never do any of this again. No more birthday dinners at Lim’s. No more sharing the small moments of Ava’s development. There is no laughter tonight, but there was in the past and that’s all gone too.

Waiting until after Dan’s birthday to tell him seemed like a good decision at the time, and having one last celebration together as a family, for Ava’s sake, seemed like the right thing to do. But it’s nothing more than diversion and denial. And Dan knows something is up.

Now, when I close my eyes in quiet moments I see Alexander and me at my exhibition. We are a movie I play back in my mind, and now I’ve got fresh footage. Making love with him did not erase him, it enhanced him. My imagination was low def, reality is high def.

‘What are you thinking?’ Dan’s voice jolts me out of my memory. ‘You were smiling.’

‘Was I?’

‘I remember your happy smile. It’s been a while, but I’m pretty sure that’s what I saw,’ Dan says sadly.

I concentrate on my food because I feel dangerously close to the edge of something irretrievable.

‘You can tell me, Jennifer. I know, anyway. Don’t think you are sparing me by waiting until this charade is over.’ He waves his chopsticks over the embarrassingly laden table.

‘You know what?’

‘I know it’s over. I have no idea why, but I know we’re done.’

I glance at Ava. I don’t want to have this conversation in front of her, in a restaurant, but maybe it’s easier this way. No screaming scenes, no dramatics.

‘I ruined us, Dan. I’m such a coward. I’m sorry.’

I can’t look at him.

I finally raise my eyes to his and he nods. He shuffles his chair a little closer to Ava and makes a determined effort to ignore me while he helps her eat her food.

Number 77: Thicker Than

I am a gentle person, calm. My patience is legend amongst my large group of friends. And yet this has me ruined. Like I've been cored, an apple with its insides scooped out, my aged and bruised flesh slowly rotting from the inside, although the outside is keeping up the pace too.

My friends look in shock when I tell them that Sofia has ruined everything. I've spent the last fifteen years telling them that Sofia is a daughter to me, the daughter I always wished for and was granted only through Jacob's marriage.

But blood, as they say, is thicker. It's thicker than the paper a marriage certificate is written on. It's thicker than the gold of a ring. It's thicker than the love of a mother-in-law, thick with yearning to be good enough. The years I did not see her growing up, becoming the woman my son would love. I tried to make up for that loss by offering myself to her. I offered her gifts of time, meals cooked, clothes washed, ironing done when she was sick with fatigue and nausea. I saw from her weak smile of thanks that it was appreciated, needed, wanted. She was unused to care and as she lapped it up I felt her edging closer to me, the beginnings of trust flourishing underneath her protective coating as the years went by.

It hit Jacob from his blind side. When it came to Sofia, that could have been front on. Jacob loved her, idolised her. He had no eyes for anything other than her goodness. He never quite believed that he was good enough for her, and he spent a lot of time trying to prove that he was. The rest of the time he spent chastising himself for failing, and, inevitably, getting angry at her for not allowing him to succeed.

I'm not stupid, I know he has a temper. But she knew that too. He was wild as a boy. Angry and wicked one moment, delicate and needy the next. His temper would scare me as he got older and stronger, but he never turned it on me. Only the furniture. But she knew that too.

Jacob came to me crying, Ella in his arms. She was crying too, poor child overwrought by her father's emotions.

'She's left me,' he said through sobs and sucks of air.

'Shoo, no she hasn't,' I soothed, knowing it must be true.

'She's left me, she has.'

And it came to pass that, of course, she had left Jacob, and Ella too.

I didn't know what was worse; that she would leave my boy broken, or that she could leave her own child. Where was her heart?

And so I discovered that I had vileness in me too. I had hatred and violence and lustful desire for revenge.

She was staying with a girlfriend. I drove there, my hands shaky on the wheel, my heart a thumping beast in my chest.

I knocked on the door and demanded to see Sofia.

'Who are you?'

'Elizabeth, Jacob's mother,' I said.

She shook her head slowly and pushed the door closed.

I stuck my foot in the door frame, hoping she wouldn't crush it on purpose.

'She doesn't want to see you, Elizabeth,' the stranger said.

'I don't care. I want to see her.'

I was yelling now, anger bursting out of my mouth like water through a blowhole. I hardly recognised myself, but I wanted to get Sofia's attention.

The stranger's face filled with sadness and understanding. Of course she was thinking, *that's where he gets it from*. But I didn't care. I kept my foot in the door and a steely look on my face.

The stranger turned to a sound behind her.

'It's okay,' Sofia said. 'Let her in.'

The door swung free and Sofia stood in front of me, looking as if she'd been beaten from the inside out.

'Come in,' she said quietly and I followed her into the house. Sofia whispered to the stranger and Sofia and I were left alone.

'How's Ella?' Sofia asked.

'She is fine, Jacob has her now,' I said.

She nodded.

My anger still controlled me, but I saw her sadness and I'm not heartless, even now.

'How could you leave her?' I whispered. I really wanted to ask how she could leave *him*, how she could leave *me*, but this would do for now.

She looked down at her feet and didn't answer. A memory was absorbing her.

'How?' I demanded in a stronger voice.

She looked at me and I saw things in her eyes I would rather have not seen.

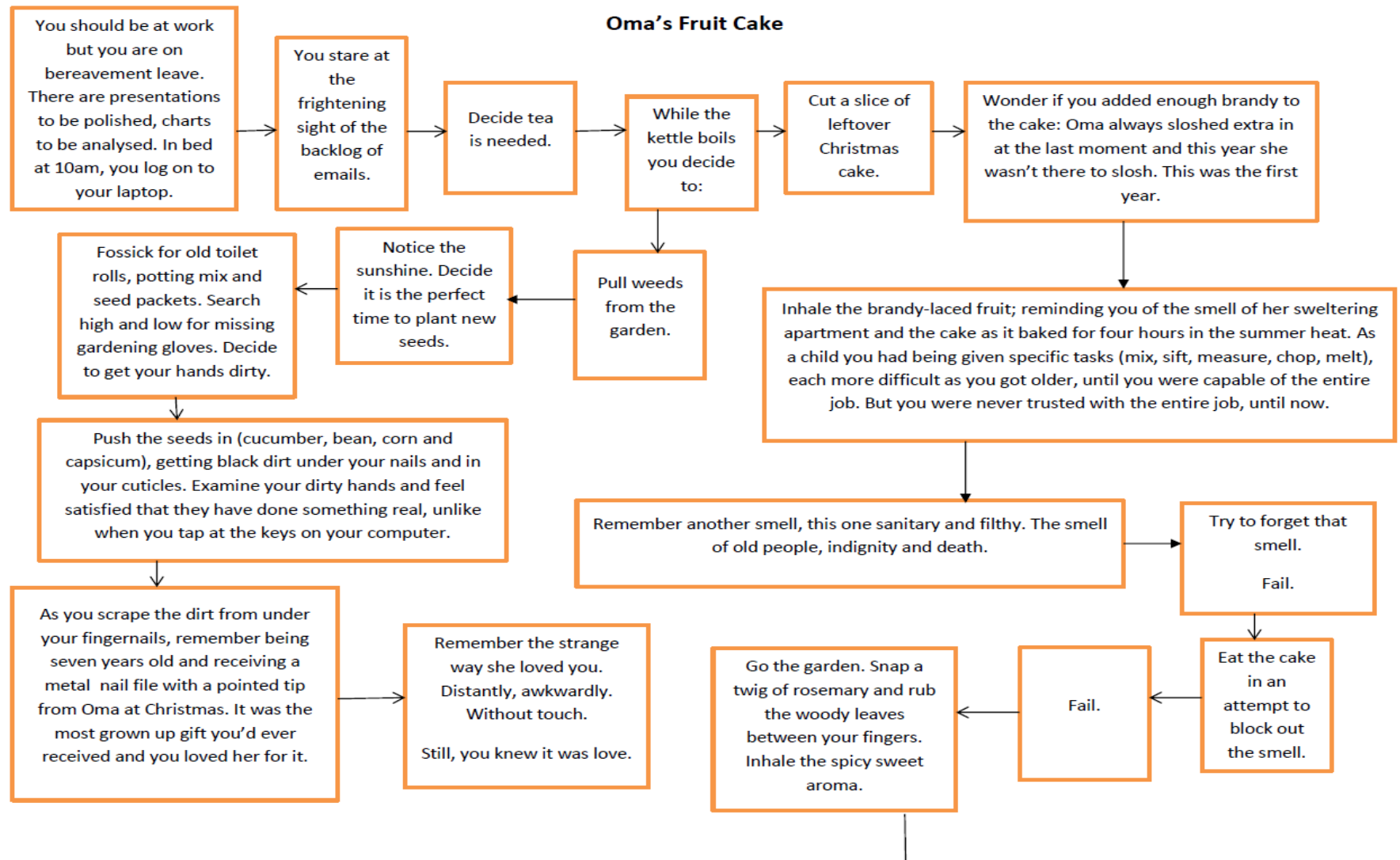
'I thought I was strong enough for him, but I wasn't. He wouldn't let me take her.'

I thought of the shadowed look on her face and wondered for the first time if he had ever laid a hand on her.

‘Did he hurt you?’ I asked.

She started to cry.

Number 8: Oma's Fruit Cake



Oma's Fruit Cake

Look at the pale oil stains, the mark of the rosemary embedded in your fingerprints. Feel the sun on your back and remember how Oma hated the beach and refused to go. She would look at photographs of children chasing, swimming, smiling and shake her head and say, 'But don't you hate the feeling of sand in your toes?' She couldn't see past those tiny grains of sand to see into the fun.

You:

Go inside.
Find the
photo
album.

Flick to the beach pictures, careful to protect the images
from your rosemary oil fingertips.

Summers from 1976 to 1988.

Look at the photos. Notice that you cannot see a single
grain of sand in any of them – but you can see sun-kissed
children, soggy bathers and endless blue horizons: skies
and faces lit with sun and pleasure.

Close the book and your eyes.
Try to imagine the shape of
her smile.

Wonder if you need to be practically
raised on a beach drenched in sun and
caked in sand like a human emery board
to appreciate the notion of sand. Wonder
if being raised on a failing farm during a
war precludes you from ever being able
to enjoy abundance in any form, even in
grains of sand.

Wish for a world in which she might have grown up playing on a beach.

Rub your eyes with your oily
fingertips and wince: the
rosemary oil burns. Imagine
her curt voice saying
'smarten up. Here, wipe
those eyes,' as she handed
you a pressed hanky.

Feel your
eyes sting.

Number 73: So Much Sand and So Much Water

The cliff is steep, crumbling ochre walls stretching from sand to sky. The old concrete steps are still there, clutching on to the cliff and overlaid with new wooden steps. Charlie didn't think he could walk down those steps now, much less up them. But when he was a child, he would *run*. Surfers would stand aside, holding their boards out wide, as he sprinted, his parents puffing behind.

Charlie hurried down to the beach.

'Hurrah!' he called to the sea. 'I am The Scarlet Pimpernel, you can't beat me!'

He hit the sand and didn't feel the heat of it on the soft flesh of his feet. He spotted the rock pool and ran in search of crabs. His battle cry could be heard up the beach and down.

Reaching the pools of warmed salty sea he conducted a thorough and exacting inspection, picking up rocks and putting them back down, disappointed that there was no sign of life. His search complete after several minutes, he looked impatiently back to the steps. He started jiggling and pacing and occasionally

rechecking a rock here or there. There were no crabs; must be too late, or too hot.
And when would she *get* here?

A small figure made its way carefully down the wooden steps, taking each one seriously as though she'd been warned too many times that she might fall. Clutching the handrail she got closer, a fluttering pink shape turning into a girl. Charlie wasn't looking, but someone pointed to him and she ran.

'Charlie! Charlie!'

Charlie looked up and saw Sarah-Jane.

'Ah-huh! I am The Scarlet Pimpernel! You may call me Sir Percy!'

He struck a pose, bracing his feet in the sippy sand, aiming an imagined sword at the sky.

Sarah-Jane giggled and brushed some kicked-up sand off her dress.

Charlie's weapon was suddenly forgotten and he looked at Sarah-Jane properly.

'Would you like to search for lizards? There aren't any crabs here,' he kicked the water in the rock pool in disgust.

Sarah-Jane's eyes popped.

'Lizards?'

'Yeah,' Charlie grinned. 'I bet we can find a skink. Probably no monitors, though.'

Sarah-Jane gave a little excited jump.

'OK,' she said.

'Follow me! I know the way!'

Charlie led her to the base of the concrete steps. He wedged himself in a tight space between the rocks. Sarah-Jane followed.

'Where are they?' she asked.

‘They’re here. You just have to be quiet so you don’t scare them. Weapons away.’ He tucked the imaginary sword into his shorts.

‘Now, no talking and no fast movement. They live in little cracks and crevices where they can hide away from predators and if they hear you, they’ll bury themselves so deep we’ll never find them,’ he whispered.

Charlie inspected the cracks in the concrete, the places where the old structure was trying to break away. Sarah-Jane looked too, carefully but with a brewing and intractable excitement.

Old chip packets and tin cans were plentiful, but lizards were not.

Sarah-Jane pulled her dress up to her knees and sat on her hands.

‘I like it here,’ she whispered dreamily. ‘I wish...’.

Charlie’s mind stilled for a moment. A wish was a sacred thing, a thing he understood, a thing he respected.

‘I wish we could stay here. Always. Live here.’

‘Let’s swear,’ Charlie said. ‘Let’s always come back here. Even when we are old.’

‘I’m going to be a ballerina, you know.’

‘And I’m going to be...something important. I just don’t know what yet.’

Charlie needed to find a way to make it to the bottom of the cliff. His old bones didn’t want to get him there. But he had important business on that beach.

‘Damn it,’ he cursed as he took one step at a time. Charlie knew what he was doing was plain stupid and he might never get back up those steps, but he had no choice. Hips and knees cracking, muscles shaking with fatigue, he took one step at a time, one hand firmly grasping the rail. People rushed past him, some knocking him carelessly, others giving him a wide berth. Finally, halfway down, someone stopped.

‘Are you OK? Do you need any help?’

‘Look that bad, do I?’ Charlie laughed.

The woman looked embarrassed.

‘I’m sorry, it’s just...it’s a long way. Do you want me to carry that for you?’

She pointed to the urn tucked under Charlie’s arm.

‘Oh no, that wouldn’t be right. Thank you dear, it’s very kind. But I am on a mission, you see.’

‘OK, then,’ she said and kept walking.

Step after step Charlie made his way down until finally his feet reached the sand. He collapsed on the bottom step and sat for a long time. Too long. He felt his legs cramp up, so he stood and walked to the sea. Charlie slipped off his shoes and socks, rolled up his slacks and walked into the water, up to his ankles. The rock pool was still there, although it had been buried in sand over the years. The jagged rocks looked smaller than when he was a kid.

‘Sarah-Jane, my darling, this is for you.’

Charlie opened the urn and tipped the ashes into the water of the rock pool. They swirled gently in the tide. Charlie found a comfortable rock and settled in to wait for the tide to take her out to sea.

Number 40: Compartments and Venn Diagrams

In the library there are rows of carefully ordered books, in compartments assigned by Dewey.

My life is made up of compartments too.

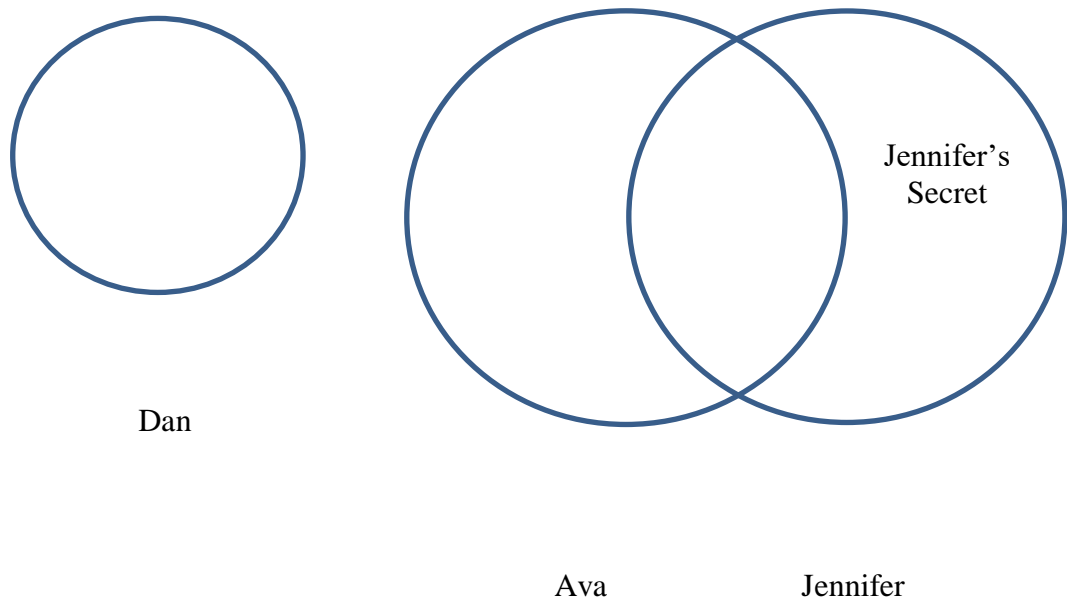
In one, there is Jennifer.

In another, there is Ava.

Then there is me.

When we got married, I thought those compartments would join up somehow, that we would share our lives with each other. But the opposite happened. Jennifer buried herself in work, then in Ava and I were on the sidelines. Mostly, I was happy to be there.

If our life together was a Venn diagram, it would look like this:



Jennifer's secret was never really a secret. I always knew she married me because I was solid, because I would never let her down. Not because she loved me.

I have a secret too.

Maybe I should add another circle.

The worst part about that diagram is the space between Ava and me. I know I can fix that, even if I can't fix anything else.

I wonder how it was possible that Jennifer once had the ability to break my heart. Now she is just a person I awkwardly share a house with, a person I am *entangled* with. We've been hanging on for so long that hanging on seems to be the whole game now.

The librarian gives me a bemused smile as she hands over the books Jennifer reserved for Ava, as well as the titles that are for us: *Surviving Divorce*, *Rebuilding*

After Divorce and *Divorce Doesn't Have To Be Bad*. In a quiet corner I flick through that last one. The title seems improbable, but someone believed in it enough to write a whole book about it, so I'll give it a try.

One chapter is called, 'Two happy homes: how to help your children thrive through change'. I flick straight to that. Ava seems like the most important part of all this. Whatever Jennifer and I inflict on each other will *not* be inflicted on Ava.

'The old saying goes, children are happier in two happy homes than in one unhappy home. This is undoubtedly true. But change can be frightening for children, so it's always best to talk to them about what is happening. Explain the change in simple, unemotional terms and talk to them regularly. If you tell them once and then never mention it again, the whole subject of your divorce becomes a no-go zone. Talk often and talk honestly,' the author explains.

I flick to another chapter, 'Being friends with your ex: it *is* possible!' The cheerfulness of these titles irritates me. I wonder if *is* it possible for Jennifer and I. Were we ever friends to begin with? I plough on and read.

'What drew you to your ex in the first place? Perhaps a kind smile, a thoughtful compliment, or maybe it was that zap of electricity that we sometimes call 'falling in love'. Whatever it was, try and remember the positives...'

I slam the book shut. What a load of shit. None of this applies to me. The prospect of divorce doesn't scare me. I'm excited. I'm ready to start again.

I grab Ava's books and leave the divorce guides on the table.

Number 15: Leaving

When I think of what I've left behind I imagine a pale place, built of pale bricks, its only vibrancy in its trees, which in and of themselves are planted in such a way to discourage interest—lines of them on either side of the road, boxed into the ground with concrete footpaths.

Here, the trees don't have the colours of fireworks like the Plane trees on Smith Street, but the olive grove, burnt by generations of drought, and festooned with crumbling bricks and mortar was where I finally found my family, all of them in deep graves. And by virtue of this alone, the *place*, though bleached by the sun and parched by the wind, leaps in my mind like unwilling sheep being penned.

There are gravestones, modest but proud within view of the decomposing old homestead. I can't help but wonder that they didn't need to find high ground here. It is hard to get used to the fact that everything is not a flood plain. I spent all my childhood in fear of flood. The houses I grew up in had water marks which recalled the floods of 1970, 1978, 1982, 1986, 1990, 92-93, and so it went. No one ever thought to question the legitimacy of building and living in such a place. But here, in an olive grove, under the Mediterranean sun in the northern hemisphere, life has been

wiped out by the elements too—here by drought that had eventually driven them to death and ruin.

I run my hands over the crumbling walls and imagine my ancestors fashioning this stone with rudimentary implements, scraping away powdery layers to get just the right angle on the stone, to ensure it holds for the generations they anticipated would live here. They didn't know the land, they went there with blind hope. In Queensland there is no painstaking fashioning of stone: buildings are made from planks that absorb the poisonous floods, and buckle and bulge and swell to leave reminders of water.

I grew up in Queensland and then left it. I moved to the driest city in the driest state in the continent and settled on Smith Street to escape the floods. And then when Smith Street, in all its inglorious suburbanality let me down, I left the continent altogether in search of my ancestry, hoping that in history I would find the missing link that would anchor me in what had always been a driftwood existence. Queensland never felt like home anyway. It was always the place I grew up in, the place where I lived, knowing that something was waiting for me elsewhere. It felt like it had been *trying* to wash me away for all those years. I thought it was trying to wash me downstream, to South Australia, to Adelaide, where the water from the north eventually flowed. But that quiet suburban street was not where I was meant to be either.

The blue skies were a shock—in FNQ we have blue skies, sure, but they are blown away by monsoonal rain clouds. In Adelaide there are blue skies, beautiful clear blue skies, but I could never see them from home—the Plane trees blocked out the sky.

Here, in the olive grove, the spindly, failed trees offer no shade, so I hunch into the crook of the broken wall and pause, wishing I'd brought more water. I want

to stay in this place but at this rate I will be chased out of it in much less time than my ancestors were. It is hard to believe this land has been gifted to me, and even harder to know what to do with it. It's pretty clear farming it would be a mistake. My resources might extend to pitching a tent, not rebuilding the cottage or building anew. A gift like this is more a test than a present. But I have travelled here with the intention of creating a new life, and that is my plan. The shape, colour, feel, smell of this life eludes me, but the excitement of the newness is invigorating. I will take each day at a time, not plan or prepare. I want to see where it takes me. I can feel my ancestors gasping at the stupidity of this—they planned and prepared, and look at how it turned out for them! They were scorned off this land and sent packing to a new life as immigrants in a faraway place. But this life, whatever it is, cannot be washed away, or buried under the moulting leaves of Plane trees and I welcome the idea of being scorched by the sun. Scorching feels indelible, meaningful. It changes you, brings something new, unlike the rain which only washes away. I've had a lot washed away, any more and there won't be enough left to rebuild. This place looks like the rain will never come. The parched and infertile soil comforts me. Barren and hot, hotter than hell. It is impossible to go back. Nothing calls me there, there is no family and there is too much rain. I sit on the powdery dirt and run it through my fingers.

This is the place.

Number 28: An Opera in My Shed

The gigs didn't dry up until my skin did and now I enter payroll data for a bank. I sit in my fluoro-lit cubbyhole and tap at keys instead of sitting in the ink of a dimly lit stage, thumping skins. Instead of punters lining up outside the bar waiting to pay their entry fee and get stamped, each fortnight I have a small line-up of folks at my desk, irritable because I've typed one wrong digit and they have been under paid. No one ever turns up to say they have been *overpaid*. Or to say, 'thanks, I was *correctly* paid'.

When my wife left me, taking our daughter Amily with her, I dusted the remnants of them out of my house and life by doing a reno job on my back shed.

My shed is big. Corrugated iron. I put triple thick egg cartons on the walls, had a sparky come and put in a heavy duty electrical supply. I brought in recording equipment and amplifiers and put padlocks on the heavy pull-down door. I chucked all my tools and accumulated shit onto the back lawn, leaving it to rust, and now I have a studio big enough to be a small bar. I dragged an old lounge in and pushed it against the wall, and in the back corner I plugged in a bar fridge. I fashioned a makeshift stage by putting down cheap shag pile rugs from IKEA.

Then I put an ad in Derringers:

Drummer seeking singer, lead guitarist and bass player for tribute band.

Some clueless kids called, asking what the pay would be. Some classically trained conservatorium graduates called and balked the second I told them what they would be playing—and where they'd be playing it. But then a few calls came through that seemed to make sense. Rowena asked, 'Do you have a rehearsal space because it can't be at my place, I have a baby. Oh, and is it OK that I have a baby?' I told her that babies were kind of essential to the human race and it was perfectly fine that she had one. David said, 'How many times a week will we practice?' He was disappointed when I told him only once. Miranda said, 'Is it OK that I don't know the whole catalogue yet?' It was the *yet* that won my heart. And finally Dalton called. He said, with a tremor in his voice, 'I get performance anxiety in front of an audience. Is that OK?' I asked him if he could sing to me on the phone and when I heard him I decided it was my duty to help him. I'd seen plenty of other musos get over performance anxiety. And the world needed to hear that voice.

I invited them all—Rowena the Mum, David the Obsessive Rehearser, Miranda of the *Yet* and Dalton with Performance Anxiety—to my shed.

Dalton arrived first, anxious to check the levels on his mic in an empty room. He stared at his thongs while he spoke to me and while he sang. David and Miranda arrived together, all sly smiles, flushed cheeks and linked pinky fingers—they knew each other. Rowena was late. She rushed into the shed, out of breath and frazzled.

'Hi everyone. Sorry I'm late. You see I have to put her down myself, she won't do it for Mum, and that takes forever because she is so slow on the bottle, and then she needs to burp—if I put her down without a decent burp she's *always* gonna

wake up crying—and I have to stay with her and sing her a lullaby while I pat her...it's...and of course tonight of *all* nights, she just wouldn't go down. It's not always like this, I promise,' I think she said all this without taking a breath. 'Oh, I'm Rowena by the way. You can call me Row. Or Rowey. Either really, either is fine.'

I shut the shed door and we plugged in.

The sound from our rehearsal went straight through the egg cartons and the corrugated iron. I knew this because the neighbours complained. From one end of Smith Street to the other. That's when I remembered some advice I'd been given as a young man: if you're having a party, invite the neighbours so they don't call the cops.

We christened ourselves Maurice and the Shed Dogs and did a letterbox drop with fliers advertising a gig in my shed the following Saturday night. Some of the neighbours knew me by name and reputation, so I hoped the novelty of seeing an old has-been in action might bring in a few stragglers.

Saturday night came around and Dalton was nervous.

'Maurice, I don't think I can do this. I only came along because I thought it would be just us, in the shed. I don't think I can perform in front of a crowd.'

'Man, you can sing the pants off these tracks. Just close your eyes and pretend you are singing down the phone to me again. No one else in the room.'

Rowena was tuning her guitar and eavesdropping on our conversation. I could see her bursting with the desire to add something to the conversation.

'Dontcha think so, Row?' I said.

'Yep, he's the real deal, Maurice.'

'Better than the original,' I added, perhaps laying it on a bit thick. 'Well, I can say that,' I said, defending myself, 'seeing I *am* one of the originals.'

Rowena looked carefully at Dalton, dropping her gaze just before his eyes caught hers. Oh god, I thought, they're falling in love. In my shed. Now there's two of them—Miranda and David were like a couple of lovesick puppies, and now Dalton and Rowena too. Quickest way to destroy a band, in my experience, was for the band members to fall in love.

My work week at the bank seemed to fly by with the anticipation of Saturday night. As I sat at my desk inputting data I would think about the set list—was the order right? Was it the right mix of slow and up tempo? What worried me most was whether Dalton would hold it together. I could see him doing a no-show.

Saturday night came around and a few lonely souls drifted into the shed and sat on the couch. There was Jennifer the filmmaker, with her baby Ava all wrapped up in a pink cloth and sleeping soundly against her chest. There was old Florence from number 90; she must have left Doug at home, probably realising that the old jazz dog wouldn't like our relatively new school rock and roll material. There was lovely Lia, wheeling Amos in with his chair. And Alice, without that good-for-nothing ex-husband of hers. She had some hippy with her, his hair in a ponytail.

As per my instructions on the flier, they'd brought their own booze and some had brought a packet of chips. I handed out old bamboo bowls, pointed them to the bar fridge and we were ready to go.

As the band tuned their instruments one last nervous time, I looked around for Dalton, but he was nowhere to be seen. Then I heard him: vomiting in the yard behind the shed. Not the greatest start—everyone else probably heard him too. But to his credit, he walked in and started to sing. He was looking at his shoes and his voice was barely projecting beyond the mike stand, but he was there and he was singing in front of real live people. This was not nothing.

After the first song he turned to me with terror in his eyes, looking ready to throw up again. Poor kid had no idea how good he could be if he just got over himself. I could see the meagre audience were fidgety and bored. He was not connecting. I looked at Row and Dalton followed my gaze. Bless her, she winked at him and blew him a shy kiss. He gave her a tiny nod and he looked at the crowd. Judging by their faces, he still had that same look of terror in his eyes. He was scaring the crap out of them. But he started to sing again.

The next song was pretty upbeat. From the early days of the band, before the singer became maudlin and melancholy, and before the drummer—that's me—had had an affair with the guitarist. Dalton *had* to sing that song with a smile on his face.

The advantage of being on drums is that you have a birds' eye view of everything happening on stage, from behind of course. I could see Row was watching every move Dalton made. She was worried for him, for sure, but there was more to it than that. This wasn't about the success or failure of the gig or even the band. The tilt of her head and the direction her hips were pointing told me everything.

Dalton was managing to stuff up the chirpy song. The neighbours were getting restless. Something had to be done, but I had no idea what.

Row knew it too. She stepped up to Dalton's mic, locked eyes with him, forcing him to lift his gaze from the floor where it had once again slipped, and started to sing. Damn, who knew she could sing? She sounded like an angel. I think Dalton's shock took him out of himself for a moment and he actually started to sing too. For real. To her, of course. It was only to her. He still wasn't looking at the audience, but he was finally singing for real. It was like she'd just told him she loved him.

The audience felt it too. They stopped talking to each other and nibbling chips and started really listening.

And then it was there; that old feeling. The high of the gig-going-right. The symbiosis of five people playing together, getting each other, tapping into something bigger than the individual, feeling it, taking it beyond the notes on the page. It was all there. All because Row had told Dalton that she loved him. With a song. God, I love music.

The gig flew by after that and I felt like I was lost in something easy and beautiful. The feeling that I only ever had on stage, that I'd been missing for years now, hiding behind that desk in that cubbyhole cubicle. I never wanted it to end.

But of course it did.

At midnight I waved the neighbours goodbye. Some asked if we were putting on a show next week, and that's how Saturday Night with Maurice and the Shed Dogs became a regular gig.

Casuarina National Park: The Swarm

We are a long way from Smith Street. No Plane trees, just a forest of Casuarinas stands in front of us and the blazing moon tips over the apex of the highest tree. The others have gone to sleep. My muscles feel shredded and my thighs throb. I've ignored the blisters on my feet for too long.

I sit with him on the balcony smoking weed—the reward after the climb. We blow blue-grey smoke into the air and pass the small joint between us, careful to avoid touching, though as I place the damp roll of paper to my lips I'm aware that it's just come from him.

We talk about pointless crap—who was the fastest, who wimped out, who won't make it back—to avoid saying anything that might matter, and I drift off into thrilling and dangerous places. I want to leave everything behind. I don't want to protect my precarious and imperfect life anymore.

The joint is gone and I am joyous and hungry and pleasantly lightheaded. Now is the time, if there would ever be a time. I can say it's just because I'm high.

I stand, straighten my bulky jacket and wriggle my numb toes in their stiff, muddy boots. I stamp the mud off, ignoring my screaming blisters.

Well, we did it, I say. The summit. I keep my tone level.

He stands too. We don't hug as a rule, but the joint has freed us and hell, we just reached the top. We take a step towards each other with our arms half raised, eliminating the careful space we've always kept. I lean my body into him. We match, from our thighs through our hips, chests and to our cheeks. I take a breath, slowly in, feeling his body move with mine, and slowly out. I hold him longer than would be considered appropriate, but he holds me too.

He turns his head and I feel his breath flow over the exposed skin of my neck carrying a soft humidity that hints of the tropics in this cold forest and spreads goose bumps down my shoulders. My skin puckers and bursts through the warmth of my thermals. This air expelled from deep within him arouses me beyond reason.

We do not let go.

The sweetness of the joint lingers in his hair and his arms are thick around me. I catalogue these things, file them into my memory, for later.

The time to end this moment has long passed, but I can feel his erection, throbbing against mine. Just when I think this is the most exciting sensation I've ever experienced, he presses his lips into the nape of my neck. He is hesitant, as though he's giving himself the option of calling it an accident. But my intake of breath is so sharp that he can't mistake my response. He continues. My eyes are closed against the forest and I push my cock harder against his. His kiss explores my ear lobe, finally reaching some electric place just below it and the question I had prepared and discarded, my complicated life and his responsibilities are all irrelevant. My subconscious is set free and it swarms into the moonlight. I can no longer summon any sensation of Jennifer's touch.

Number 67: North Atlantic Farewell

Graham

It is possible to be alive and dead at the same time. To live as though there is nothing left to be done, no work to conclude, no relationship to foster, no love to feel. It is possible to know that your death is so certain and so near that you are already in the throes of it. To be in the heart of death, to be living the pain of hell, to be absent to your loved ones, while your body obstinately withers.

For years Marion built walls, much higher and stronger than those in our Smith Street home, so that when my day came she would be protected from her grief. I ignored this because it was more than I could bear. I blamed my fragile muscles, bones, nerves and tendons. But we realised that later the remorse for our lost days would come, so we chose a different path. The shadow of death will no longer be a companion, throbbing by my side. I will walk *to* death. My way.

My mind is claw-sharp. It has to be, otherwise I would not be deemed fit to make this decision. I have studied the brochure and watched the web videos and attended the mandatory counselling with sweet-faced Claudine.

My questions have been answered, all of them. Marion and I said our long goodbyes in the way that people who have been married for forty years can do. It took weeks and was sad and funny and felt like a gift.

Marion

Graham and I attended the *Final Destination*'s christening. It made us feel like we were part of something bigger than just our pain. We watched Captain Mertens hand Queen Beatrice a bottle of champagne, which she cracked across the ship's monstrous hull and said in French, Flemish and English, 'May your travels be comfortable and your final destination glorious.' The ship was officially put into service and an hour later we boarded. Wheeling Graham around the ship we marvelled at the gilt sculptures in the atrium, the shopping mall with gifts of memorial photos, engraved pens and Belgian chocolate, and the peaceful spray of the neon-lit water feature. We sat down to our evening meal—the silverware stamped A835 in a barrel lozenge and the wine imported from all the right regions in Europe, Australia and the US—retiring to our cabin to sleep on 400 thread-count Egyptian cotton sheets.

As the sun rose the following day, the *Final Destination* encountered a protest vessel. The *Life Warrior* had apparently been following us since Zeebrugge. She sidled dangerously close and the protesters stood on deck with their posters, frowning at us shameful sinners. The two vessels, ours enormous and imposing, theirs small and pugnacious, cruised into the international waters of the North Atlantic Ocean, each watching the other with suspicion.

On the third day, the Captain of the *Life Warrior* took to the megaphone. 'So do not fear, for I am with you! Do not be dismayed, for I am your God! I will strengthen you and help you! I will sustain you and rescue you!'

Graham

These protestors continue to follow us and blast us with their monologues of death and doom. Don't they know that all of us have looked death in the eye, given it a teasing butterfly kiss to test how it reacts? We have questioned death more deeply than any of the truly living. We understand it and know it for what it is. It is hard for them to hurt us now.

Anyway, many of us are old and deaf.

Marion

The night before the burial, Captain Mertens addressed the ship over the PA. 'Thank you for entrusting us with your dignified burial. Tomorrow your suffering will end. It is important that you know that despite our attempts to outrun her, the *Life Warrior* continues to follow us. I have been informed that she is approximately thirty nautical miles from us now, and gaining. By the time we begin the ceremony tomorrow, I expect she will be alongside us again. Unfortunately, we have no power to have her removed from international waters. She is within her rights to be here. As are you. I remind you that you are not breaking any laws. As passengers on the *Final Destination* in international waters you are subject only to the laws of Belgium. I ask you to remain strong, one final time, and trust that we will protect you and undertake your final request with dignity.'

At the conclusion of the Captain's speech silence echoed through the ship. I imagined it to be like those moments as the *Titanic* sunk, as those clinging to her rails or scavenging from pockets of oxygen knew that a gulp of icy ocean was inevitable and were powerless against it.

'Marion, can you take me to the foredeck, please?'

I wheeled Graham to the bow of the ship, set his brakes and sat down next to him on the polished oak seat, resting my hand on the brass rail. The sky was cloudless but Graham watched the water of the North Atlantic, today as dark as Indian ink.

I took my husband's hand. My weathered but pliable skin pressed against his fleshless bones. We sat on the foredeck long enough to see flying fish frolicking in the water below. The sun was starting to set and the air turning to chill when another boat appeared on the horizon.

'Let's go in,' I said.

By morning, all preparations had been made. The crew were efficient and precise, professional and sombre. A few passengers had changed their minds, as had been expected. But Graham was ready, as was I.

At our final counselling session Claudine spoke very little. I missed the sound of her voice—her English, with its lovely French lilt, reminded me of being in Paris with Graham on our honeymoon—and I wanted to hear more of it. But Claudine left an empty space for us to fill.

In the adjoining chamber, which held a large bed facing a metre-wide porthole and a small array of medical equipment, the appointed doctor and nurse waited. We could have as much time with Claudine as we needed, but we were ready. We had said our long goodbyes and this morning there was not much we still needed to say. Throughout our married life we had been frank with each other and to both our amusement we discovered that the vast majority of the things we said over the years were positive.

'Telling each other any final thoughts is an important part of the process,' Claudine eventually advised.

Was there anything left to say? It seemed petty to drag up complaints now, but I trusted Claudine.

‘I should have worked less. We should have had more holidays, like this *delightful* cruise,’ Graham said.

Graham could always make me laugh, no matter how dire the situation.

We fell into silence.

After a while Claudine spoke. ‘I’m satisfied that you are ready. Are you both satisfied also?’

Holding hands, we nodded.

Claudine signed the consent form, acknowledging Graham’s fitness of mind and understanding of the consequences of the transaction. Graham and I signed our forms too, and I wheeled him into the adjoining room.

Graham

That she would do this for me, on top of everything else, is unimaginable. She will take me to the edge of life, holding my hand to ease my fears, leaving no room for her own fears to visit her. She will be brave. It is easy for me and so much harder for her, left with days, months and years to wonder and question and feel. I know she will ask herself if we did the right thing in the end. I look forward to not feeling a thing. My brain has been troubled by pain for so long that it is impossible to remember the lightness, the ease that comes with its absence. At the beginning of my disease I could blast myself into the background and be free enough, my eyeballs floating, my mind a jalopy and my body a jigsaw put back together by chemicals which took away my ability to finish sentences but locked away my pain. The soup of coloured capsules I swallowed day and night dissolved the infrastructure of my life and made it blissful enough for a while. Until they stopped working.

Afterwards, Marion will still have life to contend with, with no soup concoction to comfort her, not even my warm hand to hold.

Marion

I touched Graham's arm as he swallowed the liquid that prepared his stomach. I held his hand after his body was arranged on the bed. I grimaced with him as the needles were inserted into his lax and abused veins. I lay with him on the wide bed as the fluid was injected into the IV line.

We looked out at the ocean and spoke in whispers to each other as we waited.

I stayed with Graham for an hour after it was done, holding his hand tightly. After the tears stopped I studied my mind to see if it had been changed by this experience. Had Graham's passing, graceful and quiet in the end, proved anything? Had there been angels waiting who turned him away? Was there anything left of him in this physical body that should be preserved in some other way? I could find no reason to believe in any of these things. I had farewelled my husband, the love of my life. He was gone. I would bear witness when his body, an empty vessel sewn tightly into weighted canvas, was delivered to the sea.

The burials began on schedule at fifteen-hundred hours. The crew, on this their first mission, appeared to function beyond the sum of their parts. The *Life Warrior* lay at anchor at a disrespectful distance, silently judging us.

As the crew brought the bodies to the burial deck, where families and crew were assembled in tight and dignified lines, the protestors on the *Life Warrior* held hands in a silent vigil of prayer.

Samuel Barber's *Adagio for Strings* played over the *Final Destination's* PA.

I hugged my arms around my waist. The wind was shifting. The breeze had blown gently all morning, but now it was billowing in an unseasonal bluster from the north, blowing Barber's music over the *Final Destination* and the *Life Warrior* alike. The canvas-cocooned bodies slipped gently into the sea as the strings wove a warm nest around me and the wind whipped my hair into my eyes in an act of exuberant defiance.

Number 90: Kind of Blue–Florence

Tom arrives to look after Doug and I get in the car and drive like a bat out of hell. I hope Doug will have a bad day so that Tom will see what I can't tell him.

It's lovely in the Barossa today. The sun reflects off the golden hills on one side of the road, and lights up the iridescent green of the vines on the other. The earth is brittle and plush, all at once.

Neville answers the door, his face bleak.

'I didn't give her the full dose of morphine, Florence. She wanted to be able to talk to you. But she won't last long like that.'

I thank him and go to Gloria's room.

In just a week she has stepped closer to the edge of life than seems possible. I hold her hand and she opens her eyes. She is a skeleton held together by skin-coloured tissue paper. I do not cry when she tries to squeeze my hand, but I can no longer remember how I got here. It doesn't matter. We look at each other and that's all.

Neville comes into the room and takes Gloria's other hand. It is a silent vigil and with Doug missing it is incomplete, as my life will always be from now on.

Then Gloria is gone.

There is no drama. Her breath is there, and then it's not.

I say a small prayer to a god I don't believe in, begging for her to be looked after.

'Most of all, I will miss her wickedness,' Neville says trying to smile through his tears.

'Me too,' I say. But it's not quite true. Most of all I will miss her counsel when the time comes, soon, and I must be braver than I feel.

Number 40: Tea Cups

I buy odd tea cups in second hand stores—lonely items, strays that have lost their kind. I specialise in cups that appear to have been made in pottery class and discarded. These odd items, almost always brown, are beautiful. I look at them and see learning and imperfection and the flaws that are left behind by these things, like lines on a face, scars on a forearm, mended hearts, bulging veins, grey hairs. These things are beautiful. When I see a young face that has not formed its character through imperfection, or a body that shows no signs of life I feel no envy because I know that those things are yet to be. The time will come that those young bodies, perfect and strong, will fade and scar and flop, and I know that the people inside those bodies will never be happier than when they are old.

I'm alive now. I look in the mirror and I see a person who has been brave for the first time in ages. I came clean with Dan. The time will come when I have to come clean with Ava too, but for now she is content.

I replay my last meeting with Alexander in my mind, another of the many movies I have of him. Movies which feel ready for the archives, finally.

Scene: A coffee shop—day, 2 days ago

Jennifer is cradling a sleeping Ava in her arms. A cup of tea sits in front of her, going cold. Opposite sits Alexander, calmly sipping his espresso shot.

The two are creating as much space between each other as possible, leaning back into their chairs. There is an awkward silence between them.

Jennifer rallies herself with the speech she has been planning for weeks.

‘Alexander, I know I’ve been out of touch for ages. I’ve left you out in the cold since...since the exhibition. But I had to get things sorted out with Dan. He’s moving out. It will just be Ava and me in the Smith Street house. And the thing is, I’m really kind of looking forward to it.’

Jennifer pauses, tries to gauge Alexander’s reaction. He is impassive. Stony. Unreadable. He doesn’t respond and too much time passes.

Jennifer is becoming agitated, rocking in her chair, afraid her emotion will wake Ava and she will cry before she has the chance to really explain. But she can’t remember any of the speech she’d practised.

‘Alexander, for God’s sake, say something. Please.’

Alexander takes a sip from his espresso and places it on the table. He doesn’t speak.

‘What do you want me to say? I’m sorry? Because I am, of course I am.’

Jennifer realises she’s pleading now, and she begins to feel a familiar hatred for herself. *Pull yourself together*, she thinks. *What would you tell Ava to do?*

Calm and dignified. She would tell Ava to be calm and dignified. She decides not to speak until Alexander has spoken, and she is finally close to being happy with herself.

‘Do you remember what you did when people called me names in primary school? You stamped your feet and told them off. They slunk away in shame. That’s

what you did—you made me feel like I had a friend. You were brave. I want to bring that back. I want to be around that brave girl, because she made me brave too.’

Jennifer remembers herself then, a ten year-old version of herself stomping her feet and standing up for what she believed in. Standing up against the bullies. That was before she forgot how to be herself, before she forgot she was capable. Before she believed those subtle, insidious messages about being a good girl, not causing a fuss.

Jennifer stands up, carefully places a still sleeping Ava in her pram, leans over and kisses Alexander on the forehead.

‘Thank you.’

‘What for?’

‘For reminding me who I can be.’

Jennifer slings her bag over her shoulder and pushes the pram out the door and into the glorious sunshine as autumn’s Plane tree leaves fall all around her.

The end.

Number 28: Saturday Night and Sunday Morning

More neighbours appeared the next week: grouchy Marg with her acquiescent husband Martin. That old fella Hal who hadn't left his house since his wife died came by—he'd forgotten to change out of his pyjamas, but he was there. Even the nasty busybody from Number 7 who was always calling the cops came by. No doubt just to give her something to yak about.

They all brought something—a chair or an esky or a bag of chips. Saturday Nights with Maurice and the Shed Dogs became a Smith Street institution—I knew this to be true and not just some flamboyant dream when the coffee van parked out front of my house one night, followed by a Burger Bar truck. They stayed for an hour, filled everyone with grease and caffeine and headed off. The now fifty or so people who rocked up to my shed were fuelled. Ready for the long haul. And the gigs did get longer, and longer, until we were still playing at three or four am, Dalton's voice cracking, Miranda's fingers bleeding and Row's breasts leaking.

Summer set in. The leaves began to change colour on the Plane trees as more and more people came and started to sit in my driveway, under the stars. The young hipsters came—the rich kids from the big houses at the top of the street, and the young ones from the flats at the bottom of the street. Chaining their commuter bikes

to my cyclone-wire fence, they would squat over the gravel in their shorts and beanies and unshaven faces. The first followers—the older neighbours—graciously welcomed them to what had very early become their turf.

I loved seeing half my neighbourhood in my shed but the truth was that there were only two people I really wanted to come. Maybe I'd done this whole thing for them? I'd sent Amily and her mum a flier. More than anything I wanted Amily to see this, to see her old dad almost like he was in his prime.

Weeks went by and neither of them came. I consoled myself with the growing audience of neighbours. I was left with nothing to do but make the best of what I had. And things were looking up. Dalton had become quite the entertainer. He coated the lyrics in treacle and made them romantic to the point of mawkishness. The reason Dalton sounded like caster sugar cut with white chocolate was that he was singing to Row. David and Miranda ogled each other with thinly veiled lust as the songs bore themselves out, David's licks on the bass getting quicker and quicker, pushing the pace of the song to its limits, as their blood pressures collectively rose. It was like watching a sexy soap opera in song every Saturday night in my shed.

After a few months I rang my ex-wife and asked her to come along with Amily one night. There was a lot of hurt in her voice when she said she'd think about it.

I rang Amily's mobile and begged her to convince her mum to come, or to come alone if her Mum refused. Amily sounded torn. Poor girl was between a rock and a hard place, and her mum and I had put her there.

Week by week the audience grew. The neighbours brought along their friends, who brought along their friends and their dogs. One night I saw Marg talking to a Labrador, looking for all the world like she was having an in depth conversation with the animal.

Four months into the shows a skinny dark skinned boy turned up looking lost and dirty. He squatted in a corner and didn't speak to a soul. At the end of the night he snuck away and I was mad at myself for not saying hello. I hoped he would turn up the next week, but he didn't.

One night as the leaves on the Plane trees were starting to fall, and Amily still hadn't come, the dark skinned boy came back. He sat in the same corner, squashed up against the egg cartons, fiddled with the hem on his ragged shirt and didn't speak to a soul. But I saw him tapping his foot.

After the gig I walked straight up to him, not wanting to risk him running out on me again.

'I'm Maurice,' I said, holding out my hand.

'Faraj,' he said, and shook my hand in a way that made me wonder when he last ate.

'Do you live on the Street?'

'Yes,' the boy said.

'Which number?'

'Number?'

'Which house do you live at?'

'Oh, no. Not in a house. On the street.'

The child looked like he would break in two under a soft breeze.

'Do you play?' I asked, pointing towards the makeshift stage.

'No,' he said wistfully.

'I can teach you, if you like.'

He didn't answer.

‘Come back tomorrow morning. We can have some breakfast and I’ll teach you some beats. D’you like the drums?’

Someone slapped me on the back to say goodbye and I turned away from Faraj for a moment, and just like that he slipped away.

The crowd thinned out slowly after that. It was a crisp night without the real chill of winter and people were reluctant to leave the sweetness of the evening behind. The shed and driveway were strewn with paper coffee cups and crushed chips, the green IKEA shag pile carpet that Dalton stood on while he sang was sodden with beer. The shed was a mess, but it was my mess and I loved it. The only thing that was needed to make it feel like the pub in the old days was some lipstick stained, Hep-A contaminated beer glasses and smoky lighting. Maybe I should invest in some better lights, I thought, as I waved goodbye to the last of the stragglers.

I was about to pull down the stiff shed door when a figure walked towards me from the street. Even though she was only a silhouette, I could tell from her walk it was Amily.

‘Hi Dad,’ she said.

‘I didn’t know you were here! It’s great to see you.’ I reached out my arms and she hugged me awkwardly.

‘Well, there were about five million people here tonight. I’m not surprised you didn’t see me.’

‘It was a big night.’

Amily inspected the shed.

‘I like what you’ve done to the place,’ she said with a twist in her voice.

I couldn’t help myself.

‘I liked it better with you and your mum here.’

Amily didn't answer. I should have kept my stupid mouth shut, not dragged her into my messed up head again. She walked over to my kit and sat down. A rush of memories hit me: Amily aged two, bashing my kit for the first time, the cymbals her favourite noise; Amily aged six on her own miniature kit, her face serious with effort, tongue curled out of the corner of her mouth, trying to remember the rhythm I was teaching her: Amily aged twelve, headphones on. By then she'd given up on making music and only listened to it.

Now, she picked up the sticks and tentatively tapped the skin on the snare. The child had no rhythm, but she hardly needed to inherit my only skill.

I resisted the urge to correct her hold on the stick and tap my foot like an instructive metronome. I just waited for her, watched her tinker.

'How's your mum?' I asked.

'Happy,' she said.

The word hit me like a road train. Happy.

'So am I,' I said, and it was true.

'I can tell,' she said.

'And you, darlin'?' How're you?'

Amily shrugged. A teenager's response. 'I'm OK.' She stood up, leaving the sticks on the snare and wandered around the room, touching things here and there, inspecting my new life with the lazy nonchalance teenagers were supposed to exude. I sat down in her place and started tapping out a soft beat, giving the gaping silence between us a backdrop.

'Can I make you a cuppa?' I eventually asked her. What I really wanted to say was, 'Darlin' I miss you like hell, come home.' But I didn't.

She nodded and we walked into the house.

‘You haven’t made the house into a pub or anything, have you?’ she joked, the first real Amily smile I’d seen in far too long.

The next day I woke up first and put on the kettle. I left Amily to sleep in her old room, unchanged since she and her mother left.

As the kettle boiled I heard a soft tap on the front door.

Faraj.

I’d forgotten my promise to make the boy breakfast and teach him to play.

‘Faraj, come in! Come in!’

I ushered him into the kitchen and motioned for him to sit.

‘Cornflakes OK?’ I asked. There wasn’t any other option. Fortunately he nodded.

I put a bowl in front of him and he ate slowly. I could tell he was starving.

I filled his bowl up for the second time, and Amily emerged from her room, hair a mess and still in last night’s clothes.

‘Morning love,’ I said. ‘This is Faraj. He lives on the street,’ I said.

‘Hi Faraj,’ she said sleepily.

Amily filled up a bowl of cereal.

‘Faraj, you want to learn some beats?’

The boy nodded and stood up with the barest hint of a smile.

I looked at these two children in my kitchen and I thought; this old fella still has a few good years in him yet.

‘Come out to the shed when you’re done, Ams?’

I ruffled her birds nest hair and she nodded as I led Faraj to the drum kit.

‘You got rhythm, Faraj?’ I asked him.

‘I don’t know, Maurice.’

‘Anyone in your family play?’

He didn’t answer so I looked at him. His brown eyes were glassy.

‘Only soccer.’

‘Ah well, there’s hope for you yet, son.’

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